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Challenging the Colonialities of Symbolic Annihilation

Indigenous researchers often articulate relationality as a measure to maintain transparency and accountability to other Indigenous peoples, and as a direct challenge to the disconnected colonial writings about us, by others (Kovach; Dudgeon and Bray). My own relationality statement for this article asserts my belonging and investment as a Wiradjuri, transgender/non-binary person, a Professor of Indigenous Studies, a sound artist and performer, and as someone with a large family who I care for and who trace a thousand generations of connection to land and life across the continent of “so-called Australia” (Day 367). In the context of an article focused on queer Indigenous representation, asserting my broader kinship responsibilities to queer Indigenous Mob (TallBear 5–15; Carlson et al. 23) also flags intent to create space that begins with us and ends with a challenge to others to represent.

In 2020, I began a four-year senior Future Fellowship awarded by the Australian Research Council with a program titled: *Saving Lives: mapping the influence of Indigenous LGBTIQ+ creative artists*. The program explores the ways in which queer Indigenous artists and their work—across all forms—can affect the lives of queer Indigenous people, their families, and their communities. The program comprises projects that map the work and influence of these artists and their unique contribution and impact. While the focus is on how representation through creative renderings of queerness can enhance the lives of queer Indigenous people, a group who are disproportionately affected within the colonial system (Hill et al.; Carlson et al. 23), the program also seeks to understand the ways in which queer Indigenous artists create complex and ground-breaking work and the further impact it has for them and their kin.

The program is composed of interconnecting projects that challenge the colonial project of gender and sexuality and the containers that Indigenous peoples have historically been forced into. Through creative work, public rhetoric, commentary and analysis, and a complex mapping that is informed by LGBTIQ+ Indigenous artists, including Elders, it relies on input and feedback through surveys with queer Mob. This “checking in” assures a level of accountability back to the community for whom the work has the greatest meaning, but it also forefronts the relationality mentioned earlier.

While focused on the work of queer Indigenous creative practitioners, *Saving Lives* also explores how others use creativity to conceive of Indigenous gender and sexuality. While the program seeks to explore agentic strategies, it also highlights problematic ideas imposed and reductive colonial categorisations within screen cultures, galleries, museums, sites of performance, keeping places and other collaborative creative work under the oversight of others (O’Sullivan).

Storied

Developed across 2023–2024, *Storied* will feature the lives and work of Indigenous LGBTIQ+ artists across genres. While this is an expected outcome from research that maps Indigenous creative representation, the challenge across *Saving Lives* is to avoid reimposing the colonial project of categorisation and containment. To counter simply listing artists and their work, *Storied* focuses on artists through a self-curated remembering or “saving” of the work that they determine holds meaning in a project focused on the way we all relationally build a site in which queer Indigenous people are made to feel that they belong. This will include stories from those artists about their work, their lives, and the impact they imagine for their work.

For this reason, *Storied* moves beyond a passive recall of queer Indigenous art already made and managed into a searchable tag-based system, by challenging the colonial approach of containment and order so often associated with archives (Russell 163; Barrowcliffe 168) that focuses reductively on archives that hold history. Rather than listing a range of work by each artist, the artist selects work they believe compels a story of who they are as an LGBTIQ+ Indigenous artist and projects that into a future retelling in 100 years.

This idea of future casting, both builds on Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon’s Indigenous Futurisms, that I will write more on later, and it responds to a question I received while conducting a review of 470 museums in a previous ARC project, called *Reversing the Gaze*. That project focused on the capacity for nationally relevant museums to engage and represent First Nations’ Peoples. The question came, not from someone participating in the interviews associated with the project, but from a non-Indigenous junior curator at a leading museum in London. In questioning the value of the project, they asked, “Do you think there’ll still be Indigenous people in 100 years’ time?” My response was, “Yes, but I’m not so sure about museums.” I have spoken about this extensively, and I have noted that the person who asked the question was visibly shaken by the idea that museums may disappear in the future, yet comfortable with the erasure of Indigenous people (Carlson). My response to the question, rather than a counterattack, focused instead on the struggle that museums have faced in maintaining relevance and currency (Weil 13).

As an Indigenous person who would like to see other Indigenous people thrive their response was alarming, but also flagged their own central concern around the value of the institution. I have little doubt that they held no malice in erasing future people not yet born, but their own relationality seemed to fail to consider these future generations as connected to the present. As Anishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor framed in their articulation of Indigenous survivance, by challenging dominance and drawing on relationality and the long game of continuing to be our cultural selves, our survivance, not just our survival, is guaranteed. Vizenor’s invocation of survivance reminds that for Indigenous peoples, we live on in the generations to come, continuing to see the connection between the past and the future (Vizenor).

The zero-sum game found in both question and answer, where only we—as Indigenous peoples—or museums, can exist, is not the ridiculous comparison it may seem. The heavily laden colonial project of museums that forces categorisation, explanation, and exclusion, being pitted against our very survival is poignant. The question spoke to two important points that are adopted in the planning of *Storied*: there are those who cannot imagine us in the future, and there are people who value the idea of a structure, like a

museum, or an artefact, like the work we make, more than the survival and thriving of Indigenous people; more than the trust in our survivance. To extend this to the central position of the *Storied* project: people matter more than the art made, including those future generations, including our deep histories, and including the ways in which this connectedness makes our lives worthwhile. *Storied* asks the artists to contemplate the future value of their work, even when they cannot know it, because it allows them to see and think about Indigenous Futures.

