

Playing the Colony: Queer Indigenous Masculinities vs the Colonial Project of Gender

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The colonial project of gender (and everything else) (O'Sullivan, 2021) insists upon an unchanging masculinity signifying domination, control, rigidity, physical force, and violence. In this article, we challenge the reliability of these colonial impositions, and the fixedness of masculinities and femininities, by considering the fluidity and changeability of masculinities expressed in the work of queer Indigenous creative artists from the Lands claimed by Australia. We explore how these works intersect with a broader public imaginary and how they challenge masculinities and femininities as reliable, solid, and fixed, when there is constant evidence of their stretchy fluidity.

We take as a starting point the knitted sculptures of Jawoyn artist Troy-Anthony Baylis, and place these works in conversation with Mununjali Yugambeh writer Ellen van Neerven's book *Personal Score* (2023) and play *swim* (2024), exploring the ways in which each engages and challenges ideas of masculinity, Indigeneity, culture, and identity. Baylis' works at once evoke feminised crafting and labour, using simulacra of condoms, softness, football beanies, pride flags, the dillybag, the penis sheath and its association with coloniser morals and modesties, as well as captured Indigenous artefacts on display in museums. These are scribed with quippy one-liners that show up the artifices of the colonial project, a humour inspired by the genderless trickster spirits: Mimi. In both *Personal Score* and *swim*, van Neerven details the ways in which they have come up against the colonial project through sport and gender, culture and identity. They unpack and interrogate these frictions and blockages, and the weight of their affective residues—what it means to build sporting stadiums atop ceremonial grounds, cities atop swamps and rainforests, colonial gendered normativities and expectations atop a body.

These and other works of queer Indigenous creativity and resistance reveal the Survivance (Vizenor, 1999) of Indigenous masculinities and anti-masculinities that are vibrant, curious, playful, powerful, living, and queer.

The colonial project of gender (and everything else) (O'Sullivan, 2021) insists upon an unchanging masculinity signifying domination, control, rigidity, physical force, and violence. In this article we challenge the immutability of the colonial gender/sex binary by considering the fluidity and changeability of masculinities expressed in the work of two Aboriginal trans/non-binary creative artists from the Lands claimed by Australia: Mununjali Yugambeh

writer Ellen van Neerven and Jawoyn visual artist Troy-Anthony Baylis. As noted by settler scholar Lisa Tatonetti (2021), foregrounding Indigenous non-cisgender masculinities at once demonstrates and challenges the cultural construction, reproduction logics, and reification of colonial heteropatriarchal gender norms, while also affirming gender performances of masculinity as “ongoing, creative sites of knowledge for men, women, Two-Spirit, queer, nonbinary, trans, and gender-variant folks” (p. 10). We explore how van Neerven’s and Baylis’ works intercross with a broader public imaginary of gender and Indigeneity, engaging complex and layered experiences of masculinity even as they come up against the colonial project, generating frictions and resistances.

We are two trans/non-binary artist-scholar-activists. Han Reardon-Smith is a settler researcher, musicker, and radio-maker, living on Jagera, Yuggera-Ugarapul and Turrbal Country, having grown up on Giabal and Jarowair Country. Sandy O’Sullivan is Wiradjuri, an interdisciplinary artist and academic, currently living on Gubbi Gubbi Country. We work together on Sandy’s 2020–2025 ARC Senior Future Fellowship in a program titled *Saving Lives: Mapping the influence of Indigenous LGBTIQ+ creative artists*. The program is housed in the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures at the Department of Critical Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, on Dharug Country.

Queerness, as defined by Kwagu’l scholar Sarah Hunt and settler scholar Cindy Holmes (2015), is a deconstructive practice, rooted more effectively in action than identity. They advocate for a decolonial queer politic that “seeks to *queer* White settler-colonialism and the colonial gender and sexual categories it relies on—to render it abnormal, to name it and make it visible in order to challenge it” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 157, emphasis in original). Likewise, Driftpile Cree writer and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt affirms that he is less interested in uncovering and resurrecting Indigenous queer expressions of the past, instead attending to “what queer indigeneity *does*: the sort of possibilities, affective spheres, intimacies, modes of ethical life, paradoxes, and temporal and atmospheric disturbances it elicits” (in Belcourt & Nixon, 2018, para. 2, emphasis in original), pointing out that “those who are Indigenous and differently gendered and/or sexualized will seek and/or perform alternative sites of political action and community-building” (para. 6). We commit to an anti-colonial queer politic in our work and center our reading of queer Indigenous masculinities in resistance to the colonial project of gender (O’Sullivan, 2021).

A brief history of the colonial project of gender/sex

There is a growing pool of research on the materiality of “biological sex” that complicates the presumption of binary differentiation of any of the multiple commonly attributed biological markers (Fausto-Sterling, 2019, 2020; Prum, 2023). In this paper, we use the term “gender/sex” to refer to the entangled

cultural and biological elements of sex and gender identity, and specifically to challenge the colonial concept of a strict binary that collapses individual identity and sociocultural possibilities into an oversimplification of bodies and their reproductive function.

