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New Perspectives: How a Dancefloor of Paradigms Can Save the World

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Abstract

This paper explores how the consciousness of Indigenous peoples can facilitate the development of new paradigms to address global issues like climate change and adaptation to global warming. It explores how Indigenous and Western notions of consciousness differ and cannot be reconciled in contemporary models of consciousness without colonising Indigenous ways of knowing. It differentiates maternal and patriarchal consciousnesses and contrasts the body/heart pathway found in many Indigenous cultures with the mental field activity of the Western psyche. Using the concept of a multi-paradigmatic dancefloor, I propose a new model for developing global thinking on complex problems, inviting academics and leaders to explore the radical possibilities that emerge at the intersection of consciousnesses where profound creativity arises. I contend that this bold step is imperative to release the genius needed to address our society's local and global issues at this moment in time.

Keywords: Indigenous, consciousness, new paradigms, climate change, global warming, global crisis, weather forecasting, oral cultures, orality, writing, technologies, heart intelligence, body/heart pathway, mental field activity, twenty first century challenges.

According to the World Bank (2022), Indigenous peoples make up 6% of the world's population yet they manage around 80% of the world's biodiversity. The extraordinary role of Indigenous peoples in managing the Earth's critical ecosystems invites a deeper exploration of how we in the West are failing. In case we have any doubt, it is clear that our current industrial economic system in which we prioritize production and capital over the conservation of nature is putting at risk the prosperity of current and future generations. As the UK's Dasgupta review (2021) points out, "We have collectively failed to engage with Nature sustainably, to the extent that our demands far exceed its capacity to supply us with the goods and services we all rely on". I understand this as a crisis of consciousness that afflicts contemporary Western society, particularly in relation to global warming and the climate crisis. I believe that Indigenous peoples in their ties to ancestral lands, their commitment to community and to sustainable living hold the key to the future for all the world's population.

For the purposes of this article, I use definitions of an Indigenous person and Indigenous Knowledge proposed by Tyson Yunkaporta (2019) as follows: "an Indigenous person is a member of a community retaining memories of life lived sustainably on a land-base, as part of that land-base. Indigenous Knowledge is any application of those memories as living knowledge to improve present and future circumstances" (pp.41-42). Assuming Nagel (1974)'s "What's it like?" definition of consciousness (pp.435-50), Indigenous consciousness then becomes the experience of being Indigenous, of having memories of living sustainably on the land, as part of the land. By extension, anyone who does not live sustainably on a land-base or who cannot remember, not only is not Indigenous but cannot seek to know what it is like to be so.

Indigenous writers and scholars of Indigenous consciousness from North America, South America, Australia and the Pacific Islands articulate a number of key distinctions between Indigenous and Western consciousnesses. These include but are not limited to the heart-centred nature of Indigenous consciousness compared to the locus of the mind in Western consciousness (Lupe, 2007, p.125); an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual (2007, p.126), having a shared psychic understanding of public and private events rather than a narcissistic, ego-based reality (Allen, 1992, p.165). Indigenous consciousness relies on a complex understanding of the context of human existence rather than a simplistic, reductive paradigm (Yunkaporta, 2019, p.4). It is driven by an ontology of abundance rather than scarcity (Fuller, 2021, p. 121), intuition not logic (Lupe, 2007, p. 125), connection to self and nature rather than disconnect (2007, p. 125). It often celebrates woman or the mother as the origin of all life or the supreme being rather than elevating men (Allen, 1998, p.89).

Indigenous and Western consciousnesses are not only quite different, for some scholars they are even irreconcilable (see, for example, Held, 2019). I believe that these differences are key to understanding how we have arrived at a moment in time when our lifestyles and economic systems are pushing our own species and millions of others into extinction.

Yunkaporta makes an eloquent case for the genius of human beings. As he says:

All humans evolved within complex, land-based cultures over deep time to develop a brain with the capacity for over 100 trillion neural connections, of which we now use only a fraction. Most of us have been displaced from those cultures of origin, a global diaspora of refugees severed not only from the land, but from the sheer genius that comes from belonging in symbiotic relationship to it (2019, p.2).

