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Research Article

Teaching-in-Relation: Reflections from and with Gumbaynggirr Country

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Abstract: This paper reflects on what it means to teach-in-relation from and with Gumbaynggirr Country, guided by Aboriginal Elders Aunty Shaa Smith and Uncle Bud Marshall alongside non-Indigenous collaborators from Australia. Teaching-in-relation emerges through our relationships and is grounded in Country and our human and more-than-human kin. We offer six reference points that for us orient teaching-in-relation: Coming from your own place; Living non-linear time; Relationships with and as Country; Making mistakes and being vulnerable; Sharing, reciprocity and limits; and Connection and respect. These teachings speak back to Western educational norms and hierarchies, urging relational accountability, vulnerability, and deep listening as a decolonising practice for geography education. Through our research collective's relationships as *gunganbu* – beings who belong together – we show how learning on, with and as Country creates both possibilities and responsibilities for transforming educational practice. Rather than offering a prescriptive model, the reference points invite educators to cultivate an ethical responsiveness to place. We argue that teaching-in-relation contributes to geography education by encouraging teachers and students to engage with colonial legacies, socio-environmental uncertainty, multiple ways of knowing, and their responsibilities to human and more-than-human communities.

Keywords: relationality; Indigenous geographies; geography education; Aboriginal epistemology; Australia

Highlights:

- Indigenous peoples' knowledge provides a counterpoint to colonising educational hierarchies.
- Gumbaynggirr Elders and Custodians offer reference points to guide teaching-in-relation.
- To transform educational practice, we must heed the call of Country.

1. Introduction

Giinagay ngugaawiny. Hello everybody. We are Aunty Shaa, Uncle Bud, Paul, Lara and Sarah, writing as *gunganbu* (our belonging-together, our family) from Gumbaynggirr Country. Gumbaynggirr Country guides our being and learning together and is homeland for Gumbaynggirr people on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, Australia.

We are an Indigenous and non-Indigenous collective, working together within and beyond the University to share Indigenous, Gumbaynggirr ways of knowing and being, and to think about how those of us working within mainstream institutions might respond, appropriately and respectfully. In this paper, we speak to learning and teaching, with an emphasis on the approaches and perspectives of Indigenous Elders and Country. This work is vital in the ways it contributes important understandings and practices that are Indigenous-centred, drawing from 60,000 plus years of

knowledge production (Burarrwanga et al., 2012; Kovach, 2021; Tassell-Matamua, 2025; Woollorton et al., 2025). Geography never was a uniquely Western concept (Chakrabarty, 2007; Sidaway, 2000). The need to learn with and from diverse knowledge traditions is urgent given the times of intense change in which we live, particularly as these knowledges and ways of living hold important insights for how to live well and respectfully with each other and with the earth. As Yuchi Native American Scholar Daniel Wildcat says:

Can you imagine a world where nature is understood as full of relatives not resources, where inalienable rights are balanced with inalienable responsibilities, and where wealth itself is measured not by resource ownership and control, but by the number of good relationships we maintain in the complex and diverse life-systems of this blue-green planet? I can (Wildcat, 2013, p. 515).

In this piece, we speak about our work and our being together and reflect on what it means to teach in and through relation, from our different places as Elders and as non-Indigenous researchers in Gumbaynggirr Country. Country is an Aboriginal English word for the diverse beings, belongings and agencies, human and more-than-humans, that co-become as place (Bawaka Country et al., 2016). Country includes soil, rocks, rivers, sea, winds, stars, plants, animals, dreams, ancestors and so much more. Country is family.

Here we share what it has meant for us to teach-in-relation as gunganbu, and highlight some of the ways this approach might empower geography educators and students as we collectively navigate complex socio-environmental change. By enacting relational responsibilities in our teaching, we are trying to respond to calls to Indigenise pedagogies and to centre understandings and practices of teaching and learning that are Earth-centred. For us, that means listening to and learning from and with Elders, ancestors and Country. Teaching and learning is something that is always happening and is not limited to the classroom or formal educational settings. Indeed, Gumbaynggirr knowledge holders have been passing on knowledge to the next generations for tens of thousands of years. The importance of centring relationships has long been stated by many Indigenous teachers, scholars, Elders and through story, land and Lore/Law (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Bishop, 2023; Hammersley et al., 2026; RiverOfLife, 2020). Following this, the concept of relationality emphasises the importance of connections, human and more-than-human, to the ongoing emergence and creation of flourishing life-worlds.

