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<https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.24063>

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**REIMAGINING KINSHIP SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS:
INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ABORIGINAL ECOLOGIES
IN AUSTRALIA (HUMAN AND LAND RIGHTS)**

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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people in Australia continue to endure the ongoing effects of 250 years of British colonisation and imperialism. At the same time, Aboriginal peoples have actively resisted these colonial and imperial forces, which sought to sever their profound connections to Land, Kinship, culture, Languages, Law and spirituality.¹ Despite enduring challenges, Aboriginal activism remains resilient, grounded in the intricate Kinship systems that interconnect human, non-human, animate and inanimate entities, as well as Land, spiritual and ecological relationships, responsibilities and obligations.² Over the last two decades, numerous studies have examined the complex interplay of power, control, knowledge, resistance and mobility that shaped the impact of British imperialism on Indigenous peoples.³

Indigenous peoples advocate for their rights, sovereignty, environmental protection and the preservation of their cultures and languages. Aboriginal activism focuses on resisting colonialism, combating systemic injustices and securing recognition and autonomy for Indigenous Nations. These efforts are aligned with contemporary global resistance movements calling for social justice including the Land Back Movement, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and #Black Lives Matter. A deeper understanding of Indigenous people's participation in these global networks of power, resistance and mobility is essential for comprehending contemporary Aboriginal rights in Australia.⁴ It is also important to note that there are aspects of Aboriginal activism that are distinct. This paper explores how Kinship networks form the foundation of both cultural identity and resistance, emphasising that engagement in movements striving for land, human and ecological rights are inseparable from broader Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies. This exploration focuses on the firsthand experiences of three Aboriginal activists. Before examining these experiences, the scholarship informing this inquiry will be explored.

Indigenous scholarly perspectives and standpoints are central to understanding the role of Kinship and Country in Aboriginal activism and challenging the distinct silos of knowledge production in Western epistemologies.⁵ Issues at the core of Aboriginal activism—including land rights, language revival and human rights—are treated as distinct entities, and studies of Aboriginal resistance movements frequently overlook how Kinship systems serve as the basis of such activism.⁶ For Aboriginal activists, Kinship systems represent the vital relationship between culture, Land, water and nature, linking individuals across multiple Nation groups through bloodlines, marriage, adoption and other relational structures. This paper will examine the connections between Aboriginal activism, Kinship and Country through decolonial, Indigenous and political theories.⁷

In this paper, the term “Aboriginal” refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The term “Indigenous” will be used to describe Traditional Custodians internationally, while “non-Indigenous” will refer to individuals who do not identify as either of these categories.⁸ Additionally, capitalisation is used to show respect and recognition of Aboriginal peoples. We acknowledge that the terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” can be problematic, as they refer to First Nations people who share the experience of the ongoing effects of colonisation, yet have diverse histories and are also linguistically and culturally diverse Aboriginal Nations spread throughout Australia.⁹

ABORIGINAL KINSHIP SYSTEMS AND BELONGING

Aboriginal Kinship systems differ from Western kinship and marriage classifications. Aboriginal Kinship systems represent a complex and interconnected web of relationships that not only connect individuals, families and communities, but also include deep ties to place, to Country (Land, water and sky), to the inanimate and to the more-than-human world including animals, plants and spirits.¹⁰

Specifically, this intergenerational knowledge system not only defines but transmits gendered obligations, roles and responsibilities to Country and to other people, including the ethical use of resources, social and marriage Laws, and Indigenous Ancestral and spiritual governance.¹¹ Aboriginal people regard Country as a living Ancestor, meaning that the land itself is imbued with the spirits of their Ancestors. Within this spiritual dimension, relationships with Ancestors are maintained and honoured. The spirits of Ancestors guide and protect the living, and ceremonial practices often involve honouring these relationships. This connection to Ancestors also reinforces the idea that Kinship systems are not just a present-day reality, but a continuity that links past, present and future generations.

Central to Aboriginal Kinship and knowledge systems is the concept of relationality, which emphasises that existence and identity are defined through interdependent relationships between people, Land, Language and spirituality—the core sources of meaning and being.¹² For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Kinship embodies a way of life, symbolising affiliation with Country and fostering a sense of belonging within Nation and Clan groups, families and wider communities. Queries amongst Aboriginals such as “who’s your mob?” and “where are you from?” establish connections based on lineage, Clan and Nation associations as well as personal affinities, which collectively transcend geographical boundaries and include wider social networks.

This relationality is expressed through culturally specific, gendered axiologies, ontologies and epistemologies that are deeply connected to the earth and to wellbeing.¹³ Additionally, as Watson

emphasises, these relationships have been embedded within Indigenous knowledge systems and laws since time immemorial.¹⁴ These structures determine roles, responsibilities and rights both within and outside communities and nations, providing the framework for caring for Country and both human and non-human entities, including land, animals and spirits. All these relationships are reciprocal; just as the land nurtures the people, the people have a responsibility to care for and maintain the land. Within this web of relationships, Country (Land) is recognised as one's primary kin and plays a central role in the Aboriginal kinship network.