I will return to this point about symbiosis with nature. First, I will explore Yunkaporta's ideas on complexity and the loss of cognitive function. He describes the recent demand to impose

simplicity on the complexity of creation, or the creation of stupidity over wisdom. He says, “recent traditions have emerged that break down creation systems like a virus, infecting complex patterns with artificial simplicity, exercising a civilizing control over what some see as chaos. The Sumerians started it, The Romans perfected it. The Anglosphere inherited it. The world is now mired in it (2019, pp.3-4).

I’m interested in this process of simplifying and what it tells us about human consciousness. It seems key to understanding why we have not responded to climate indicators that have been showing us for decades that we need to change track in terms of how we inhabit our planet. Yunkaporta observes that in first people’s law, nothing is created or destroyed because all systems are infinite, regenerative and connected (2019, p.51). In second people’s laws - the laws of modern, Western culture and societies - systems are isolated, they exist in a vacuum and have a beginning, middle and end.

If we take climate change and specifically climate monitoring as an example, we see that the scientific indicators we use to monitor the state of our planet, whether these are parts of CO₂ per million, average temperatures, rate of glacial melting etc, are all considered in isolation. It is only recently that scientists have begun to explore the idea of tipping points and how a change in one part of our planetary climate system can cause change or even breakdown in another. We could say that our extraordinarily complex and multi-dimensional climate system has been reduced to a series of simplistic measurements by Western science. Now scientists seek to join the dots between discrete data points and observed climate changes in order to create functioning models that tell us what is happening around us. Of course, we are lagging behind what is actually happening.

In summer 2022 for example, temperatures in the UK reached 40.3C, smashing 2019’s record by over 1.5C. Extreme heat of this kind had been predicted in the UK. What surprised

meteorologists and climate scientists was how soon these records were broken and by how much. It is interesting to understand how 2022's heatwave was forecast: ensemble modelling requires multiple weather models to be combined to show a kind of machine consensus. A month before the UK's extreme heat, only one model was forecasting 40C and it was largely disregarded. Over the following days and weeks, more models began to agree until there was a consensus and a forecast was made. Forecasters said:

for large-scale patterns across the northern hemisphere, a seven-day forecast today is about as accurate as a five-day forecast in 2000 or a three-day forecast in the 1980s ... this is in part due to improvements in individual models – for example, higher spatial resolution – and partly because more model runs can now be produced simultaneously, thanks to greater computing power (Carbon Brief, 2022).

What's interesting about all of this and why it's relevant here is how the UK weather event and Western weather forecasting illustrates two points: the first is Yunkaporta's notion of imposing stupidity. In the West, over many centuries, perhaps since the Enlightenment or possibly before, we have reduced complex weather systems to simplistic single measures which cannot be used for effective long-term forecasting. Now, with increased computing power and state-of-the-art technologies, we combine simplistic models to recreate the complexity of weather systems. Clearly, much is lost in the process and the models are accurate only seven days ahead.

The second point is how far we have moved away from our own inbuilt human capacity to understand weather systems. Nomadic elders in Chad, for example, would use their own Indigenous knowledge to predict short-term and long-term weather. As Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim recalls:

Reading the clouds, listening to the wind, they could tell you that in several hours it's going to rain. By following the birds' migrations, observing the trees' leaves and the plants' fruits and flowers, and even the direction the cattle face, our elders can predict if the rainy season is coming and if the dry season will be strong or light, and then adapt our migration pattern for the year (2022).

A brief survey surfaces many further examples of Indigenous weather forecasting amongst, for example, the Shona people of Zimbabwe (Maguti & Maposa, 2012, pp.107-110), Mayan Indigenous farmers in Mexico (Camacho-Villa et al, 2021), Afar pastoralists in north eastern Ethiopia (Balehegn et al, 2019, p8) and the farmers and fishing people of Ilocos Norte in the Philippines (Galacgac & Balisacan, 2009, pp.2044-53). I'm reminded of the story of the hurricane in Hurston's 'Their Eyes Were Watching God', when the Native American Seminole people along with the rabbits, possums, rattlesnakes and other local animals started to walk out of the Everglades because they knew that a hurricane was coming (2018, pp. 175-178). In all of these scenarios, the behaviours of ants, Earthworms, dragonflies, dogs, frogs and birds, the leaves, wind, air and, in fact, all natural phenomena are sources of information about the Earth's climate and how it is in constant change. Ancient Indigenous knowledge systems rely on humans living as an integral part of the Earth's complex ecosystem. When we are part of it, we can understand it. Of course, this capacity has been lost for millennia in Western society and culture. What matters here is to underscore Yunkaporta's point about the reductive nature of Western science and the importance of living in symbiotic relationship with the land.