In our understanding and practice of relationality, we are inspired by the work of the Indigenous-led intercultural research collective writing as Bawaka Country et al. (2016) who have shared a Yolngu-led relational ontology of co-becoming, demonstrating the ways in which humans and more-than-humans come into being together, not separately but as part of Country. We are also inspired by Bawaka Country's sharing of a Yolngu pedagogy that works through human and more-than-human relationships and relationality so that family, animals, plants and Country are all teachers and learning is happening all the time, not just in the classroom (2023a). For us, relationality is a way of doing and being that is supported by Gumbaynggirr Dreaming and Lore/Law and comes with deep responsibilities to ourselves, each other and Country. This resonates with Pairebeenne Trawlwoolway scholar, Lauren Tynan's assertion that "relationality is not a new metaphor to be reaped for academic gain, but a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country" (Tynan, 2021, p. 598). Relationality, or a relational approach, then, informs a whole different way of teaching and learning that is critical in times of change and uncertainty in which human and ecological relationships have become out of balance (Smith et al., 2021). Gamilaroi woman Michelle Bishop reflects that "perhaps a reframing of environmental education is needed to one that is "learning on/from/as Country" in recognition that everywhere we learn, we are learning "on Country, that we *are* Country" (2023, para. 4).

Following Bishop (2023), Tynan (2021), and Bawaka Country et al. (2016), we centre Indigenous people's knowledges and relations in this piece as an explicit counterpoint to colonising educational hierarchies that continue to marginalise Indigenous ontologies (Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019). These ongoing hierarchies are felt and structurally embedded in settler-colonial-Indigenous contexts such as Australia and in centres of structural power that have been created and empowered through unequal, exploitative relations in on-going ways. Centuries of imperial expansion emanating from Europe meant the proliferation and imposition of "Eurocentric political, legal, welfare, education and academic systems" (Gay'wu Group of Women et al., 2024, p. 94) into, and onto, the so-called 'new world'. The persistence of these colonial legacies and geography's—and Europe's—complicity, means that there are conversations still to be had for geographers far removed spatially from former colonies.

Now, more than ever, we must heed the call of Country (Smith et al., 2021) as part of Country (Bishop, 2023). The knowledge of environmental change has always existed in Indigenous ontologies (Davis and Todd, 2017; Whyte, 2018). For millennia, Indigenous peoples have experienced and endured climatic changes by way of their deep responsibilities and relationships with kin and Country (Tynan, 2021). As Smith et al. (2021, p. 163) share when describing the impacts of 2019-2020 summer bushfires in Australia, these socio-environmental events “are connected as part of a much bigger story of change and destruction that began with colonisation and continues today”. But with destruction there is creation (Smith et al., 2020). Responding to calls to decolonise geography education is a timely practice precisely because it offers a way to embrace environmental uncertainty and to create change, if we are listening.

For us, responding to times of great change as educators means we need to teach-in-relation in a fundamental way; reframing our work so that it is always centred on and comes about through relationships. Here, teaching is a practice of relationality. It is a building of family, oneness and kinship including with more-than-human kin. Rather than bringing some aspects of Indigenous culture into an existing system, we hope to learn and be differently, beyond the rigid confines of an externally-produced hierarchy and way of being. Gumbaynggirr Lore/Law and the associated relationships need to be at the centre, and this is a task for all. As Uncle Bud reflects:

To me, these stories I’m sharing... are something magic. I love doing it and I don’t want to see any of our culture forgotten. Culture is the main thing. It keeps you connected to the earth. When people cut down and take the trees out of the earth, it’s like they’re taking a bit of my spirit out. Once you take something out, it’s hard to put it back together. Everything that belongs to the earth was put there by nature. That’s what the kids need to learn.

I want to see everyone bringing culture back, reviving the land, giving it a purpose again. Not just us taking and taking again. It’s up to everyone now to follow in the footsteps of the Old Fellas.

Gumbaynggirr stories are an anchor and a guide, one that isn’t about ‘me, me, me,’ as Auntie Shaa has said. Uncle Bud and Auntie Shaa both emphasise that all of us need to go back to Country, to put our relationships with Country at the centre of everything. This means opening our ‘wondrous minds’ to connection and change (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019). Auntie Shaa says that she hopes that her teachings “can act as a window, a window that kids [and other students] look through and see the wider, deeper world, the world where we are all connected and in relationship with Country and each other.”

We have worked together since 2016 as a collective called Yandaarra, which means shifting camp together in Gumbaynggirr language. For us, shifting camp is about coming together as Gumbaynggirr and non-Indigenous people to create better relationships with ourselves, each other and with Country itself. We have come together as a group in different ways at different times including, in particular with Auntie Shaa’s daughter Neeyan Smith, post-graduate student Liz Murphy-May, as well as Auntie Shaa and Uncle Bud’s nieces Hannah Smith, Elaine Carmady and nephew BJ Carmady, and other Indigenous academic-family Fabri Blacklock, Michelle Bishop, Lauren Tynan, June Rubis and others. These treasured people are gunganbu too, spiralling through time and place and connection. We have also come together with teachings from Old Fellas who have passed like Uncle Benjie and Auntie Byne. Here then, we would like to acknowledge and respect their work and contributions as well as pay our respect to other Custodians of Gumbaynggirr Country as well as the ancestors and other beings and co-becomings of Country and our/their kin.

