

Interdependence

Polly O. Walker, PhD (she/her/hers)

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This memo explores one of nine distinctive characteristics of ethical engagement through the arts. It is part of the research informing the report entitled: Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges.” This research was proposed by the [Community Arts Network](#) (affiliated with the [Porticus Foundation](#)) and carried out and written by [IMPACT: Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture, and Conflict Transformation](#), in partnership with Brandeis University and ReCAST, Inc.

“Embracing the interdependence of beings and systems; functioning in terms of eco-systems; valuing relationships: human to human, living being to living being, humans with land and the earth” (Making the Case, 2021).

Conceptual analysis and important debates

The conceptual analysis of this memo is based on ‘two way seeing’, a decolonizing form of epistemological pluralism that explores the theme of interdependence through Indigenous and western lenses. Both western and Indigenous scholars stress interdependence between humans as a central and essential aspect of conflict transformation. However, Indigenous paradigms emphasize interdependence among a more extensive network of relationships, including within oneself, with other humans, ancestors, generations to come, the natural world and the cosmos.

John Paul Lederach (2005), one of the seminal western scholars of conflict transformation, names *the centrality of relationships* as one of the four essential disciplines of conflict transformation. Drawing on cutting edge research in a wide range of fields, from nuclear physics to system theory, he maintains that relationships are the main organizing concept in emergent research. He describes the ‘singular taproot’ of the moral imagination as an extended relationality, as “The capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationship even with their enemies” (p. 34). Lederach goes on to explain that this imagination involves key disciplines of fostering a wider set of interdependent relationships as well as situating oneself within the pattern of violence. Lederach acknowledges the intergenerational interdependence of those now alive and coming generations: “...the well-being of our grand-children is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy’s grandchildren” (p. 35). He also argues that disrupting cycles of violence is inextricably linked to relational spaces that are the sites for transforming conflict (2005, p. 111).

A number of Indigenous scholars, knowledge holders, and elders emphasize interdependence as central to their approaches to conflict transformation (see Graham, 2008; Walker, 2019; Maryboy et al., 2012). However, in Indigenous paradigms, webs of interrelatedness that shape peacebuilding extend beyond human relationships. A number of Indigenous scholars and their allies describe the crucial role of eco-relationality in conflict transformation, a form of interdependence in which humans are engaged in relationships of respect and responsibility with the natural world, ancestors, generations to come and other humans (see Cajete, 2016; Meyer, 1998; Vaai, 2019). In Native conflict analysis, disrespect of this extensive network of relationships is seen as an underlying factor in intractable conflicts (Yazzie, 2004), and efforts to maintain, repair or renew relational networks are integral to Indigenous processes of transforming conflict and building peace (Brigg & Walker, 2015).

Kinship relationships with the natural world are not metaphors for Indigenous peoples; they are lived realities in which Land is a close relative, often Mother, who takes an active role as an agent in transforming conflict (see Meyer, 2008). Just as many human mothers teach their children ethics and responsibility, in Indigenous worldviews the natural world guides humans toward balance and harmony with the full range of ecosystems. Respect and reciprocity toward relationships with the natural world also provide a framework for conflict transformation within human relations, as Graham (2008) explains: “The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our human-ness. Because land is

sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations” (p. 182).

Both western and Indigenous scholars position interdependence as a key aspect of building peace. However, the emphasis of these Indigenous and western scholars differs in the degree to which they ascribe agency to the natural world. Bringing both of these approaches together in understanding conflict transformation supports an epistemological pluralism that sharpens our vision and deepens our understanding.

Although few western scholars clearly articulate eco-relationality as a foundational aspect of conflict transformation, Lederach (2005) hints at the eco-relational role of those people who are storytellers and shamans, describing them as magicians whose knowing mediates between human communities and a vast network of beings with whom humans are interdependent.

Epistemological pluralism can enhance our understanding of interrelatedness in the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation. In this section I explore both western and Indigenous perspectives of enhancing interdependence through ceremony and ritual.