Yunkaporta goes on to draw a distinction between the high-context, reasoning oral cultures where no variables are independent and low-context print-based cultures where ideas and objects are focussed on in isolation, like the weather monitoring systems I mention above. He observes that "Consensus and context are unnecessary items in low-context cultures.

Reasoning is hierarchical, solitary and disconnected, making it possible for communication to be one-way in the form of rants, instruction and, most importantly, orders” (2019, p173). So how did we arrive here?

Ong and Hartley’s work offers interesting perspectives on this journey. They explore the phenomenon of writing which they call the first technology, followed later by print and then information technology. They remind us that language is an oral phenomenon and that it can exist very well without writing, though writing cannot exist without orality. One of the impacts of writing is that it established “autonomous discourse” (2012, p.77) which is relevant to Yunkaporta’s theory of how we have simplified our culture to the point where it no longer serves us. Discourse in oral cultures is a product of conversations. Meaning is negotiated and statements and ideas can always be contested. In these cultures, only vatic or prophetic discourse is autonomous. With prophesy, the speaker is merely a channel for the message and not the source. A good example is the oracle at Delphi where the Pythia were understood to be the voice of Apollo and therefore were not responsible for their utterances. The technology of writing enabled context-free texts, discourse that is detached from its author and which cannot be contested. Written text effectively became the voice of god! Even Plato described writing as inhuman, able to destroy memory, passive and unresponsive (p.79). Although not the subject of this paper and so I will not pursue this observation, it is fascinating to consider how first print and now social media have become the ‘voice of god’ in our culture, issuing context-free text into the public domain with little mechanisms to contest content. Taking this one step further, we could explore the power dynamics of who owns and controls print and social media, whose voices are over- and under-represented amongst these ‘voices of god’. The point here is that in oral cultures, discourse remains complex, a product of context and therefore collective. I will return to this distinction between the collective and the individual.

Ong & Hartley believe that writing restructures consciousness itself and this idea leads me back to Yunkaporta via Gerda Lerner. Yunkaporta looks at the historic development of Western society and how low-context ways of thinking - accelerated by the development and expansion of writing, perhaps - were used by the Greeks and Macedonians to create an obedient workforce and armies (2019, p.173). Lerner, in her exploration of the origins of patriarchy, offers the insight that social and political developments in our culture can be neither deterministic nor manipulative. In other words, something that seemed expedient at a moment in history may have far-reaching consequences that simply could not be foreseen at the time. As she puts it, “Things developed in certain ways, which then had certain consequences which neither men or women intended.... By the time consciousness of the process and of its consequences could develop, it was too late .. to halt the process” (1986, p.51). The development of writing and hierarchy of language that later emerged has had unintended consequences for those whose education and life are determined by written discourse.

Karen Lupe brings a Pacific Island woman’s perspective to questions of Western and Indigenous consciousness in her writing on the thinking heart of the Pacific peoples (2007, p.125). She uses the word ‘streams’ of human consciousness to describe the differing nature of consciousness across cultures. For her, consciousness emerges from the collective matrix of culture, an energy field that not only binds people together but that also shapes the way we experience ourselves and the world around us. Our stream of consciousness is intimately woven into our sense of being from our birth and even before.

She draws attention to the assumption that Western psychological development is a norm that applies to all people. In her writing about the inner-life processes of non-Western people, she describes the Samoan ego as “mediated by a body/heart pathway that differs from the

Western ego's central core of mental-field activity" (p.125). She is very much aligned with Yunkaporta in her description of Western consciousness as egoic, preoccupied with the mind and rational thinking and this viewpoint resonates with Lewis-Williams & Pearce and their notion of the Western consciousness contract that values alert, rational thinking above all other states of consciousness and epistemologies (pp.37-59).

One of the key differences between Western and Indigenous consciousness is the location of thinking: for Indigenous peoples, thinking is not an activity of the mind but of the heart. There is now plenty of scientific evidence to support the notion that we all have a 'heart brain'. The heart's intrinsic nervous system is a complex, self-organising system that is neuroplastic (Surel, n.d.). The heart generates five thousand times more electromagnetic signals than the brain and is in constant dialogue with it. Not surprisingly, the heart sends far more messages to the brain than it receives. This is a radical perspective (from a Western science point of view) on the source of human intelligence and one that has been recognized for long but largely ignored. Current research into heart intelligence is perhaps only catching up with what Indigenous peoples have always known.