In this article, we speak as ‘we’ in a way that acknowledges our connection and also our different positions. When a particular author is speaking from their perspective, we talk in the third person. When we speak in ways that come from shared insight, and collaborative thoughts and writings, we speak collectively. Even as we do so, we feel it is important to note our very different places in our collaboration and our relationships with this knowledge, a protocol that we elaborate on below. Auntie Shaa is an Elder and story holder for Gumbaynggirr Country. Uncle Bud is a senior Elder, Waambung man of the Baga baga bari on Gumbaynggirr Country. He has shared his knowledge and wisdom with many, especially young people. Paul, Lara and Sarah come with different pathways as non-Indigenous people. They learn and they shift, they come into relation, trying to be without entitlement. They do not have authority over the stories or knowledges, nor do they speak for Gumbaynggirr people or Country. All of us come as ourselves, acknowledging and respecting our pathways and ancestors that brought us here, as well as the challenges, violences and exclusions of colonisation, capitalism and heteropatriarchy.

As we move forward shifting camp together - Auntie Shaa, Uncle Bud, Lara, Paul, Sarah and you, as you read this - we will reflect on six important reference points that guide us in teaching-in-relation. We share these as differentially positioned educators both within and beyond the classroom. The following dialogues and reflections we share as reference points have emerged over the last decade together while sitting around a campfire, when having a feed, while debriefing teaching a course, or when talking on conference calls and zooms.

The conceptualisation of a reference point is offered by Auntie Shaa as a term to use when distinguishing particular relationships and learnings that orient and guide. Reference points provide the centre of meaning against which things are understood and related to. We hope these reference points will provide useful guidance for educators and for those wishing to come into relation in many different places and contexts. Not because your teaching practice or circumstances are the same as ours, but because perhaps these reference points may provide helpful points of orientation as you shift camp through your own place and relationship, in your own way and yet in ways connected with us. We can only speak from our places and experiences. We are still learning and making mistakes as we work to 'shift camp together'.

The following sections, then, highlight reflections that come from us as educators, teachers, students, gunganbu (family), grandparents, uncles, aunts, mothers, fathers, children, nephews, nieces, cousins, friends, kin. The reference points are communicated through quotes drawn from our many yarns together and paired with practices that reflect and embody this teaching-in-relation. There are many overlaps and synergies between these points. They sit together, connect through Country and Lore/Law.

The reference points and the practices we share are not answers; they are in no way meant as a 'recipe' for how to teach, transform, Indigenise or decolonise geographical education. Rather, they need to be approached with consideration, patience and humility (Bishop, 2023), adapted to suit your specific learning context and its histories, geometries of power and privilege as well as your own place and position within these. We do hope, though, that they may provide some guidance about what has been important in our work and offer some insight to how to learn respectfully together in and through relationship as we shift camp together wherever we may be.

For us, the six reference points begin with Gumbaynggirr Country and the teachings shared by Elders, ancestors and more-than-human kin. They arise from lived relationships rather than educational theory and are offered as points of orientation rather than prescriptions of practice. In geography education, however, these teachings somewhat resonate with discussions of geo-capabilities and powerful geographical knowledge (Lambert et al., 2015; Maude, 2016, 2018). Where those frameworks ask how learners might better understand and engage with a complex and changing world, teaching-in-relation suggests that such learning begins from relationships and responsibilities. From a Gumbaynggirr-led perspective, geographical understanding is inseparable from care for Country, respect, and accountability as part of human and more-than-human worlds. In this sense, powerful geographical learning is not only about extending what students know, but also about deepening how they relate, listen and respond within the places of which they are a part.

2. Teaching-in-relation: six key reference points

2.1. Reference point 1: Coming from your own place within relationships, with an open heart and with humility

We can only speak from our places and experiences. This is a fundamental point of reference for our work, sharing and learning together and of how we teach and learn through relation in multiple settings. For Auntie Shaa and Uncle Bud, Gumbaynggirr Country is at the centre of our relationships. As we work together, we are individually and collectively part of multiple relations, as Elders and Custodians, and as Yiraalli, non-Indigenous people. This means Auntie Shaa, Uncle Bud, Lara, Sarah and Paul are situated differently in relation to Gumbaynggirr knowledge and Country, within our relationships and within our learning and teaching. Each of us should always speak from our own place of knowing and through our own place. As Auntie Shaa and Sarah reflect:

Sarah: The other thing with us as Yandaarra is about acknowledging that we have different positions. We are coming together and it is about everything, it is our interconnected journey but we are all different.

Aunty Shaa: I think it is good to give it acknowledgement— we are in this meeting, in this coming from different places and it needs to be honoured. So, coming to this place of oneness, how do we live that? How do we practice that together?

