

Yunkaporta, T. (2019). *Sand talk: How Indigenous thinking can save the world*. Text Publishing Company. 285 pp.

Review by Tony Syme and Tobias Gebhardt



What happens when you look at the world from an Indigenous perspective? Tyson Yunkaporta provides a sophisticated and thought-provoking answer that puts Indigenous Knowledge into the spotlight for scholars and nonacademic thinkers alike. In *Sand Talk* Yunkaporta explicates *How Indigenous Thinking Can Save The World*. He shares insights gained from his “yarns” with Indigenous wisdom holders, insights that are simultaneously entertaining and deeply thought-provoking. Yunkaporta describes *yarning* as the traditional form used to transmit knowledge and explains it as a structured cultural activity grounded in “story, humour, gesture and mimicry for consensus-building, meaning making and innovation. . . . It has protocols of active listening, mutual respect and building on what others have said” (p. 131). In this way knowledge emerges, rather than being acquired.

We yarn about the book’s impact, its insights into the Indigenous realm, and its possible application for research. Early in the book Yunkaporta explains his concept of *us-two* as a dual-first-person pronoun that stems from an Aboriginal language. We see this as two versions of self: One is a cultural and relational being of place, and the other is a product of the system that inflicts its ideology onto people, creating two beings: *us-two*, with an unexplored space in between. Tyson uses the *us-two* concept “to provoke thought rather than represent fact, in a kind of dialogical and reflexive process with the reader” (p. 22). We engage with this thought experiment, treating this review as emerging from the in-between space of the yarning process and our relational positions of our own *us-two* version: that of European Australians who do research in the Indigenous Knowledge space while wrestling with being steeped

in Western knowledge traditions. We look at what exists and is created in(-between) our yarns about the book, and this review is compiled from excerpts of this yarning process.

Tony: I would like to start our conversation by acknowledging Bundjalung Country (an area in the north of the state of New South Wales in Australia), where our yarns take place. The Indigenous relationship to Country is paramount in Yunkaporta’s *Sand Talk*, and I actually feel challenged by him to reassess my relationship to place and to find my own ancestral roots that were embedded in the land—to relearn how to be a custodial being of Country myself.

Tobias: Thanks, Tony. The Indigenous relationship to Country is indeed very special. Country itself is seen as a sentient being with agency, an active partner who shares knowledge (which is why we capitalize Country: to show that it is an equal knowledge holder and research partner). It means taking into account relationship with all of creation. Tyson Yunkaporta helps us understand these complex patterns of creation that keep the world in balance. The predominant and controlling patterns of the Western world have disrupted this balance for a long time, and it feels like we are getting closer to a turning point, which is why so many people are now interested in *How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*.

Tony: Yunkaporta “walks the talk” by demonstrating a different view of this “patterned” complexity. He elucidates how Indigenous thinking expresses the complex patterns of the world through many different mediums, such as song, dance, stories, paintings, or carvings. These mediums connect the dreaming-mind, the story-mind, the kinship-mind, and the ancestral-mind, which he describes in some detail in the book. He also describes

how strong Indigenous voices need to do more than recount Indigenous experiences. They also need to examine and challenge the narratives of the occupying culture with counternarratives.

Tobias: This different thinking comes through in the book. Yunkaporta has a unique way of captivating the reader that is grounded in Indigenous Knowledge passed on from his yarning sessions. This knowledge is portrayed through the symbols depicted in the book, which makes *Sand Talk* such a rich resource for academic and nonacademic readers alike, as the knowledge within exercises its own agency. The book can provide different insights for each individual reader.

Tony: There are so many messages that the Elders wanted Yunkaporta to convey to the world, and even though he states that he is not a high-level knowledge keeper himself, he does have the right skill set to translate their patterns of thinking to the reader. At the same time, *Sand Talk* also speaks for itself and different knowledge will emerge from it for different people.

Tobias: I like how you say he does not see himself as a high knowledge keeper. It shows his humility, something that stands out for me among Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders in general. Such humility is missing in Western systems. Tyson refers to this lack of humility in the book through one of the *Sand Talk* symbols from a major contributing Elder, “Oldman Juma.” The symbol depicts the “I am greater than you; you are less than me” equation that, as Tyson writes, is “the most destructive idea in existence” (p. 30).