A number of western scholars maintain that ceremony and ritual heighten awareness of the interconnected aspects of one’s experience. For example, Driver (1992) analyzes ceremony and ritual as holistic processes that integrate “the psychological, the sociopolitical, and the material worlds” (p. 175). And according to Schirch (2007), ritual involves the integration of “people’s minds, bodies, all or many of their senses, and their emotions” (p. 157). Western scholars of performance studies also illuminate ways in which ceremony and ritual enhance interdependence across difference in social groups.

Many Indigenous peoples also understand ceremony as heightening awareness of the interrelated aspects of experience. However, their concepts include an extensive network of relationships within which ceremony acknowledges and revitalizes interdependence and interrelatedness with the natural world, as McMaster & Trafzer (2004) explain:

Among many different Indian peoples... holy rituals keep the Earth alive and moving. The grass grows and rivers flow... We sing our songs, perform our dances, and pray. In many ways we remember the old traditions, and by telling our stories of being, we re-enter and renew our sacred circles. With each song, story or ceremony, the Native world is recreated, linking the present with the past. In so doing, we bring ourselves into the larger circle of Indian people, nurtured by sweet medicine that lives today. Native Americans stand in the center of a sacred circle, in the middle of four directions. At this time and for all time, American Indians are in the presence of, and part of, many vast, living, and diverse Native universes. (p. 44)

The arts based initiatives described in the next section illuminate ways in which interdependence can be strengthened through arts and cultural work designed to transform conflict and address issues of justice.

Descriptions of arts & cultural work initiatives that illustrate the transformative power of interdependence

Border Wall Art and Cultural Work

The award-winning art installation “Teeter-totter,” a bright pink seesaw installed on a section of Trump’s new border wall that bisects Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, demonstrates the interdependence of community members living on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States. Although it was a decade in the making, the teeter-totter was only allowed to remain in place for 30 minutes because the US Border Patrol refused permission for its installation. Set up in the dark of night, the see-saw was ready at first light, with people showing up to play on the Mexican side where communities pressed against the wall. “Teeter-totter” both embodies interdependence and creates a metaphor for the interdependent relationships on both sides of the border: Just as the physical actions of a teeter totter depend on the actions of people on both ends of it, justice for those living near the border requires addressing the fact that “actions that take place on one side have a direct consequence on the other” (Barajas, 2019, para. 14).

There have been many arts-based initiatives to address the violence of this border wall and the colonialism that keeps separation policies and processes in place. The installations arising out of Indigenous paradigms stress the underlying interdependence of the peoples who ‘are crossed by the border.’ This philosophy is in stark contrast to the stigmatization perpetuated by media who present as ‘illegal’ the people who cross the border without the permission of nation states. Interrelatedness as a central aspect of borderlands conflict transformation can be seen in the short video Coyotlalli Techpanoltih by Josué Rivas (2020) that illuminates the role of relationships among Indigenous peoples and between Indigenous and settler peoples, in building societies of balance and harmony.

In the midst of these border conflicts, Tohono O’odham ancient and contemporary ceremonies reaffirm relationships with and responsibilities toward all humans and the natural world, including lands and waters. Currently, springs and lands that are sites of annual ceremonies of renewal are being bisected and destroyed by the border wall extensions (Náñez, n.d.). Even while Tohono O’odham peoples are resisting this colonial intrusion, they continue to perform the ceremonies honoring interdependence with those seizing and destroying their sacred places. Each July Tohono O’odham hold a ceremony called the Vikita in which tribal members pray for the earth and for everyone and everything on it. These ceremonies send a powerful message of interdependence supporting conflict transformation between the government of the US and the Indigenous peoples who have not ceded their sovereignty to nation states.

Eco-relational interdependence: Indigenous Women’s poetry and story

Many Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island (North America) embody interdependence with the natural world in their movements to address the ongoing violence of settler colonialism. Visual art, music, poetry, ceremony and many other forms of art and cultural work are being engaged by Indigenous women to honor interdependence, to bring others' awareness to the ways in which disrespect of this vast network of relationships is making individuals, communities and the natural world out of balance. A seminal work in this area is a compilation of Indigenous women's writings edited by Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo (1998), *Re-Inventing the Enemy's Language*, which illuminates the structural and cultural violence of settler colonialism's disregard for Indigenous people's webs of relatedness. Artists from a range of Native nations describe the violence wrought by disrespect of interrelatedness with the natural world: of apocalyptic environmental destruction, endangerment of entire populations of animal relatives, disregard of Indigenous women and their roles, as well as marginalization and oppression of Indigenous worldviews.