For Lara, Sarah and Paul, as non-Indigenous people on Gumbaynggirr Country, this speaking place is fraught with histories of colonisation. Acknowledging and responding to these relationships and fraught histories can be confronting. For Aunty Shaa, our true selves lie in this open and honest relationship to place and experience, so too our dream and spirit selves. For Aunty Shaa, dreams provide a window to our ‘true self’:

You know that place where dreams come from? That is part of us. Dreams sort of shine the light on what our true reality is...That comes from in us. That is us. Waking us up, remembering, opening...That place from within is a good way to discuss the whole teaching, learning, education thing.

Honouring this place from within means being open and true to these multiple selves and the relationships within these places. Aunty Shaa’s niece Elaine Carmady reflects on the way all of us have a pathway to being here, a story, that we can acknowledge to guide our respectful coming-together. Elaine says:

Yildaan is our Dreaming Track, and it is our story of how we came to be where we are, following in the footsteps of our ancestors. Everyone has their own story that is their Yildaan, their Dreaming Track.

To talk about the teachings and learnings of your place, experience, dreams, spirits, humility is unfamiliar in most Western educational contexts. Yet the sacredness of these things is integral to honouring our true selves. This reference point asks us all, wherever we may be in the world, to reflect on our own positionality in relation to historical and current geometries of power, and to be open to vulnerabilities, histories and complexities of your place and relations. Attending to the learnings in these guiding places, with an openness to ‘not knowing’, will seem contrary to the structured expectations of teacher-as-expert. But in order to bring into being the radical change that is needed, it is time to start listening and responding to all our selves.

2.1.1. Reference point 1: Learning and practices

Reflect on your Yildaan, your journey and way of becoming, including on your family history, where your ancestors have come from, what Country you live on, and the histories and stories of those places and that Country. Bring this curiosity for place and validation of experience and feelings into your classroom. It doesn’t matter what you’re teaching. If you listen and attend to your true selves, and model this in your teaching practice, you are honouring yourself and the ancestors to learn from your place and relationships.

Attend to the more-than-human as part of connecting to your place. What are the ancient stories of the land where you live and teach? How do these stories embody land-based connection? How might you honour these stories – what is your purpose - in your teaching as a way of acknowledging the sacredness of this place?

Have you ever had recurring dreams, or persistent feeling that just won’t let up? Do you listen and respond to your intuition? For Aunty Shaa what humans have come to know as our conscious self is just one version of us. To honour our true self, our place and experience, is to ‘wake up’ to the learnings that come in through our bodies and dreams.

2.2. Reference point 2: Country and ancestors living non-linear time

Teaching in respectful relation for us means respecting Country and ancestors as important, knowledgable agents. Animals, plants, rocks, winds, waters, skies, dreams, ancestors—these beings are sentient. They feel, care and teach. Within a Western frame these knowings “are not easily understood or communicated by humans, least of all in English. Yet these beings emerge with us, are part of us” (Yandaarra with Gumbaynggirr Country et al., 2022, p. 710). These

interconnecting, more-than-human relationships are happening in all times. There is no distinction between past, present and future when we talk about Country and the ancestors, or the Old Fellas as Aunty Shaa often calls them.

We contain in our very DNA those who came before us. But there is much more going on, and this is the message Aunty Shaa wants us to hear.

For me, it's...communicating with my ancestors and opening my mind up to dimensions where we meet and communicate, that ground, learning about what the protocols are for that...and it's all done by intuition and sensing; being tuned in to vibration and frequency.

So, communicating in this more-than-human world of dimensions, senses, vibrations, urge us, call us to attend differently to how we have been taught. Aunty Shaa continues:

The more time I spend with my ancestors, the more in-tune I've become. And they just help so much. It was my father who helped with the learning around the plants, so you're walking with them.

Uncle Bud speaks also of the seasons and animals that speak and guide:

We're still moving with the times, learning and adapting to what our surroundings are. And we go by the animals, plants and everything too. There are signs that we get through the Old Fellas. Like, the butterflies that come out when the buluungal, mullet fish, are running. There are also seasons with the moon and the stars. You've got to stop and take notice of what your surroundings are.

Old Fellas are with us, in and with Country. They live through the landscape-as-Country as well as in the less tangible realms of dream and spirit. Uncle Bud says:

Uncle Harry Buchanan, he used to row out in a boat up to Gumma and right out to Wellington rock. He'd have a little spot out by Wellington rock where he kept his snapper. Uncle Eddie, he had a spot up at Yarriabini. There were lots of boundaries and places marked in different ways. The rivers were our song-lines. Going from place to place, those were our walking tracks.

There is an urgency here too as Aunty Shaa reminds us:

Our ancestors are like working their butts off to create this consciousness around oneness and relationships...Our ancestors are setting things right so that the structure that's been put in place is recognised and acknowledged and lived by (Yandaarra with Gumbaynggirr Country et al., 2022, p. 719).

Recognising and living by these protocols of the ancestors and Country honours their ongoing presences because we live in the times of the ancestors, which are, after all, the time now, and the times of the future.