Indigenous Futures: *Challenging Symbolic Annihilation (CSA)*

The *Saving Lives* Fellowship is housed in the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures (CGIF), a site with three nodes that embed the concept of survivance: *Future Worlds; Digital Futures; and Intimacies, Relationalities and Locating Ourselves* (CGIF). The Centre recalls the work of another Anishinaabe scholar, Grace Dillon, and their conception of Indigenous Futurisms explored through imagined worlds and possible futures that directly challenge a trajectory set by colonisers, by drawing on the past, and considering the present while mapping a future of infinite possibilities (Dillon 346). That Indigenous Futurisms is often seen to be analogous to reductive imagined narrative worlds contained in creative spaces, fails to realise the power of imagining—and creativity—for colonised peoples and the importance of it to Indigenous people engaged in the relational pursuit of survivance.

Survivance is central to understanding and challenging colonial erasures and informs each step of CGIF and the *Saving Lives* program. If the work in *Storied* “saves” and extends each artist’s work into their own infinite futures, another project of *Saving Lives*, a *Challenging Symbolic Annihilation (CSA)* database, reminds of the reality of representation of us, both by others, and by the power that our own participation and visibility can have, to challenge these erasures. The database, titled *Queer as...*, began as a means to locate queer Indigenous representation in mainstream screen-based creative work, specifically film and television. As a widely available artform, film and television has moved from a paucity of queer representation to a more accurate reflection of the complexity of its audience (Banks et al.). Or has it?

Saving Lives focuses on the ways in which presence is insisted on and erasures are challenged. The database project, therefore, aims to test this idea to reveal how queer representation includes or excludes other identity complexity, how erasures are challenged or reinforced, and how erasures and tropes of identity play into the problematic categorisation of the colonial project of both erasure and categorisation.

The project, and its resulting database, draw on Gerbner’s term, “Symbolic Annihilation,” and explore the expansion of this idea by both Tuchman and Bourdieu in their discussions of the violence of exclusion (Tuchman 150–74). While the project begins with queer Indigenous representation, in order to see this, it requires an examination of queer representation in general, including who makes the decision to represent or not. It also explores the combination of visibility and presence, and the associated risk. Annihilations, whether symbolic or literal, are agents of the same colonial ideal, to manage those who are not within the acceptable containment through both failing to recognise and searching for reasons that justify that difference.

Gomeroi queer scholar Alison Whittaker challenges the desire in others to locate a complex and well-trodden queer Indigenous past with the uncomfortable truth that queerness was neither recorded, nor understood by colonial forces, and that the erasures

of queerness were intentional and violent (O'Sullivan 67; Whittaker 223–37). The contemporary desire to trace a history of Indigenous queer representation from time immemorial as evidence that we have not only recently arrived at queerness (Hill) is analogous to the ways that the colonial project in so-called Australia has insisted on people who were forcibly removed from land now proving persistent occupation to lay claim to that land (Deloria 95; O'Faircheallaigh). Imagining queerness as new or requiring this kind of proof and history receipts from Indigenous peoples, when it is not required for the mainstream population, also treats Indigeneity as rarefied and separate from the broader human condition and is a tool of coloniality (O'Sullivan 67). Through observation it also traps Indigenous people in a state of interrogation and suspicion. That this can happen—along with the Indigenous presence-made-mystical that Dillon writes about, presents risks in developing a database that seeks to locate and identify queer Indigenous representation. Yet, if we are only written about, rather than agents of that work, if our screen representations include us bodily, but are controlled by others, then tracking and understanding this, is crucial. A database can facilitate that.

The requirement of others to impose a formal history of queerness on Indigenous people, to talk of our always-presence, as though the visibility of queerness was not also forcibly removed under colonial occupation, is palpable in the work of Whittaker and a range of queer scholars who challenge the assertion of Indigenous heterosexuality within the colonial project (Day 368). Challenging these assertions also creates questions for our project as we build the database, including: Is the desire to contain Indigenous lives visible within mainstream screen-based work? Are Indigenous people reductively represented? Central to much of the work on challenging the colonial project of gender and sexuality is considering our own past, while challenging questions of our validity. *Queer as...* does specific work in locating these reductive ideas of who we are, including by examining attempts to locate us as mythical or magical by dint of our Indigeneity (Dillon, "Native Slipstream"), and by examining complex representations that may extend our survivance.