Aboriginal people often describe themselves as custodians of the land, a responsibility passed down through Kinship lines.¹⁵ Caring for Country involves practising cultural rituals, performing ceremonies, respecting sacred sites and maintaining a harmonious balance with the natural environment. Country is more than a place to live; it is an active participant in the Kinship system, reinforcing the interdependence between people and their surroundings. Country is understood as a living entity that holds and teaches Kinship Knowledges and Laws. Yuin Elder Guboo Ted Thomas illustrates this truth: "I do not teach the [D]reaming, the mountain teaches the [D]reaming."¹⁶ This intimate, sacred and dynamic relationship with Country demands recognition of Country as an active agent in shaping Kinship laws and knowledges in a process of co-becoming. The concept of Country encapsulates the idea that people are intrinsically connected to and part of the Land.¹⁷

Distinguished Indigenous Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson introduced the concept of an "ontological relationship to Country," referring to the deep embodied spiritual connection that Indigenous peoples have with their Land. Their sense of belonging is deeply rooted in and derived from Ancestral Beings and Country, tied to specific locations, and this enduring connection has remained resilient despite the destructive forces of colonisation.¹⁸ This connection is fundamental to their identity, culture and existence, challenging Western legal frameworks of land ownership and sovereignty. In Indigenous worldviews, Land is not seen as property, but as a living entity interconnected with people, languages, spirituality and all living things.¹⁹ This perspective contrasts sharply with Western views that treat land as a commodity to be owned, traded or exploited.²⁰ Moreton-Robinson argues that Aboriginal peoples view themselves as integral to the Land, not separate from it.²¹ Consequently, dispossession under colonialism disrupts not only territory, but also one's sense of being. Ontological belonging encapsulates this deep relationship with Country, positioning it as central to identity and resistance against colonial frameworks.²²

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson extends this understanding through her work on Indigenous resurgence, emphasising the importance of relationship to the Land in sustaining cultural identity and resistance.²³ Aboriginal Kinship networks, deeply tied to Country, are not merely family structures, but spiritual, cultural and political systems.²⁴ These networks mobilise collective action and form the foundation of Aboriginal activism, which arises from these interconnected systems rather than from individual efforts. Kinship systems reflect a worldview where humans act as custodians of the Land, aligning with Moreton-Robinson's concept of ontological belonging.²⁵ Existence and identity are deeply intertwined with connections to Country.²⁶

Aboriginal legal scholar Irene Watson's concept of "Raw Law" explores this relationship, explaining that law originates from the land and the Dreaming, the period of Creation, when Ancestral Beings shaped the land and established laws governing relationships among people, land and living entities.²⁷ Unlike Western legal systems, Raw Law is transmitted orally and upheld through ceremonies and cultural practices.²⁸ It emphasises reciprocity and mutual care between humans

and the land, embodying a *kincentric* worldview where the land is a sentient entity.²⁹ Raw Law serves as a form of resistance to colonial legal systems that impose Western concepts of land ownership and governance.³⁰ Aboriginal sovereignty is fundamental to this distinctive legal system grounded in Aboriginal relationality and spirituality, challenging the commodification of land and offering an alternative understanding based on care, reciprocity and cultural obligations.³¹

For Aboriginal peoples, Country comprises not just physical land, but also the relationships between land, people, Ancestors and the spiritual world.³² Kinship systems emphasise stewardship, where land is treated with respect and care, reinforcing the reciprocal obligations humans have toward the Land.³³ This relational framework is integral to cultural survival and forms the basis for resistance against colonial forces. Aboriginal Communities continue to practice Raw Law and *kincentric* principles, resisting colonial fragmentation and asserting their rights to self-determination through governance systems that prioritise cultural knowledge, spiritual obligations and ecological balance.³⁴

In many Indigenous cultures, laws governing relationships extend beyond human interactions to include all living entities. This worldview fosters a sense of collective responsibility and reciprocity, further challenging Western notions of land as a commodity.³⁵ Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata notes that this knowledge is carried with individuals as they live their lives and understand their place in the world. This highlights the inseparable connection between Indigenous law, knowledge systems and Country.³⁶ Similarly, Moreton-Robinson emphasises that *kincentric* Indigenous cultures are shaped by histories, embodied knowledge and a life force that connects people to land, creators, living entities and Ancestors.³⁷ These kinship relationships are ethical systems governed by a deep spiritual reverence for the land, demonstrating that Indigenous law and knowledge are deeply rooted in a worldview of responsibility and respect toward both human and more-than-human kin.³⁸

By recognising the significance of these kinship networks and their broader philosophical implications, it becomes clear that Indigenous law and knowledge systems are not separate from Country. They are rooted in a relational worldview that prioritises care, mutual responsibility and the preservation of cultural and ecological balance.³⁹ Understanding this connection constitutes not only a form of knowledge, but also a form of resistance, as Aboriginal peoples continue to uphold their cultural and spiritual obligations to the land, asserting their sovereignty and resisting colonial exploitation.⁴⁰

HOW KINSHIP WITH LAND RESISTS THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM

Aboriginal Kinship is political, structuring social and familial relationships, governance and resistance within Aboriginal Communities. These systems play a crucial role in organising leadership, decision-making and resource distribution, making them central to Indigenous activism and sovereignty.⁴¹ In these societies, leadership and authority often stem from familial ties, where individuals become custodians of Land and Law.⁴² Elders, who hold knowledge of the Dreaming and Law, derive their authority from their positions within these kinship networks, offering an alternative system of governance to Western political models which emphasise centralised, institutional power.⁴³ In this context, Kinship also governs land ownership and resource management. Custodial responsibilities over specific areas of Land and natural resources are passed on through Kinship ties, resisting the colonial concept of land as a commodity that can be privatised and exploited for economic gain.⁴⁴

Colonial efforts to dismantle these systems through forced removals and assimilation policies have sought to fragment traditional Kinship ties.⁴⁵ In response, Kinship has become a central framework of resistance, with the spiritual connection to land, or ontological belonging, serving as both a political and cultural tool for healing and activism. When land is returned to Traditional Owners, it allows for governance based on traditional practices, strengthening community wellbeing and reviving deep connections between people and Country.

The landmark Mabo case (1992) was a turning point in this resistance. This case challenged the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, which had claimed the continent as “land belonging to no one” before the 1788 colonisation of Australia. Eddie Mabo, a Meriam man, fought for the recognition of his people’s land rights, which were deeply rooted in his Kinship system. The High Court’s ruling in favour of Mabo not only overturned the concept of *terra nullius*, but also acknowledged the ongoing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their Land, solidifying Kinship as a legal and political framework that resists colonial erasure. The Mabo case remains a milestone in Aboriginal activism, affirming the importance of Kinship in shaping land rights movements and reinforcing resistance to colonialism.⁴⁶ Aboriginal activist movements, such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972), and responses to events like the destruction of the Juukan Gorge (2020), have continued to assert sovereignty and land rights based on Kinship connections. Similarly, the fight to protect the Djab Wurrung sacred trees demonstrates how Kinship activism plays a vital role in resisting colonial exploitation and preserving spiritual heritage.⁴⁷

Despite attempts to fragment Aboriginal Communities, the resilience of Kinship structures has continued to play a critical role in preserving Indigenous knowledge, law and the connection to Land, ultimately acting as a means of political resistance against colonial control.⁴⁸ Rolando Vázquez’s (2011) essay, “Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity’s Epistemic Violence,” examines how the translation of non-Western knowledge systems into Western frameworks often acts as an epistemic tool of erasure. Vázquez explains that when Indigenous knowledge is interpreted through a Western lens, its original meaning and cultural significance are frequently distorted or erased, especially when removed from its epistemic context. This process of translation marginalises Indigenous knowledge, stripping it of its unique value and reshaping it to fit Western categories.⁴⁹ As a result, colonial power structures that prioritise Western knowledge systems over Indigenous epistemologies are reinforced, leading to cultural erasure and the suppression of alternative worldviews.

Vázquez’s (2011) critique highlights the role that modernity plays in perpetuating this erasure, just as colonialism systematically suppressed diverse knowledge systems in favour of homogenised, Western-dominated frameworks.⁵⁰ This process has a significant impact on Indigenous communities, reducing the visibility and value of their cultural and social structures by stripping them of their original context. Adding to Vázquez’s critique, Audra Simpson’s (2014) concept of “ethnographic refusal” in her book *Mohawk Interruptus* illustrates how Indigenous peoples resist the extraction and distortion of their knowledge systems. Simpson argues that by refusing to engage in Western ethnographic practices, Indigenous peoples assert their sovereignty over cultural knowledge, preventing its misinterpretation and erasure through colonial translation.⁵¹ This refusal is a method of resisting epistemic violence and maintaining control over the representation and integrity of Indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that they are not subjected to the processes of distortion discussed by Vázquez.

EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND COLONIAL DISRUPTION

In Australian Aboriginal culture, kinship is central to social organisation. Colonialism's imposition of Western governance models can be understood as a form of epistemic violence, a concept articulated by scholars such as Watson (2008) and Jaskiran Dhillon (2021).⁵² Forced assimilation policies, such as the Stolen Generations, sought to sever Aboriginal peoples' Kinship ties to family, Language and Land, replacing Indigenous knowledge systems with Western institutions of law, governance and education. The suppression of Aboriginal Languages, as Dhillon notes, represents a profound form of epistemic violence.⁵³ Language is crucial for transmitting cultural knowledge and maintaining Kinship ties. The colonial education system, which prohibited Aboriginal languages, aimed to erase Indigenous cosmologies and disconnect Aboriginal people from their spiritual and ecological knowledge.

Despite this disruption and the terrible losses of Language and knowledge, Aboriginal Communities have shown remarkable resilience in revitalising their languages and reasserting Indigenous knowledge systems. These efforts are part of the broader movements for Land and human rights. Aboriginal activism plays a crucial role in this enterprise, drawing on principles such as ethnographic refusal, which directly challenges settler-colonial frameworks by asserting the significance of Kinship systems⁵⁴ and ontological belonging, describing the deep, inherent, spiritual connection that Indigenous peoples have with their Land, Culture and Community.⁵⁵ These bonds transcend Western notions of identity and power, positioning Kinship not only as a social structure, but also as a profound connection to Country.