2.2.1. Reference point 2: Learning and practices

Have you ever been walking somewhere, through the bush or a forest maybe, and felt something slow you down or hold you back? Have you ever felt a presence around you? Our ancestors are with us now. As we type these words, and as you read them just now. Remember, these ancestors have been here before and lived life's lessons, and they are with you now.

For people whose ancestors are not from this place, including Sarah, Lara and Paul, these same sentient beings and relationships form part of their story, their histories, their ancestral lineage, though in the far-off lands of Ireland, Scotland, England, Norway, Iceland. But because Sarah, Lara and Paul, are here now, their ancestors are here too. Actually, they're yarning with Aunty Shaa's ancestors right now!

The next time you have that feeling that something is trying to tell you something, stop. Slow down. Listen. It could be a strong gust of wind, a persistent bird call or a sudden feeling of dread as you move through a space. Your ancestors are telling you things. Country is talking. It is teaching. Are you listening?

Create spaces to sit with your colleagues and students and talk about these things. As educators teaching in a time of great change, we need to honour, live and learn by these feelings and practices.

2.3. Reference point 3: Gunganbu relationships with and as Country

A few years ago Aunty Shaa gifted Paul a spirit animal, the gunyjarr-gunyjarr, willy wag tail bird. In Gumbaynggirr Country the gunyjarr-gunyjarr is ‘the messenger’. Aunty Shaa was gifted the gunyjarr-gunyjarr years before. Now Paul and Aunty Shaa are connected through the gunyjarr-gunyjarr. It is their kin relationship and one way they communicate through space-time. As Paul tries to attend to the ancestors and the call of Country, he is tuning in more.

Now whenever I see the gunyjarr-gunyjarr I think of our relationship and that’s really beautiful. I think of Aunty Shaa and her ancestors, and our ancestors together. I wonder too, ‘what is she telling me by coming to me, what’s the message?’

For Aunty Shaa these more-than-human relationships bind us, Yandaarra, together:

So, it’s always been for us, Yandaarra, us finding a way to walk together and come together as one and we decided to do a relationship thing and become a family, gunganbu, and we did that...this might be how we relate...weaving together our lives and our ancestors our spirits on this planet here in the physical, with the natural world.

Uncle Bud’s message is clear:

Family is the most important thing in the world. Family means everything. It connects us to who we are and our belonging.

As gunganbu, and with our ancestors by our side, we’re never alone. Paul, Sarah and Lara are held to account for what they share, and how they share it, so their consciousness of Aunty Shaa, Uncle Bud, Gumbaynggirr Country, the ancestor’s presences remind them of the sacredness and purpose of the messages going out to the world.

This happens in educational settings too. In a university course Paul is guided in bringing the sacredness and purpose of Yandaarra’s messages into the classroom.

It’s a bit hard to explain, but when sharing Yandaarra’s learnings with students I feel gunganbu with me, as me. I don’t have to prepare notes anymore. I know that what needs to come in for me, comes in. I will share what I need to share, what I’m allowed to share, in that moment, for those particular students.

Paul will say to students, ‘Aunty Shaa is here with me now, making sure I’m saying things the right way’. The presences of gunganbu guides him and holds him to account. In this way, when with the students, Paul is responsible to the animals, plants, rocks, winds, waters, skies, dreams, ancestors, to juungambala, set things right, to share some protocols with the guidance and love of gunganbu. When students engage with the work of Yandaarra, the students are invited into relationship with Gumbaynggirr Country. In being invited into relationship, so they too are invited into a set of sacred kinship-based responsibilities and protocols of respect and sharing.

In a yarn at the story place, Scotts Head on Ngambaa Country (southern Gumbaynggirr Country), Paul shares with Aunty Shaa what he’s doing with students which is part of honouring the sacredness and purpose of their kin relationship. He told her about something that’s been happening in class.

Yeah, when preparing for tutorials I’ll bring chairs into a kind of circle...Over time I found that there is almost always a spare chair, an empty chair. So it’s now become part of what I do, making sure there is this empty chair. I wasn’t really sure why I was doing this, but now I know. It’s you! It’s the ancestors, it’s gunganbu.

Having the empty chair has become a prompt for students. So now when a curious student asks about the empty chair, it opens up a conversation about gunganbu relationships and space-time connections.

2.3.1. Reference point 3: Learning and practices

The gunganbu relationships we describe take time and deep trust. Mistakes are made on the way. One important aspect is being connected to your place and honouring local custodians. Connecting to local mob where you live and teach will take time, and may be a long journey.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people colonialism still impacts deeply. Everyday. Do not underestimate this. For teachers wanting to make connections and build relationships with local mob Auntie Shaa has a simple question. 'What is your purpose?' Sit with this question. If you don't do this inner work, they will know. Follow your intuition, your inner knowing, your many selves.