More recently, Mojave Nation poet Natalie Diaz (2020) published a compilation of postcolonial love poems, one of which describes the embodiment of eco-relationality and the role in conflict transformation of acknowledging interdependence : "I carry a river. It is who I am. 'Aha Makav. This is not metaphor' (Diaz, 2020, p. 46). In many Indigenous worldviews, destruction of parts of the natural world constitutes genocide toward the Indigenous peoples so intimately connected with the natural world. Diaz' poem grapples with the possibilities of conflict transformation should a more respectful engagement with interdependence be evidenced by settlers: "If I could convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?" (p. 51).

Poetry and narrative, such as that of Diaz (2020) and the many authors in Bird and Harjo (1998), have the aesthetic power to arrest the readers' attention long enough for them to engage with concepts of interdependence that are essential to transforming violence toward Indigenous peoples, and that may be vastly different from dominant Western worldviews of those in power in settler colonial countries. Often the worldview blindness of those in dominant groups (Goldberg, 2009) obscures that which is of vital importance to peoples in oppressed groups.

Water Protector's Art: Celebrating and Protecting Eco-relationality

Arising out of the Indigenous nonviolent resistance campaign at Standing Rock, the Water Protectors' Movement both celebrates and calls for the revitalization of eco-relationality. The movement has engaged a range of arts and culture-based initiatives to raise awareness of the importance of relationship with Water for the well-being of all on Mother Earth. One of the most widely disseminated and recognized images in the Water Protectors movement is the visual art of Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch (see Monkman, 2017). "When you have [one or two] strong images that say "water is life," it gives the people a voice, in a way that the placards don't, " (Belcourt, cited in Monkman, 2017).¹

Ceremonies are another initiative at the core of the Water Protector's Movement. One notable ceremony involves marking participants' faces with ochre, linking them in relationship with Land (Belcourt, cited in Monkman, 2017). Another significant ceremony of the movement is Water Walking, in which Indigenous women walk with and for water, a ritual that has survived settler colonialism and that honors eco-relationality with each step (Beeds, n.d.). Beeds (n.d.) explains the interdependent

¹ See image at end of this memo

conflict transformation potential of these ceremonies: “ nîpîy/Nibi (Water) is one of our many relatives with whom we have a reciprocal relationship. Like our Ancestors, we move our bodies in Ceremony to articulate that relationship and to protect the Beings who sustain us for future generations. Carrying nîpîy/Nibi becomes a means for us as iskwêwak/Kwewag to connect to Her on a profound spiritual level. She becomes us and we become Her” (para. 4). Beeds goes on to call for all peoples to enter into a respectful relationship with Water in order to create well-being for everyone and for the natural world.

USDAC: Addressing polarization-moving toward acknowledgment of interdependence

Each year the United States Department of Arts and Culture hosts a Peoples’ State of the Union consisting of story circles held across the country and designed to foster justice and conflict transformation (*People’s State of the Union*, 2021). This year, the USDAC is partnering with Masscreative and The Theatre Offensive to host virtual story circles that will be followed by interpretation of the shared stories created by an array of artists, poets, and musicians. These interpretations will be broadcast in a live streamed Poetic Address. The story circles for 2021 are designed to address political polarization and violence, as well as other forms of violence that have been made more visible to the wider community through the losses incurred due to COVID-19.

Story circles, one prominent form of which was created by John O’Neal (2011), have demonstrated capacity to sing up the interdependence of all those involved, which is often obscured in polarized discourse or debate. Kenyan scholars and artists are building on O’Neal’s format and have instigated story circles involving youth and the police in Kenya. They have found story circles to be effective in transforming conflict by enhancing awareness of interdependence between these groups, lack of which has been a factor in election violence (Bonface Beti, *personal communication*, 2020; Kilonzo, 2020).