Aboriginal activism is rooted in Kinship systems—upholding collective governance, relational responsibility and ontological belonging—and has been central to revitalising knowledge systems and Languages. These elements are crucial to decolonial resistance, demonstrating the resilience of Aboriginal Kinship in the face of modernity's attempts to marginalise Indigenous knowledge and sever connections to Land and community. Resistance to modernity and the revitalisation of languages and epistemologies illustrates how, in Aboriginal culture, Kinship extends beyond familial ties to imbue the spiritual, cultural and political frameworks that support collective action. This broader understanding of Kinship galvanises resistance, drawing from both the physical and spiritual realms. Aboriginal thinkers like David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Neidjie (1989) have emphasised that Country is a living entity, deeply interconnected with all beings.⁵⁶ This holistic view of Aboriginal activism illustrates how Kinship systems transcend distinctions between human and non-human worlds, incorporating ancestral and spiritual spheres. The Creation process—in which Land was formed first, followed by the people and their Languages—reflects the enduring connection between Land, Language and Kinship systems and the interconnected, relational strengths of Aboriginal cosmology. Languages, seen as living entities, forge connections between people and their Country, transmitting intergenerational knowledge across thousands of generations.

ROLE OF KINSHIP SYSTEMS IN ABORIGINAL ACTIVISM

Aboriginal activism plays a crucial role in the lives of many Indigenous Australians as they resist structural racism and the ongoing impact of colonial practices on their claims to Land, Language and human rights. This activism has been influenced by global alliances, forging new understandings of knowledge, culture, spirituality and history. While Aboriginal activist networks are often thought to have emerged primarily in the post-World War II era, especially following the United Nations

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, they have deep roots in much earlier struggles for survival and self-determination. In recent years, Aboriginal activism has found resonance with the global #Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which emerged in the US in 2013 in response to the deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement. In Australia, since 2020, the death of George Floyd has intensified the use of terms like “#Black Lives Matter” and “Aboriginal Lives Matter” in order to draw attention to Aboriginal deaths in custody and the high incarceration rates of Indigenous Australians.⁵⁷

Although these movements have brought attention to issues of social justice and Indigenous sovereignty, Aboriginal activism has been shaped by older campaigns. For example, the Australian Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s campaigned against Aboriginal deaths in custody while advocating for self-determination and human rights. During this period, activists in Melbourne and Sydney established connections with African American leaders and, by 1971, had adapted the Black Power movement to suit their needs. The international influence of this movement extended its reach to various states in Australia, although the term “Black” carried the dual connotation of referring to both African American and Australian identities.⁵⁸ Uncle Charles “Chicka” Dixon, a prominent Aboriginal Elder, clarified that the Black Power movement, which was often misinterpreted as promoting violence, was in fact focused on self-determination for Aboriginal people.⁵⁹ Despite its significance, the movement remains under-recognised in mainstream Australian history. Another example of a globally inspired movement was the Australian Black Panthers who, like their American counterparts, sought to draw attention to the plight of Aboriginal people; they were active at the time of the 1967 Referendum and the 1988 Invasion Day Rally. Historian Kathy Lothian notes that, similar to African Americans, Aboriginal people and their white allies campaigned for equality in education, healthcare and legal representation, as well as the abolition of discriminatory laws.⁶⁰ The adoption of Black Power ideologies and Black Panther rhetoric by Aboriginal Communities provided a global perspective and highlighted the transnational nature of these movements.

Contemporary Aboriginal rights movements, shaped by these earlier struggles, continue to address issues of inequality, Land rights, identity and the impact of institutionalised racism. While these movements are often viewed through the lens of global activism, the role of Kinship networks is an essential, though sometimes invisible, component. At a 2021 Aboriginal activist rally, young activists called for racial, social and environmental justice, echoing global movements like BLM: “As Black, Brown, Indigenous people, and allies in the U.S. and across the world collectively rise up to end systemic racism and violent police practices, it was necessary for us here in Australia to also rise.”⁶¹

This call also reflected the deeply rooted history of Aboriginal activism, grounded in Kinship networks and responsibilities passed down by Elders that predated these international movements. Notable events included the 1938 Day of Mourning and the 1939 Cummeragunja Walk-off; and the Pindan movement and the Port Headland and Pilbara strikes in the 1940s by Aboriginal people: “We see this as our cultural and political responsibility and obligation to do so as Aboriginal people—we must pick up the fight where our Elders left off and continue their fight for justice.”⁶²

Kinship networks, interconnected with Ancestral foundations, often serve as the driving force sustaining these calls for social change. Networks are not only a cultural framework, but also a political tool that strengthens Aboriginal activism. Being grounded in relational responsibility and an obligation to future generations, Kinship systems are central to Aboriginal resistance against settler colonialism and the pursuit of justice for Indigenous peoples.

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF ABORIGINAL ACTIVISTS

This final section draws on interviews with Aboriginal activists to examine the relationships formed through Aboriginal activism and how these relationships may be articulated in and through Kinship systems and networks. The interview questions explored the type of reciprocity that may exist between these systems, particularly in contexts that focus on environmental care, sustainability of Country, language revival and social justice efforts. Questions focused on how acts of Aboriginal activism drew on Kinship systems and networks to express the relationships shaped by both the human and non-human world.