Do your own research about the histories of where you live and teach, and sit with that too. Look for publicly available literature written by Indigenous peoples, as well as other diverse groups with connections to the place and community where you live and learn. The Elders, custodians and story holders who have shared their stories have done so with purpose. They are a gift to you, so honour the messages shared. Read them and sit with them. When the time is right, you'll know.

2.4. Reference point 4: Mistakes and being vulnerable with trust and with accountability

An important reference point that continues to guide our coming-together is the importance of being vulnerable, accountable and being open to mistakes.

Our work together actively shifts the centre of our accountabilities away from institutional or dominant norms to centre, first, relationships, Country and Law/Lore. This, of course, is deeply challenging and challenged in a colonising context, but it remains a core part of our practice (see also Bawaka Country et al., 2023b). There are many layers associated with these kinds of accountabilities. As Lara and Sarah reflect:

We view engaging Aboriginal futures respectfully as part of a multi-directional practice of accountabilities in relation with ourselves, our families (in the broadest sense), and invited relationships with Aboriginal Elders and Custodians. For us, this practice must take many forms, such as paying the rent, working in solidarity with Custodians on getting land back, attending Indigenous-led rallies and marches, and caring for relatives (human and more-than-human) within the sovereign relationships we have been invited into.

For the non-Indigenous members of the collective, Lara, Sarah and Paul, it is important that we do not approach this as a move to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) or a way that might somehow dissolve or overcome our positions and differences. Rather, it can be a way of challenging and unlearning some of the processes and practices that continue to privilege settler positionalities. We approach accountabilities as an important step as we tentatively seek ways of living and responding differently towards a pluralist respectful, relational belongings (see also Daley & Wright, 2025; Wright, 2024).

Part of this is understanding that we cannot be perfect and we do not have all the answers. There is nothing simple or straightforward here and we are always going to make mistakes. Mistakes are a part of life. We can choose to embrace them and learn from them, or we can be dismissive, even ignore them, thus missing opportunities to learn and be accountable. As Yandaarra we have come to know that mistakes open up a place of vulnerability, but also we trust that there are lessons and that the learning that comes with mistakes comes with accountability. As Auntie Shaa's daughter Neeyan shares (in Smith et al., 2020, p. 956):

When someone does make a mistake, or a mistake comes in, we know we are not finished here. We have to go through this learning. Even if it were me who acknowledged a mistake – all will learn. Then we can move onto the next. The Old Fellas can create that. (Neeyan)

The mistake must be acknowledged for collective learning to take place and it is the ancestors – the Old Fellas – who you are accountable to as you move on in your learning.

So ‘the broken place’, the mistake, is sacred (Smith et al., 2020, p. 955). As is ‘sitting with’ the feelings that emerge in that place. Honouring the sacredness of the mistake, and the role of the ancestors in guiding the learning that can come from it, is to teach-in-relation. An important message here is the ‘moving through’ the feelings, but to do this, the mistake has to be acknowledged. Complete vulnerability. This can be very hard, but you have to go through this as part of honouring the mistake, and where it takes you. Don’t forget, as Aunty Shaa says, ‘those Old Fellas, we can ask them to intervene at any time to help us’.

2.4.1. Reference point 4: Learning and practices

Have you ever made a mistake and not known what to do with it, or how to respond? As Neeyan says, mistakes are sacred. Thinking about mistakes as things to be honoured can reorient us from having unhelpful negative feelings to seeing mistakes as a relationship of accountability and an opportunity to learn and grow. This could involve sitting in a circle and being transparent with your students about the nature of the mistake. By sharing it you are honouring it. This may also mean showing vulnerability in front of your students as a way of honouring the mistake and the accountability to learn from it. There is also a modelling as part of this teaching practice that invites students into this teaching-in-relation.

2.5. Reference point 5: Sharing, reciprocity and limits

An important protocol that underpins our work with and as Yandaarra is that of sharing and reciprocity. We share knowledge, time, care and so much more. This is not meant in a transactional way, as in, you did something for me, or gave something to me, and now I’ll do something for you. Rather, it is a broader sense of sharing and continued giving, ngurrajili, that comes about through connection and relationship. We do this as we care for ourselves, each other, and Country, and as we open ourselves up to be cared for in turn.

In teaching and learning, this is important so that the knowledge is not a one-way extractive process, something that stems from a sense of separation, but is part of a relational and multi-directional exchange. In this way, learning can be about acknowledging and renewing the spirit of relationships with each other and with Country, in ways underpinned by respect and care. It is about learning to give and receive care and learning honourably. Care is offered by Country and by Custodians that have shared knowledge in different ways, so that learning through relationships is a multi-directional and more-than-human sharing. An important question to consider is, what will you do with this knowledge, how will you integrate it, how will you give and make changes in your life? This, for us, on Gumbaynggirr Country, is part of ngurrajili, continued giving. Aunty Shaa, with Yandaarra, explains:

The giving is a receiving, and gifts come from different directions including through more-than-human relationships, from and as time, from and as place. This is the balance of it all, the web of life that continues as we all are connected, become together. It is the relationality, the knowledge, the sharing, the caring of the seasons, the tides, the fish, the laughter, the dance, the time spent gathering.