Lupe links the Samoan body/heart pathway and heart intelligence to its emergence from matriarchal consciousness. Western mental field activity, she proposes, has emerged from patriarchal consciousness which she suggests had its beginnings in Europe. Some would disagree with locating the source of patriarchal consciousness in Europe although there is no doubt that it has taken root here over the past five thousand years. Mytho-archaeologists like Marija Gimbutas have argued for an ancient matrilineal consciousness in Europe. She spent her life researching her thesis that ancient Europeans were colonised by invaders from Central Asia who brought a war-like, patriarchal culture to peaceful, goddess-worshipping Europeans. This thesis is supported to some extent by DNA evidence: 90% of the DNA of the

Indigenous population of the British Isles was wiped out in about 3,000 BCE when new peoples arrived from the continent of Europe, for example. I am not too concerned with the exact origin of patriarchal consciousness here. The point is that Europeans have for several thousand years colonised vast areas of the world and her peoples with a consciousness that ignores the greatest source of human intelligence, the heart.

Lupe describes the impact of colonisation and the cultural trauma that has impacted the consciousness of Indigenous peoples. This trauma has caused soul loss, a loss of the power, energy and life force that animates the individual and collective spirit. This is diagnosed as mental illness in Western medicine and even the term 'mental illness' evidences the mind-body split in Western understanding of human wellness as well as the lack of understanding and focus on heart health. Colonisation has not only taken place at the level of nation and culture nor is it entirely extrinsic. Women have often been demonised by Western consciousness and the teachings of Christianity that are foundational to it. Every woman in Western society has been affected by a consciousness that ignores women's role in creating life and giving birth, and in so doing, creating a bridge between generations past and future. The work of reclaiming full soul and energetic power is still ongoing for most women in Western society.

Intuitively, my line of thought brings me back to my experience of pregnancy and birth which brought about a spontaneous reconnection to the wisdom of my heart and healing of deep wounds. I find it interesting that Lupe points out how the holy trinity bypasses the natural trinity of mother, father and child by replacing the mother with the holy spirit. Not only is the feminine eliminated but also our lived physical connection to the body, the past, the future, ancestral lineages and the world around us. The visceral, life-affirming experience of pregnancy, creating life in the body, directly refutes the Christian denial of woman and

mother as central to human existence, returning to each mother lost soul parts and her own matriarchal consciousness. It can be the beginning of a personal decolonisation from rational, mind-centred thinking. This transformation lies at the heart of any shift in Western consciousness towards collective thought and action as a global community.

A cursory glance at the list of speakers at the University of Arizona's Center for Consciousness conference (2022) gives an indication of the standpoints of the leaders in the field. Whilst recognising that many of these academics are widely read, often experienced in multiple disciplines of science, philosophy and spirituality, and that the cohort included a Nobel laureate, it seems uncontroversial to say that the study of consciousness is largely white, Western and patriarchal. This observation raises a concern already highlighted by Lupe about the relevance of paradigms and models emerging from this particular group about anything beyond its own sphere of knowledge. We have to ask whether white Western men can claim to know about anything other than white, Western men's experience and can speak for anyone other than themselves. If we are to believe Nagel, then the answer must be no.

Does it then follow that white Western male constructs of consciousness - Gebser's evolution of consciousness, for example, or Wilber's states and structures (Combs, 2009, pp.109-134) - are located in the white male psyche and cannot be universalised? Chilisa discusses this problem in the context of decolonising research. As she says, "Indigenous research roots research methodologies in the Indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, worldviews, values and practices of the formerly colonized societies whose knowledge has been excluded from discourses on knowledge production" (2020, p.19). She cites many ways this can be approached including deconstruction and reconstruction; self-determination and social justice; ethics; language; internationalization; history; critique (p.14). Held goes further in her view that Western and Indigenous paradigms are irreconcilable and proposes that "radically

decolonizing research means that any decolonizing research paradigm must be developed conjointly between Western and Indigenous researchers, creating a new research framework altogether” (2019, *Decolonizing Methodologies*). Chilisa’s elegant description of this co-created multi-paradigmatic space is what she calls the ‘dancefloor’ of paradigms, where different methodologies, approaches and worldviews come together to create a framework that emerges from lived experience, values and history (2020, pp.22-23). As I reflected on how to situate Indigenous consciousness inside the existing models of consciousness circulating in Western academic publications, I realised that this would be an unwitting act of colonisation. The only way to conceive of finding a holistic theory of consciousness would be to undertake research at the intersection of multiple paradigms of consciousness, involving the knowledge keepers of those paradigms in a dancefloor project.