Central to understanding representation for queer Indigenous creatives in the scope of the *Queer as...* project is who controls the narrative in these mainstream renderings of our queerness when it is work that is broadcast to a wider audience who already have a reductive sense of what constitutes Indigeneity. If queer Indigeneity reduces us to stereotypes made by others, there is also a question of who this serves. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's framing of the compounding disadvantage of intersectionality, she describes the conceptual and cultural distance and dissonance between those affected, and those who have oversight and control (1241). As a legal scholar, Crenshaw proposes that legal outcomes for Black women are substantially worse than for their White counterparts, even when both experience the same obstacles. While intersectionality cannot be recast as a way to understand complexity of difference, it is Crenshaw's proposition around the distance, from those handing down the sentence to the people least served, that reveals the truth of bias and the power of visibility. Until we—as Indigenous creatives—are charged with making, and until queer Indigenous artists tasked with control of these projects are deciding on accurate representation, we cannot be sure that the stereotypes will not perpetuate. But what evidence do we have that the oversight of queer Indigenous creatives has an impact in relation to queer Indigenous representation? Has there been an increase in complex representation of queer people, and is this also true of queer Indigenous people? How do these containers of representation work both against and toward reinforcing the colonial project of gender, sexuality and representation? *Queer as...* seeks to understand this.

As a cohort who have been subject to the colonial project of gender and sexuality, we have the most to gain from challenging it in creative representations of us, but to limit it to only queer Indigenous representation would be to locate a potted history of inclusion and exclusion. In order to fully understand representation of ethnic groups and minorities, the project examines intersections of queer representation, where further diversities—including ethnicities—are considered. If this seems a herculean task of effectively providing a queer, ethnically diverse version of the IMDB, this is the reason it offers up as a proof-of-concept rather than an extensive mapping. By sampling several thousand iterations of representation across television and film of the last 25 years, the work aims to move beyond showing patterns and instead interrogates.

If the idea of categories and ordering into structures was unpalatable for *Storied*, that concern exists here in a database that could be focused on tagged iterations of queerness and other “diversities” into a reductive and colonising structure. To challenge this, but also to understand the data gathered, each entry contains narrative analysis detailing the representation, and focusing—as *Storied* did—on input from those who have creative control. The year-range selection protocol narrows the focus to understanding how screen-based queerness has changed in representation over that period, and how further complexities have facilitated or been barriers to this change. Importantly, the use of “proof-of-concept” is not just a limiting process, it also speaks to how others can learn from the containment of representation. How it can be held against specific external criteria of world events, trends in screen-based distribution, and discussions around diversity in representation.

To understand why a database focused on queer screen representation beyond Indigenous people, would come from an Indigenous-focused project, is to understand how Indigenous people have led practice in so many areas where they have identified the value of breaking the unspoken bonds of agreement to be marginalised, reduced, erased and, just simply absent. The *Intimacies, Relationalities and Locating Ourselves* node of the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures focuses on demonstrating through the excellence of Indigenous representation and connectedness how other marginalised and minority communities and settlers can leverage the future to deliver more (CGIF). In this way, a proof-of-concept can radiate out from an Indigenous-led and focused program to an expansive understanding of how genders and sexualities are presented in the public sphere.

While the database is complex in its rendering, it not only looks for presence, it also explores erasures and other problematic framings of representation, such as queerbaiting (McDermott). In this way, it searches for what is not yet there. It uses Dillon’s work to explore the idea of narrative work providing a space to better understand representation, but it also aims to understand how this is changing or how we might use it to effect change.

As an Indigenous queer person who has never seen themselves represented in the enormous wealth of screen work that I’ve encountered, there is a risk that a database exists to fill this void. I grew up in the 60s and 70s never seeing myself represented either as an Aboriginal person or as a trans/non-binary person, and certainly not as both. I have still never seen anybody like me on television or in film, and I’m not alone (Cover). But if the future delivers relational outcomes, someone like me, may. It is not a question of locating exact copies or representations reflecting our existence and experience; if my relationality statement represents a longing for representation, it also presents the promise that it does not have to be in my lifetime. Instead, the focus is to understand how these futures may be

charged with infinite possibilities of representation that are not limited to the colonial project of categorisation and exclusion.

Queer as... may be used to break down and reshape our understanding of queer representation across screen-based forms but it also serves a specific purpose when it comes to understanding how representation is crucial to Indigenous wellbeing (Carlson et al. 31). It is this aspect of the program, including *Queer as...* that contains an unknowable risk and where the database material may help to sift meaning. What if the work is not of interest to a queer Indigenous audience, or the story not sufficiently compelling to queer Indigenous people who wish to see themselves represented? What if they have given up on this idea? The project pins itself on what Grace Dillon, in coining the term Indigenous Futures, refers to as the desire to see multiple, mundane possibilities (Dillon, "Indigenous Scientific Literacies" 23–41). But it will also seek feedback and ask for critical engagement from those who will benefit the most: queer, Indigenous people, their community and their kin.

Survivance

In spite of the colonial project that continues to focus on making the lives of Indigenous people worse, Indigenous people are thriving (Watego 26; Carlson et al.). At the centre of the *Saving Lives* Fellowship program is the assertion that Indigenous worlds are made better by challenging the colonial project of gender and sexuality, by centring our own values and survivance. At the heart of *Saving Lives* is the assertion that this is best managed through the stories that we tell, the ways that we—as Indigenous peoples—are present in that telling—rather than as objects or representations to be considered.

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