

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Sand Talk by Tyson Yunkaporta, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019**

**Reviewed by John Newton**

*If you don't move with the land, the land will move you.*

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At first glance this seems an unlikely book for review in a journal that draws strongly from psychoanalytic explanations of human behaviour. The book attempts to explain Indigenous thinking to a non-Indigenous readership and the only 'psychoanalytic' term employed is 'narcissism'. But it is well chosen. The narcissism that elevates western ontology and epistemologies above those we have come to describe as 'primitive' needs to be confronted if we are to escape the limits of our current ways of thinking, being and organising. Limits that are so obvious in the increasing fragmentation of our social institutions and ecology; a fragmentation in which humans are such active and destructive participants. Readers will find many connections to the organisational and social dilemmas broached in this journal.

The author, Tyson Yunkaporta, crafts, without stridency, an intriguing, self-reflective, informative and erudite journey across immediately relevant topics such as education, justice, diet, conflict, harmony, gender, kinship, work, leisure, remembering, complexity, sustainability, dreams and spirit. There is an edge though to the narrative as the author moves between academia and the campfire in finding the metaphors to communicate cultural differences and their consequences. His style is variously playful, serious, sharp, irreverent, funny and blunt as he creates a provocative counter-narrative to mainstream, non-Indigenous ways of knowing.

Yunkaporta is a hurtfully assimilated Australian Aborigine who received a western education and gained a Professional Doctorate in language and cognition alongside a perambulating search for his lost heritage. As such, he is well able to illustrate how indigenous thinking and language emanates from experiential learning that seeks insight into the connections between all things. Indigenous languages are not structured in a linear syntax and Indigenous knowledge is not static, so cannot be stored in a book or computer file. Indigenous words describe the immediate experience of relations to the other, whether it be human, animal, water, land or the night sky; relations that are in

constant flux. A pertinent example is the tension between the individual and the group; a tension which permeates all human collectives. Yunkaporta argues that the problem of an individual claiming to be above the collective, a familiar and recurrent narcissism, is managed in his tribe by particular protocols of speaking and listening plus the fact that there are many more words in his tribal language than in English to describe the relatedness of the individual to the group; words deriving from the various and changing nodes that an individual occupies in the complex and shifting relations of Indigenous kinship. His tribe has many more word options than the English dichotomies of me/you, us/them. Moreover, because narcissism is regarded as an ever present dynamic in human relations, not an individual pathology, it requires a way of being acknowledged and managed through the collective.

Reading this book during the Covid 19 pandemic, Yunkaporta's argument put me in mind of the mantra "We are all in this together". This mantra works as a surface level call to unity but simple observation reveals that we are all in this in different ways depending on our wealth, race, age, employment, nationality, trade relations and so on. It seems that we non-Indigenous people are yet to find a language that acknowledges this complexity of involvement and are yet to invent participative processes to evolve local ways of responding that respect connectivity and difference, both locally and globally. Yunkaporta's argument implies a prevalent narcissistic wish for a vaccine to beat nature rather than for mutual adaptation in resolving a social dilemma.

The book's title, Sand Talk, refers to an aspect of communal sense making used by Indigenous Australians whereby they draw symbols in the sand, with wooden instruments and utensils, to assist communication and thinking together about relations between themselves, their tribes, the land, nature and the cosmos. These symbols, some of which are usefully illustrated in the book, are often etched into the wood from which boomerangs, coolamons, fire sticks, spears, shields, etc. are manufactured. To non-Indigenous eyes these markings are decorations but for the Indigenous people they are a way of preserving and sharing ways of knowing across language groups and of reminding themselves about the relatedness of all creation.

A strength of the book is the myriad ways it conveys what it means to operate in a connective state of mind, particularly when this involves threatening the power of cultural colonisers who insist on fixed boundaries between animate and inanimate matter, between humans and animals, between earth and space, between centralised knowledge/power and local/indigenous ways of knowing. For Indigenous thinkers (and the author draws from numerous international comparisons) information is in difference and movement, not static, hierarchical categories; and such information is a guide to action in respect of and for the difference. As I progressed through the book I began to

associate this argument to the work of the physicist David Bohm (2004) who developed the concept of the enfolding and unfolding between implicate and explicate orders that constitute the universe: the whole is in every part and so every part is connected. When I referred to the Routledge Classics 2004 edition of Bohm's *On Creativity*, I found that the preface had been written by a Native American (Leroy Little Bear) who decades ago had been able to advise Bohm that what he was discovering in physics was already present in Native American folklore. Bohm's humility at this revelation enabled him to confirm his hypothesis that everything we can know is already available to us if we can be open to what the other, meaning all of creation, can teach us.