I began with the belief that we need a new paradigm to think, as a world community, about the challenges of changing climate, increasing population, increasing inequality, war and migration that face us in the decades ahead. Yet my approach was firmly situated inside a Western paradigm in the sense that I was searching for an answer amongst my own thoughts and within the limits of my own education and experience. Chilisa’s concept of a dancefloor brings new directions here. In fully accepting the possibility that Indigenous and Western consciousness are irreconcilable, can we become open to new ideas about how to find solutions to twenty-first century global problems? What happens if we overcome the tendency to lean back into our own worldview? If we lean into the intersection where differences meet? Is this the place of genius that we need to explore?

I turn to bell hooks and her point that the margin is a place of radical openness. She was not writing about global problems or the meeting place of Western and Indigenous consciousness. Yet, her words offer insights into why we need to stand at this intersection.

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For hooks, the margin is “a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk” (1990, p.206). It is a place of radical possibility, of transformation. Given the total failure of Western patriarchy to create a safe and sustainable world for present and future generations, I envision a future in which all communities step forward into the margins and onto the dancefloor of paradigms. It is only at this intersection of margins, at this edge of radical potential, that enough space will be created for the full potential of human creativity to arise to address the scale of the challenges we face today. This might sound unthinkable .. yet it is already happening.

Across the world, Indigenous and scientific communities are coming together to bring the power of each community’s knowledge, insight, vision and capability to bear on local problems. In Chad, for example, where a hotter, drier climate has wreaked havoc on traditional ways of living and Lake Chad has been reduced to 10% of its size over 4 decades, Ibrahim brought together 500 Indigenous people to pool their knowledge of natural resources. Men and women added different knowledge, women knowing, for example, which crops are good for cooking and also resilient to drought. Many groups contributed, each adding to the mapping of the others, and documenting wisdom from conversations with grandparents and elders. Ibrahim used digital technology to create the map and shared it with local communities. The digital project is now being widely adopted across the region as a resource for managing and living in a changing climate (Wired, 2022).

In another example of a collaboration project bringing together Indigenous and Western knowledge and information systems, the Indigenous Knowledges section of the Climate Atlas of Canada went live in March this year (2022). Developed by Indigenous community leaders, it showcases Indigenous peoples’ ways of knowing and being and how these are critical for understanding and managing climate change. It shares the wisdom of Indigenous elders and

knowledge keepers in an online format and is intended as a resource about the impacts of climate change for 634 First Nation communities and 53 Inuit communities.

This process of bringing together the wisdom of Indigenous and mainstream knowledges is sometimes called two-eyed seeing by Indigenous peoples. Two-eyed seeing is:

the gift of multiple perspectives treasured by many aboriginal peoples and .. refers to learning to see from one eye with the *strengths* of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the *strengths* of Western knowledge and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together for the benefit of all. Two-eyed seeing further enables recognition of Indigenous knowledge as a distinct and whole knowledge system side by side with the same for mainstream (Western) science (Bartlett et al, 2012, pp4-13).

Ibrahim says, “People still believe that Indigenous peoples represent the past. But let me tell you that we are the future” (Wired, 2022). Somehow, we need to reintroduce the lost complexity of Indigenous thinking into efforts to address the issues facing humanity right now. Combining ancient Indigenous ways of knowing with powerful emerging technologies is, for me, what is missing in current attempts to address existential questions of the survival of the human population on Earth. My question for the future is how the creation of a multi-paradigmatic dancefloor can encourage diverse Indigenous and Western communities into the radical openness of the margins to find solutions to the problems we face as a global community at this moment in the twenty-first century. In my view, this is an imperative. We cannot rely on Western science, systems or consciousness to find a way out.

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