Tony: Thanks for bringing up Oldman Juma, because he introduced Tyson to the symbols that hold so much knowledge. These symbols, drawn in the sand, led to the term *Sand Talk*. Tyson passes the knowledge that viewing the symbols will change us on a molecular level and that his words are simply the delivery systems for these symbols. We are invited to feel the knowledge in these symbols through a gut-brain rather than our head-brain relationship. Through the “gut,” symbols impart huge amounts of knowledge with very few words. In this way the book actually accompanies the symbols, not the other way around.

Tobias: The book invites us to trust our intuitions, to engage with a deeper truth that

stems from the process of creation, not from so-called verifiable data. Knowledge will show itself when you are ready. I love how the book does this: Open it anywhere and it will reveal another layer of knowledge. I just randomly opened the book, to the place where Yunkaporta speaks of the “shadow spirit” that he relates to how Westerners used to engage in certain ceremony themselves (pp. 107–108). Today it seems we are out of touch with such practices. This is true of Indigenous peoples as well, to an extent, due to the legacy of colonialism. Another reason why this book has such an impact: It can reconnect us with our own spirit worlds.

Tony: Yes. The book reminds us that we were all indigenous to “place” at some time, and this last 200 years of human industrial civilization is but a blink in time. Our very DNA is deeply rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing that we reawaken by changing our perspective. My own research explores this connection to place: our connection to Country that is not about taking knowledge content away as data, but as witnessing what Country is actually teaching us—as you said earlier, Country is a research partner, and we need to learn how to listen and connect with it again.

Tobias: We could use a bit of “cultural humility,” Tyson writes, to understand that the Western way is not the only way of understanding the world—realizing that each of us is a mere “single node in a cooperative network” (p. 98) of a complex system. Yunkaporta relates this to the possibility of being an agent of sustainability who accepts differences, embraces them, and interacts with different systems. I relate this to an invitation to reconnect to each other, to work together, as well as to reconnect to Country and the spiritual world. That’s what I like about *Sand Talk*: It invites us all to communicate and collaborate.

Tony: Also realizing that it is about learning to be human and recognizing that our civilization, education, and resultant worldview actively work against being human. Many Indigenous people across the globe understand this dilemma and despite the suffering they have endured under the dominant ruling bodies, they are still willing to offer a way back to our humanity. Yunkaporta maintains that our only chance to survive into the future is by relearning our relationship with being in the world through the knowledge held by the few remnant

Indigenous knowledge holders. This knowledge lives on through the sharing of stories. (p. 109).

Tobias: Yeah, in my own work I investigate how it can be achieved through the power of yarning and its inherent method of sharing stories. This implies active and deep listening to Indigenous wisdom holders, and *Sand Talk* is the perfect example. The story-mind, as Tyson explains, “is a way of thinking that encourages dialogue about history from different perspectives, as well as the raw learning power of narrative itself” (p. 130). He later writes that there is great opportunity for dialogue between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples, yet so far our skewed power relations have made it a predominantly one-way conversation. It is time for a different dialogue, a different story, where all voices are heard equally.

Tony: So true. Through such dialogue we could learn how to be a custodial species again, like we knew how to be in our own ancestral lands not that long ago.

Tobias: I know what you mean. If there is one fundamental message in the book, it is the one Tyson points out that everyone asks of life: Why are we here? His answer: “It’s easy. . . . We look after things on the earth and in the sky and the places in between”

Tony: And, for humans to survive into the future, our fundamental relationship with the earth and sky must move from being extractive to being custodial. This capacity for adaption is presented as the only choice: “if you don’t move with the land, the land will move you” (p. 3).

We hope our yarn about the book has provided some insight into how knowledge emerges through dialogue, and that it has encouraged readers to engage with *Sand Talk* and discover for themselves what kind of knowledge it will reveal. Yunkaporta presents the terms *respect*, *connect*, *reflect*, and *direct* as a form of progression to engage with living systems, which sum up what his yarns with Indigenous wisdom holders revealed for him. Through yarning about the book, it was the story-mind and the invitation for cross-cultural collaboration that grabbed Tobias; for Tony, it was the ancestral-mind and his pursuit of reconnecting to Country. *Sand Talk* holds something for everyone, and if you approach it with an open mind and heart, you may find some guidance from *How Indigenous Thinking Can Save The World*, whether for research or for your own life.



About the Reviewers

Tony Syme is a doctoral student in the Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples at Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia.

Tobias Gebhardt is a doctoral student in the Gnibi College for Indigenous Australian Peoples at Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia.