Aiming to understand their lived experience of engaging in activism, interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024 with three Aboriginal people, Kylie, Monica and Bill (pseudonyms), who self-identify as activists for Aboriginal rights and sovereignty movements. The participants were selected because of their long association with Aboriginal activism in Australia. They ranged in age from 50 to 70 and identified with three different Aboriginal Nations in New South Wales. They had been engaged in activism between 12 and 50 years. The interviews were audio-recorded digitally and later transcribed. A thematic analysis was undertaken of the key characteristics of their experiences of activism.

ABORIGINAL ACTIVISM AND KINSHIP NETWORK CONNECTIONS

When reflecting on their experience of Aboriginal activism, the participants identified the strong connection between Kinship and activism and explained how they understood the concept of protest. Audra Simpson's (2014) notion of ethnographic refusal as a decolonial strategy provides valuable background here.⁶³ Rather than seeking recognition from colonial authorities, Aboriginal Communities assert their sovereignty by disengaging from colonial governance structures altogether. This form of silent protest, often led by Elders, demonstrates that resistance can take many forms, from direct action to the quiet endurance of cultural practices and Kinship systems. For instance, in the Aboriginal context, Kylie revealed the significant nuances behind the term "protestor," asserting that there were both active and silent protests:

You've got your active protesters. But you've also got what's called the silent protests, our Elders and Ancestors, who can't physically be there at the protests. Active protests in local communities around New South Wales involve not just activists, but also what is known as silent protests. Silent protests means that Elders and knowledge holders in these communities often express reluctance to share their voices with the government due to historical neglect and lack of respect. (Kylie)

The notion of silent protesters is significant. These individuals remain silent as a result of physical limitations, or fear and loss of faith in government institutions that have historically undervalued and undermined Aboriginal peoples. In this context, the voices of Elders and knowledge holders are passed down to active protesters. To further highlight the relationships forged by different Aboriginal knowledge holders, in the context of her activism Monica also refers to the lack of trust in government structures. Regarding the transmission of knowledge, she says:

I'm not going to share my knowledge and ideas with the government. That's my choice, and, yeah, standing firm on that. (Monica)

Kylie adds that connection to Elders and knowledge holders gives activists strength and understanding and supports their perseverance:

So now, our Elders and our Aboriginal leaders, who are our knowledge holders within all our local Aboriginal Communities, have shared the past stories with us enough for us to be strong and to continue to fight and to resist against colonial systems and structures. Their position ... is, why should I continue to share with the government that never listened to us before? (Kylie)

Similarly, Bill's response reinforces the significance of Elders in mentoring young Aboriginal people within Kinship networks, as well as fostering unity and advocacy through social movements. The role of Elders has also spilled into Australian government policies such as the Priority Reforms.⁶⁴ Bill refers to well-known Aboriginal activists to make this point:

Elders and activists such as Uncle Wes Marne, Uncle Kevin Gilbert, Auntie Isabelle Coe and Ghillar Michael Anderson [co-founder of the Tent Embassy] play a vital role in educating and mentoring young Aboriginal people through the Aboriginal Lives Matter movement, Aboriginal Land Rights and Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Their invaluable knowledge and contributions have garnered immense respect. The government is now beginning to recognise this through initiatives like the Priority Reforms We have been involved in discussions about engaging with local communities and Elders and various organizations, including NGOs. (Bill)

FOR BILL, THE ROLE OF KINSHIP SYSTEMS IS CRUCIAL:

The strength of Kinship systems within Aboriginal communities plays a pivotal role in connecting everyone and standing united with one main voice and the fight for Land, Language and human rights. Each community's needs are unique, yet they remain interconnected through solidarity and shared rights, primarily facilitated by Elders. (Bill)

An integral part of this learning and transmission process is the interconnectedness of this activism to Language, Country, Land and Kinship. Kylie notes that:

Within all our Languages is all our learning, which also is deeply rooted to our Land, connecting us with our Country and our Kinship, our Mother Earth through words. And we do our learning through our Elders in our local Aboriginal Communities, in regards to protesting for those rights. (Kylie)

As this passage and the following highlight, Kinship does not just refer to physical family ties and connections, but also the activists' spiritual bonds with the Land and all its elements:

During the Land Rights and Sovereignty movement and Aboriginal Lives Matter movement protests, our Kinship was working with all the "blak" fellas there and ... I was trying to organise the protest. We were connecting up with word of mouth, mobile phones, Facebook and other social media platforms, inviting all our brothers and sisters, including family members, Australia-wide. That's ... our Kinship system—we wear it at a spiritual level, we don't work on a body level. It is more than just a physical and bodily level, connecting with the Land and everything on it and under it—minerals, rocks, water, mountains, rivers, insects, plants and animals—all connected spiritually. (Kylie)

For Kylie, the Land Rights and Sovereignty movement, along with the Aboriginal Lives Matter protests, demonstrates the enduring strength, depth and resilience of Kinship, which extends beyond a physical presence to encompass a spiritual bond with the Land and all its elements. This terrestrial connection underpins the unity and mobilisation of the community. As Kylie emphasises,

Kinship operates on a level that transcends the human and fosters a holistic and deeply rooted sense of solidarity and identity through connection to Land, plants and animals.