To understand and practice sharing well also means understanding that there are limits to what can be learnt. Not all knowledge can be shared. Not all knowledge is for everyone. Unlike some approaches in a mainstream, Western understanding of education, not all knowledge is there to be grabbed, owned, or hoarded. Rather, it is important to understand and respect limits in learning together and to integrate what you learn.

Uncle Bud emphasises that there are limits in what we might know and do. As he says:

There’s a lot of places Aboriginal people left things like a trademark and you’re not allowed to touch it. You’ve got to tread lightly on Country and ask if you want to take something. That’s been passed down to us by the Elders.

In this, there are differences in our coming together. We need our sharing to reflect our relationships, our coming together, but not our sameness. As Aunty Shaa reflects:

It's this thing about, 'I want,' and the emotional stuff around that. There is a mentality around that assumption in there, that it's how things are: 'I want this so I can get it; I can have it.' I don't know what that whole equation is; I don't know where that comes from...

For non-Indigenous people, reciprocity and sharing is also about bringing learnings into our lives. Learnings and experiences shared are not things just to take, to own or hold like a trophy or trinket, but come with a responsibility to respond (Bawaka Country et al., 2018; Bawaka Country et al., 2020, Todd, 2016). Lara and Sarah reflect:

It is not enough for the two of us as settlers/migrants to simply listen to (or read) Indigenous offerings, though this is key. We, Sarah and Lara, must also actively engage the gift of what is offered, learning when and how to respond. For us, this is part of taking seriously Indigenous practices of reciprocity and accountability creating the conditions of possibility for generating solidarities led by Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and struggles.

The importance of this orientation is underscored by Métis/Michif (Woodman via Red River) person and scholar Max Liboiron who calls out 'practices of reading extractively' and 'taking words for our own goals'. As Liboiron (2020) states, "It is a consumptive mode that uses texts like a resource rather than collaboration with them or being otherwise accountable to the ideas, the authors, the publishers and other readers" (p. 95).

We need to genuinely nourish relationships, learn well, move with respect and centre transformation in our own lives. Rather than extractive practice, this kind of approach can support learning practices that can create the 'windows and mirrors' (Aldana, 2008) for our present and contested realities and our unknown futures (Daley & Wright, 2025; Phillips and Archer-Lean, 2018).

But one should 'not think, because I am human, I can walk in there and do anything I like. We need to get to know Country, enter a space of co-existence and interconnectedness. This is about learning how to introduce and connect with Country using your senses and intuition' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 273).

2.5.1. Reference point 5: Learning and practices

Auntie Shaa reflects on the importance to nourish relationships with Country as she reflects on how to respectfully respond to a welcome or acknowledgment of Country. This is part of ngurrajili, continual giving, and learning well. She says:

There are many ways to respond after being welcomed or doing your Acknowledgement. The most important thing is to feel it in your heart and be true in what you do.

Responding could be saying hello to the life there. Or you might like to do something, plant something, think of something practical, giving back to Country. As a teacher, you could give some responsibilities around caring for a tree or suggest other caring activities.

Another way to respond would be to growing the relationship with the lizard or the tree. 'Hello lizard? you might say. 'Have you got a story for me today, tree or waterhole or lizard?' It may not have a story for you - until one day it might. You could have that lesson going for a week or more. Students could go out each day, practice talking to the tree, opening up their imagination, opening their connections, building their relationships with place. Going to the place repeatedly may help them go into a heart place around it.

2.6. Reference point 6: Connection and respect

Uncle Bud, as a guiding Elder for Yandaarra in shifting camp together, carries the fire for the group, bringing people together, nourishing connections between us as Yandaarra, and the wider human and more-than-human communities that make up Gumbaynggirr Country. Fire is an important more-than-human presence for Uncle Bud and Yandaarra, it warms our bodies and our hearts, re-igniting connections as we laugh about good times spent together and remind

each other of important responsibilities to ourselves, each other, and Country. Sitting around a fire at Gumma in Gumbaynggirr Country, having a yarn, Uncle Bud reminds us that:

That's the strongest thing in life, being around a fire. That's where all your memories come back and the stories from way back. That's what we used to do, just sitting around after going up the beach all day. And that was magic. That fire, mate, it brings out something there. I love it.

In carrying the fire for our group, Uncle Bud also carries a message about connection, love and respect. His stories are vital elements in nurturing our relationships and becoming gunganbu, beings that belong together:

Just getting people together and tell them how we used to think, how the old people used to think, the connection when the mullet were running. You see the butterflies and the flowers on the trees...and that will show people when the mullet are on.

Uncle Bud continues:

It's connection. Connection to one another. I reckon that and respect is my main thing. That's what I want to do.