*.....cultural humility is a useful exercise in understanding your role as an agent of sustainability in a complex system. It is difficult to relinquish the illusions of power and delusions of exceptionalism that come with privilege. But it is strangely liberating to realise your true status as a single node in a cooperative network. There is honour to be found in this role, and a certain dignified agency. You won't be swallowed up by a hive mind or lose your individuality – you will retain your autonomy while simultaneously being profoundly interdependent and connected. In fact, sustainable systems cannot function without the full autonomy and unique expression of each independent part of the interdependent whole. p98.*

The author avoids any nonsense about returning us to some mythical garden of Eden or phantasm of the noble savage by emphasising that indigenous systems are inherently sustainable because they are open and adaptive. In contrast, he gives many examples of contemporary, closed system dilemmas caused by the reductive thinking and fragmentation that are the hall marks of hierarchical reasoning and analysis. He points out that his own people have lived on the Australian continent for approximately 65,000 years, longer than any other known community on earth, and would not have survived had they not been adaptive. His simple operating guidelines, or network protocols, for sustainability agents are Connect, Diversify, Interact and Adapt, in that order. Similar guidelines can now be found in modern management texts explaining how to work under conditions of uncertainty in complex adaptive systems. Leading organisation theorists (such as Boxer, 2014, Stacey, 2012, Western, 2008) are challenging the conventional distinction between organisation and environment along with the primacy of hierarchical decision and control systems. We grope towards holistic thinking and heterarchical processes but, unlike Bohm, seem unable yet to problematise the role of profit in symbiotic relations. Bohm advocated a process of 'dialogue' for allowing the implicate order to come into consciousness and thus make available hitherto unseen, potential connections between parts and the whole. Yunkaporta describes a process of 'yarning', which is an indigenous form of dialogue. Yarning takes time, so can be regarded as the enemy of profit/progress/scarcity, and follows a sequence that is the exact opposite of the non-Indigenous way:

1. **Respect (spirit) – ways of valuing:** aligning values and protocols of introduction, setting rules and boundaries.
2. **Connect (heart) – ways of being:** establishing strong relationships and routines of exchange that are equal for all involved.
3. **Reflect (head) - ways of knowing:** thinking as part of the group and collectively establishing a shared body of knowledge to inform what you will do.
4. **Direct (hands) – ways of doing:** acting on the basis of shared knowledge in ways that are negotiated by all.

The efficacy of such a process relies on the values and characteristics of an oral/acoustic, high-context, culture rather than the Western visual/print, low-context culture. A similar point was made by Gordon Lawrence as he conceptualised and developed the practice of social dreaming. His reversal of perspective from narcissism to socialism (2003) and the use of a matrix (2005) is designed to encourage narrative intersubjectivity, dreams as a form of unconscious, contextual thinking, and emergent connections.

Yunkaporta is scathing about fetishizing or cherry picking indigenous practices (a typically reductionist mistake). He stresses the fact that deep memory is stored in relationships and critical knowledge about sustainable living has been lost through the ethos of individualism and objectivism. We need processes of thinking together to recover patterns of knowledge and to gain full cultural potential. *“The assistance people need is not in learning Aboriginal Knowledge but in remembering their own.”* p163.

There is not space in this review to detail the states of mind he describes as necessary for supporting action emanating through connectedness and complexity but his descriptors give some indication: Kinship-mind, Story-mind, Dreaming-mind, Ancestor-mind and Pattern-mind. These dimensions of existing and knowing are familiar to most of us but are often regarded as separate, alternative, less true, ways of knowing than the scientific method. Indigenous thinking does not have a place for elements or variables or categories; it seeks the interplay of ways of knowing in order to reveal the interconnection of all creation. The author is particularly critical of abstract, conformist, compartmentalised, Western modes of education and the alienation and emotional damage it can cause through disconnection from the wondrous complexity of life. Perhaps akin to the loss of primary spirit (Bain, 2002)?

Controversially, the author goes so far as to claim that non-Indigenous cultures tend to be ‘adolescent’ in their preoccupation with the same three questions: Why are we here? How should we live? What will happen when I die?

Indigenous cultures, in their maturity, have transcended these questions and accept the role of custodians of all creation, guided by the belief that “*Everything in creation is sentient and carries knowledge, therefore everything is deserving of our respect. Even narcissists.*” p275.

I cannot imagine any two individuals reviewing this book in the same way; there are so many points at which to respond viscerally. And therein lies its value; if only we can find ways to yarn about our responses.

## References

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## Biographical note

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