Land or Country is also significant to activism and Kinship. The concept of Country is integral to Aboriginal identity and Language and has been at the heart of Native Title and Land Rights movements since the beginning of colonisation. Issues regarding the significance of connection to Country for identity, Language and wellbeing continue to inform activists.

For Indigenous Australians, the significance of Country is timeless and predates colonisation. In the interviews, the responses referring to Country mirror many Aboriginal people's deep spiritual relationship with their Country and its languages, a connection which has often been articulated in literary texts such as David Mowaljarlai's, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive*, David Unaipon's *Aboriginals: Their Traditions and Customs*, Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country*, Sunfly Tjuperla's *Two Men Dreaming* and Bill Neidjie's *Story about Feeling*. Like the interview responses, these literary works convey a spiritual, physical and bodily connectedness to the Land. Bill Neidjie, for instance, describes this connection as a spiritual sensation that permeates one's being:

*Listen carefully, careful and this spirit e [he] come in your feeling, and you will feel it ... anyone that, I feel it ... my body same as you. I am telling you this because the land for us never changes. Places for us, Earth for us, star, moon, tree, animal. No matter what sort of animal, Bird snake ... all that animal like us. Our friend that.*⁶⁵

As noted above, Aboriginal scholar Moreton-Robinson describes Indigenous relationships with the Land as forming an "ontological belonging."⁶⁶ This belonging is based on Ancestral systems of relational knowledge which spiritually binds individuals with the Land, all aspects of nature and the sources of Kinship.

SOLIDARITY THROUGH CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

It is often assumed by government institutions in Australia, and subsequently through laws and policies, that as a result of colonisation and the systematic development of structures aimed at fragmenting Aboriginal Communities (such as the forceful removal of Aboriginal people from their Ancestral Lands), Aboriginal societies are disconnected from their Kinship networks and Country. Monica's activism is centred on dispelling this myth through her existing Kinship systems and the story they tell. She explains that nothing could be further from the truth regarding this perceived disconnection:

I think that's the disconnection of Western society from our Aboriginal society. I think for our society, we've always been told by the Western society that all of our Aboriginal society is disconnected. No, sorry. And I've said this to all local communities when I go there. But I'm sorry, but the government law and policies need to realise that we've never been disconnected. (Monica)

This assertion directly counters the colonial narratives critiqued by Vázquez and Simpson.⁶⁷ Vázquez (2011) shows how the violence of modernity is perpetuated through the suppression of other worldviews and relational systems, a development which Monica actively resists. Audra Simpson further analyses this resistance, noting that Indigenous sovereignty persists through everyday acts of refusal and connection, despite the state's attempts to dismantle Indigenous structures.⁶⁸ Monica's activism, deeply rooted in her existing Kinship systems, offers a form of

epistemic resistance to colonial policies of assimilation. She reflects the persistence of Aboriginal relationality to Country, a connection that Western laws have failed to recognise or understand. The government policy of assimilation and efforts to break Aboriginal Kinship networks included the forced removal of Aboriginal people from their Lands and the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities, commonly known as the Stolen Generations. Despite the significant impact of these policies, Aboriginal Kinship networks continue to play a crucial role in contemporary activism, fostering resilience and a deep connection to Land, language and cultural heritage. This activism forms the basis of community teaching and learning that brings people together. As Monica elaborates:

We're connected to everything. How can we be disconnected? And when we ask, who are you?, this means we need to find out how we are connected. And when a Stolen Generation family member comes into their community—yeah, the Elders, mostly women in the community, take on the role of teaching and accepting them. (Monica)

This solidarity through Kinship aligns with Simpson's analysis of the enduring strength of Indigenous relational frameworks, despite the state's continuous efforts to deny them. For Monica and many Aboriginal activists, the role of women and their connection to both human and non-human mothers—the Land and the community—is central. For the community, the role of a mother is applicable to a woman as well as the Land. Monica foregrounds this understanding of the mother:

Definitely, the women are the backbone, as you know, as we know, especially growing up in Aboriginal Community. They are the first teachers of everyone in our community. You know, the women are the strong Kinship, family, always ties to the mother. So, the mother is the first of the Kinship. And Land is the mother, too. And the women are the mothers. And that's why the respect factor for Country as Mother is super important in our Kinship system. In recognition of that as well. So, you'll speak to my mum or Nan as part of the Kinship, you know. (Monica)

It is in this specific attachment to mother, as both a human and non-human, that a voice exists for Monica in her activist work and in the way it relates back to her family and community:

Whoever you are really close to will understand this ... Yeah, actually start, a sister like you and I, we have a Kinship, right? ... When modern protests occur, I use my voice to make statements, standing up for what matters to my family and communities and protesting legally, passionately voicing our concerns. (Monica)

In this response, Monica not only highlights the crucial role of women to preserve Aboriginal identity, she also sets out how this identity entails belonging to a specific people and place, rooted in Kinship. Similar to Kylie's response above, the notion of Country is key to this relationship. As Monica makes clear, Country is Mother, determining a person's origin and the Country and Nation group or Clan or language group to which they belong. This notion is fundamental to Aboriginal self-identity and the first port of contact when people are introduced to each other. Aboriginal identity fundamentally relies on descent and Country of origin, embodying a sense of community and Indigenous self-perception and recognition. Descent is understood not merely in genetic terms, but as a historical connection to the Land, a particular history, sense of being and responsibility.