Indeed, teaching and nourishing connections and respect is what Uncle Bud is doing with all of his work with school students, at the University, co-writing books and articles, and leading community initiatives.

To make change, to learn and teach as gunganbu, we need to be able to think outside a limiting square, to think and be with Country, to become greater beings than any of us are now. For us, as Yandaarra, as we try to shift camp together, we are oriented by reference points that come from and as Country and Lore/Law.

Following Uncle Bud, Aunty Shaa and other Gumbaynggirr family's leadership, learning to teach-in-relation means teaching and learning from a place of connection and respect, emphasising sacred relations between human and more-than-human beings as part of Country. In Gumbaynggirr Country and elsewhere some of these relations have been deeply disrupted and are under pressure from ongoing colonisation, so part of relational responsibilities in teaching and learning is supporting students to engage with Uncle Bud's message of connection and respect. By doing so, we as educators and students can help co-create the conditions of possibility to continue the work of bringing social, economic, political and ecological systems back into balance with the sacred Law/Lore of Country.

2.6.1. Reference point 6: Learning and practices

For Aunty Shaa and Uncle Bud, connections must always be nourished in ways that support togetherness. Ceremony is a time where we are practising being balanced, in harmony with all living things, we are celebrating life. In speaking of children learning, Aunty Shaa suggests some understanding of ceremony that can be practiced by all. She is talking about children as learners but we can all learn in this way. Children are leaders and teachers too. Aunty Shaa says:

Ceremony is a place of harmony where you put aside all your arguments, all your conflicts, all your disagreements, fears and worries. In ceremony, you can come into a place of harmony where you can then practice love for each other and all living things, a place where we can practice sharing, a place where you look after each other and respect each other. We are celebrating life, life is important. Ceremony is about balancing life, making life happen; we are in life, we are creative in this new place of ceremony. It is the place where [all] can celebrate different beings, like the tree. It is alive. We have to look after that tree because the tree looks after us.

[You and students] might want to go and do something, a poem, a drawing and share it in circle, to help them be comfortable sharing with each other in a respectful way. [You] might also want to do an acknowledgement to Gumbaynggirr saying thank you for the learning... What would you say to thank Country for this learning?

3. Conclusion

As we draw what we have shared from our specific places and relationships in and with Gumbaynggirr Country to a close, Aunty Shaa acknowledges that “we are each different in our abilities to respond yet we each have a flame to nurture within us”.

In caring for this flame, students, teachers, all of us, are invited to challenge what is ‘normal’ and go beyond the taken-for-granted ways of doing and learning. Studying, teaching and learning, become an invitation to enter into relationships and an opportunity to reflect on what we can each bring to those relationships. As Yandaarra (in Gay’wu Group of Women et al., 2024, p. 97) have written:

On Gumbaynggirr Country there isn’t a static way of living in the Dreaming, in vital more-than-human creative energy, it is forever being, becoming, changing, transforming and transporting. We all have the potential within us to relate in this way as part of an ongoing creation. This is the flame inside us that Aunty Shaa invites us to nurture, to keep alight and grow in deepening connections with ourselves, the earth and each other.

We hope that this paper has offered some points of resonance or reflection for your own teaching and learning practice as we collectively work to fundamentally reshape how and what students learn. For us, as we shift camp together, we are coming into greater awareness around what it means to be Country and Indigenous-led in teaching and in our everyday lives. Our coming together is about healing and creating, and we do this by learning how to listen to Country and its Law/Lore that is held in all its creation. The sound of the birds, the winds, the waters’ currents, the fire and its crackles, the smell of food, the laughter of children.

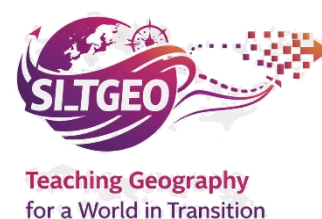
Within these moments of listening, we learn new ways of being with ourselves, each other and with Country. There’s a sacredness to this new way of being, which is all about relationship. It is the relationship that underscores the reference points that guide us in how to relate to one another and build trust, respect, understanding, purpose, responsibility. Through relationship we become more aware of or conscious of responsibility, place and purpose and how these three things are significant factors to consider when making choices and decisions within our connections. These are some of the things we treat as significant in how we support one another and create a safe and trusting place where good, honest, respectful and sometimes hard conversations are had. And most importantly where we can laugh and feel a freedom to just be. This is how we become Gunganbu, belonging to each other, with Country.

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Contribution to the Special Issue Topics: Responding directly to the Special Issue theme of powerful teaching in uncertain times, this article explores how Indigenous-led teaching-in-relation can support transformative geography education. Drawing on teachings from Gumbaynggirr Country, we offer six reference points that encourage relational accountability, deep listening, and respect and responsibility for more-than-human worlds. The paper contributes to scholarship on decolonising geography education, place-based pedagogies and powerful geographical knowledge by offering alternative ways of understanding learning, responsibility and belonging.

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