Combatants for Peace: Acknowledging interdependence even with ‘the enemy’

Combatants for Peace is a network of excombatant Palestinians and Israelis whose work embodies the interconnectedness of both peoples, and which builds on shared values of freedom, democracy, security and dignity of Israelis and Palestinians. A central part of their nonviolent movement is a collaboration with Bread and Puppets, a global activist group founded in response to the Vietnam War (“Make Art, Not War,” 2017). In the face of an extremely polarized conflict, Combatants for Peace uses art to build bridges between people on both sides of the violence, fostering relationships between these communities and engaging in nonviolent action against the occupation. The puppets have become a signature mark of CfP’s monthly Freedom Marches. Members of CfP argue that peace is the best security and that their puppets point out the silliness of seeking security by using armed force (particularly using armed force against marchers wielding puppets).

Ideas about how interdependence contributes to addressing complex challenges

Interdependence contributes to addressing many complex challenges, including climate change, polarization, and colonialism. To a great extent, human induced climate change has arisen out of a philosophy of materialism and capitalism in which the natural world is conceptualized as commodities to be used to enhance human wealth. In contrast, awareness and honoring of interdependence supports relationships of respect and mutual responsibility which creates a different pattern of care for, and communication with, the natural world.

The polarization around the globe between far right and left political rhetoric and action is escalating conflict in a wide range of countries. Polarized discourse fosters images of the other as completely different from those in one's group (and often as lesser than). The fear that is engendered by polarized discourse obscures the interdependence of people with others who hold different political and cultural beliefs. Art and cultural work can depict interdependence, or facilitate experiences of interdependence, in ways that disrupt polarization.

Settler colonialism denies interdependence with Indigenous peoples and with the natural world, seeing them primarily as needing to be managed. Arts and cultural work that sing up the interdependence of Indigenous and settler peoples, as well as their interdependence with the natural world, is demonstrating potential to address the ongoing challenges of settler colonial appropriation of Indigenous lands, wealth and resources, as well as failures to create just societies.

Author Biography

Polly O. Walker is of Cherokee descent and a member of the Cherokee Southwest Township. She is currently Director of the Baker Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies and the Elizabeth Evans Baker Professor of Peace Studies at Juniata College in the United States. Polly earned her PhD at the University of Queensland in Australia where her research focused on conflict transformation between Aboriginal and Settler Australians.

She has published in a wide range of peer-reviewed journals and contributed chapters to a number of edited volumes on topics related to cross cultural issues in conflict transformation, Indigenous approaches to peace, and the role of ritual and performance in peacebuilding. Polly is co-editor, along with Dr. Cynthia Cohen and Prof. Roberto Varea, of *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict* Vol. I: Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence, and Vol. II: Building Just and Inclusive Communities.

Polly is Chair of the Indigenous Education Institute whose work supports ethical collaboration with Indigenous peoples and Western scientists supporting the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge systems.

She serves as board member for the Peace and Conflict Studies Institute of Australia, The International Peace Research Association and the Peace and Justice Studies Association.

Polly is an experienced trainer. She was a lead trainer and program developer in a six-year international Kastom Governance program in Vanuatu, which was conducted under the auspices of the Australian

Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, AusAid and The Malvatumaui National Council of Chiefs. Polly also conducted mediation training with the Solomon Islands National Peace Council, and conflict transformation training with an Aboriginal Community Development organization on Palm Island in Queensland, Australia. Polly is a member of the IMPACT [Leadership Circle](#).

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Some other themes worth pursuing, but for which space does not allow in this memo

- Lederach (2005) points out that isolation and fear paralyze the capacity to imagine the web of **interdependent** relationships. This research project might wish to pursue ways in which arts and cultural work have addressed (and could address) isolation and fear in ways that enhance awareness of, and willingness to engage, interdependence.
- How arts and cultural work heighten/create awareness of the interdependence of past/present and future, a concept of time that is a central aspect of many Indigenous peoples' approaches to peace, as well an essential aspect of addressing entrenched conflicts in sustainable ways. (references available if needed).

An example of Water Protector's art by Isaac Murdoch