Bill also refers to the notion of mother as integral to healing when discussing issues of trauma and health risks triggered by colonisation:

Social determinants of health often focus on negative aspects such as substance abuse, particularly in Indigenous communities. Colonisation has profoundly impacted mental health, leading to intergenerational trauma. This trauma can span up to six generations, affecting language, land and overall wellbeing. The holistic connection to the Land, often referred to as "Mother," is integral to spiritual healing and balance. South Australia recognises traditional spiritual healing methods alongside Western healthcare, a model that should be adopted nationwide. Healing is a fundamental right, and Traditional Aboriginal Healers should receive the same respect and remuneration as Western healthcare professionals. (Bill)

Here, the notion of mother encompasses a holistic understanding of Land and its connection to people's traditional spiritual healing. Bill's insights highlight the profound impact of colonisation on Indigenous mental health and the importance of spiritual healing practices as another dimension of activism. Recognising the Land as "Mother," and integrating traditional spiritual healing methods with Western healthcare, are vital steps toward addressing intergenerational trauma and promoting overall wellbeing in Aboriginal Communities. Respecting and properly compensating traditional healers and honouring their essential role in the healing process will contribute to a more inclusive and effective healthcare system that acknowledges the deep connection between Land, Aboriginal identity and wellbeing. These emerged as vital dimensions of Bill's Aboriginal activism.

FIGHTING FOR LAND AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The fight for Land and human rights by Aboriginal activists can be analysed through the lens of epistemic violence, as articulated by Vázquez and Simpson.⁶⁹ Vázquez's critique of modernity emphasises the imposition of a Eurocentric worldview that systematically denies the existence of alternative epistemologies, such as those held by Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Simpson's work on settler colonialism highlights how Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination are undermined by colonial legal frameworks that deny Indigenous peoples' inherent rights. Both scholars offer critical insights into how the ongoing struggle for Land and human rights is a response to the violent erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems and sovereignty.

In the interviews, Monica asserts her legal right to protest for both Land and human rights, connecting this struggle to her identity, sovereignty and self-determination. Her words reflect Simpson's (2014) emphasis on refusal and the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty against settler-colonial domination.⁷⁰ Monica emphasises the government's refusal to recognise these rights:

If you have a legal right to protest, you should be able to use that right, particularly in relation to human and Land rights, because the government doesn't recognise them [these rights]. The only way they'll recognise those human rights is if people stand up and use their voices. This is my right to self-determination, to maintain my identity and sovereignty, confidentiality and privacy. (Monica)

Moreover, the fight for Land rights is intricately intertwined with Kinship obligations and personal wellbeing, emphasising the responsibilities of stewardship to care for the Land, ensure Language preservation and acknowledge the sacredness of Ancestral claims. Monica vividly illustrates this connection by recounting a dialogue with the government about the significance of a particular tree bearing fruit, highlighting the sacredness attributed to this tree by Aboriginal communities. She draws parallels between the preservation of Aboriginal Languages and the role of Elders, likening them to trees that carry the culture and lineage of their people:

Talking about teaching and speaking an Aboriginal language? Believe it or not, we've posed this question to the government: We asked about a tree that bore fruit, "What would you do with that tree if it was the last one?" So, we've made that tree sacred. We went to the government, and they didn't know what to do. They just looked at it. Aboriginal language is like a tree, and Aboriginal Elders are like that tree. We carry the language. We carry the culture and the lineage. Yes, grounded and connected, big time. The closer you are to the land, the more connected you feel. Definitely. And that's why when you connect with nature and Country, even if you're by yourself, you're not alone. You never feel alone. That's our philosophy. Even though I don't have anyone around right now, I don't feel alone. Yes, you have the Kinship there all the time. I know they're here, and their presence is even louder now because I don't have anyone around me. So, they're really connecting with you every day. Yes, and now I can lean on them intentionally. Yes, she [the Land] understands me and helps me. (Monica)

The interview participants underscore the critical importance of fighting for Land and human rights, highlighting the intrinsic connection between these rights, Kinship obligations, cultural preservation and personal wellbeing in Aboriginal activism. Their narratives illuminate the ongoing struggle for recognition and respect in asserting these fundamental rights and affirm the enduring bond between Indigenous peoples and their land and culture. Moreover, Monica's response seamlessly intertwines various elements, weaving together her sense of identity with knowledge acquired through Language and connection to the Land. Using the metaphor of the tree, her narrative depicts the convergence of human and non-human components in Kinship. Her metaphor connects Language, knowledge, Elders, lineage and Country and vividly illustrates the holistic relationship between Aboriginal culture, spirituality, the natural environment and personal identity, emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of all these aspects in shaping individual and collective experiences.

Elders have a pivotal role in Kinship systems that are highly significant to Aboriginal Communities. Interview participants make clear that it is imperative that these perspectives are understood in policy formulation, which continues to be influenced by colonial practices. Bill notes:

The government, in collaboration with cabinet offices and ministerial secretaries, must now be listening to Aboriginal perspectives, incorporating cultural elements into their policies. This represents a shift towards social justice and recognition of rights. When engaging with local communities, it becomes evident that some frameworks still support assimilation and segregation, highlighting ongoing systemic issues. (Bill)

Despite these failures, the Kinship system remains a source of strength, emphasising a shift from deficit-based models to those recognising community capacity, agency and Indigenous knowledges. As Bill states:

Uncle Wes, who is a centenarian [and respected Elder], has expressed that the government, academics, policymakers and the education system has historically ignored the voices of his generation. This longstanding neglect is a shared sentiment among many Aboriginal Communities. The Kinship system, however, remains a source of strength, emphasising the need to transition from a deficit-based model to one that recognises community-based strengths. (Bill)

Through their activism, the participants enact a form of epistemic resistance, asserting their right to sovereignty, cultural preservation and self-determination. The fight for human and Land rights, empowered by Kinship systems and knowledge of community responsibilities, continues to reflect cultural and spiritual connections to Country. This holistic and integrated approach is fundamental to understanding and sustaining advocacy for Land rights. The health of the Land, the community and the individual are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of Aboriginal activists collected in this study emphasise how Aboriginal Kinship networks and systems are essential frameworks for resistance and activism. Aboriginal Kinship networks continue to defy colonial legacies while empowering Aboriginal peoples to advocate for Land, human and language rights. The role of Elders and knowledge holders, the significance of Country and the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, are all fundamental to Kinship networks. The link between Aboriginal activism, Kinship and Country is deeply rooted in Indigenous philosophies and relationality. Scholars like Moreton-Robinson (2003), Simpson (2014) and Betasamosake Simpson (2017) emphasise the importance of spiritual and cultural connections to the Land and how these connections extend beyond and contradict the narrow boundaries of Western legal and political systems. These interconnected systems of Kinship and Country are central to Aboriginal identity and resistance efforts, highlighting the holistic nature of Indigenous activism.

The activists interviewed provide a deeper understanding of how these Kinship networks function as complex social, spiritual, political and cultural ecosystems. Kinship encompasses bodies, Ancestral foundations, actions, passions and Country, emphasising the interconnectedness of all entities, both human and non-human, in a network where each participant holds agency and significance.

In the context of Land rights, this perspective highlights how Land, Kinship, culture and activism are, dynamically and collectively, shaping the struggle for recognition and justice. Kinship networks resist colonial fragmentation by maintaining integrated and continuous relationships between people, Land and culture. The agency of non-human actors such as the Land and Ancestral knowledge contributes to sustaining these networks, reinforcing the importance of environmental and cultural stewardship as part of Aboriginal culture and spirituality.

Participant narratives reveal that Aboriginal Kinship networks not only preserve cultural heritage, but also drive contemporary activism, promoting sustainability, justice and recognition for Aboriginal peoples. These networks showcase the enduring nature of the agency and potency of Aboriginal people in the ongoing quest for a fair and just future. Kinship structures and networks involve material, expressive and territorial functions that evolve in dynamic ways. The Kinship system operating between Aboriginal people and the Land is a profound and central part of their activism and resistance to colonialism. This connection challenges Western notions of land as property, instead emphasising reciprocal, sacred relationships with Country that are integral to identity, culture and survival. Through various forms of Kinship activism—whether protecting sacred sites, reclaiming sovereignty or revitalising cultural practices—Aboriginal people are resisting the fragmentation of their communities and the ongoing dispossession of their land. In doing so, they affirm their cultural autonomy and the resilience of their Kinship systems in the face of colonial pressures.

The interconnectedness of Kinship, Country and activism in Aboriginal cultures offers a profound framework for understanding ongoing struggles for Land and human rights. By placing Indigenous ontologies and knowledge systems at the centre, this study has shown how Kinship networks sustain cultural identity, ecological stewardship and resistance to colonial forces. Aboriginal activism is not merely political but deeply spiritual, rooted in the enduring strength of Kinship

systems and the relational bonds between people, land and ancestors. In this way, the fight for land and human rights in Australia is inseparable from the broader, ongoing struggle to preserve Aboriginal cultural identity and sovereignty.

Kinship networks and systems emphasise collective wellbeing and social justice issues, providing a framework for advocating for human and Land rights. These systems challenge Western legal and social norms by promoting community-based approaches to justice and governance. The activist narratives in this study draw on Kinship obligations in order to highlight the interconnectedness of individual and community rights. The significance of Kinship systems in Aboriginal Communities cannot be overstated, as they form the bedrock of social cohesion and cultural identity. These networks, upheld by the wisdom and guidance of Elders, underscore the necessity of shifting from past deficit-based models to ones that recognise and celebrate Aboriginal Community strengths and voices. Despite historical neglect and ongoing systemic issues, the Kinship system remains a powerful source of resilience, solidarity and enduring activism. Acknowledging the ongoing spiritual connection to the Land and integrating traditional healing methods into mainstream healthcare are vital steps toward genuine social justice. The collective efforts of Aboriginal Community members and their Elders in nurturing, extending and informing Kinship networks, especially during times of activism, highlight the enduring strength and unity within these networks and the need for policies that respect and incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and cultural frameworks.

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