The gender/sex binary is a racialised and racist ideal that originated in the strictly bifurcated roles, bodies, and racist ideals of elite patriarchal white Anglo-Europeans (Markowitz, 2024), weaponised and wielded as a tool of racial supremacy and control. As Jamaican writer and critical race theorist Sylvia Wynter astutely observed, the “globally hegemonic ethnoclass” (2003, p. 262) of the white, cisgender, heterosexual, elite, affluent, educated, able-bodied “Man” is maintained through an intensive effort of overrepresentation, disciplining, and reproduction that situates this figure “as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves” (p. 260). This Man-as-human(ity) is the claim through which colonial powers insist upon their supposed natural superiority.

The specific features of “maleness” and “femaleness” represented by wealthy white Anglo-Europeans served as a measuring tool for colonial race scientists, through which they perceived both the elevation and evolution of “civilised” peoples and the supposed perversion of racialised peoples, read as justification for intervention and colonial control (Carlson et al., 2023; Markowitz, 2024). Nigerian scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí described this process as *gendering*, ascribing colonial understandings of binary gender/sex onto colonised peoples, rather than attending to the inherent qualities of their pre-colonisation social relations (2011, p. 2). Whiteness imagines itself a centrifugal force, both neutral and natural, that alone is capable of the objectivity and reason necessary to discover, identify, understand, control, and most of all possess the “other” (Hage, 1998/2023; Moreton-Robinson, 2015), and bodily and cultural deviance from the norms of Man’s white colonial masculinity has long been central to the dehumanisation of colonised, racialised, disabled, gendered, and otherwise “othered” peoples (Brown, 2022; Hokowhitu, 2015; Jackson, 2020; Maynard & Simpson, 2022; McMullin, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2021; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Spillers, 1987; Tatonetti, 2021).

Although its naturalisation is well established in the predominating ideology, this ongoing colonial project of gender (O’Sullivan, 2021) continues to require exhaustive defensive action (Butler, 2024). This is demonstrated through the contradictions of its implementation by white colonial-imperial interests today. Challenges to the assumption of gender/sex as a natural and fixed binary are met with alarmism and fear-mongering ranging from contrived speculations of sexual predation in women’s restrooms and racialised disputes about gender identity and fairness in up to Olympic-level sport (Burke & Klugman, 2024) to decrying the disintegration of the conservative nuclear family (and its property relations) as the foundational

unit of the modern nation state (Butler, 2024; Gill-Peterson, 2024). In an astonishing rhetorical inversion, head of the Catholic church, Pope Francis, pronounced in 2015 that teaching “gender theory” in schools is tantamount to “ideological colonization” that poses a risk to society comparable to Nazism and nuclear war (in Butler, 2024, Introduction, para. 6). Simultaneously, however, colonial nations (and corporations) proudly proclaim their “advanced” tolerance of queerness and condemn the “backwards” homophobia supposedly rife in colonised communities (Butler, 2024; Neerven, 2023, pp. 78–79). This is especially stark in the practice of “pinkwashing” engaged by the colonial-settler state of Israel as a justification for ongoing genocidal violence against Palestinians (Ali, 2024; Atshan, 2020; Queers in Palestine, 2023). Accordingly, an anti-colonial queer politic that resists the colonial distortions and violences occupying the public imaginary is of crucial importance in the present moment.

Queer as... creative masculinities

Our work together on *Saving Lives: Mapping the influence of LGBTIQ+ Indigenous artists* has included a deep dive into complex queer representation in television, which we’ve titled *Queer As...* (O’Sullivan et al., 2024b, 2024a). Our recent *Queer As...* survey of television audiences attracted a wide variety of respondents; as two trans/non-binary scholars who do public-facing work on gender identities outside the racial-colonial gender/sex binary, we were able to attract a large number of respondents who are of divergent genders themselves. Initially we noted that very few self-described men were responding, and it was interesting that “men” were frequently identified by respondents as the problem (with “women” emerging as a second issue).

A key finding of the *Queer As...* survey was the desire for greater complexity of identity portrayed and explored on screen, framed not so much as respondents’ desire to see their own experiences authentically reflected, but rather to stretch boundaries, to see representation that is expansive that challenges the limits of the public imaginary (O’Sullivan et al., 2024a). When the viewer or reader steps out of their comfort zone---whether through watching a TV series, reading a book, or seeing an artwork that is provocative---there is the meaningful sense that they *want* to be changed in some way, and this was repeated across the survey. Television is accessible as a form in ways that other arts might not be, particularly in the contemporary era of streaming, in which a far greater array of queer content is available to mainstream audiences (Griffin, 2023). Because of this, and the commercial industry context from which television emerges, television has a predictable and continually reinforced form and structure. Audiences today have been watching television for multiple decades, and they know what to expect in terms of episode length and narrative arc. This predictability delivers an interesting package that allows people immersion in a familiar rhythm and pacing, in which expectations can be worked with or disrupted. The

familiarity of the form, in combination with the time spent with a particular character and storyline, invites audiences to think about, and with, their own complexities.

The same shortcuts for understanding are less available to audiences of fine art, literature, and museums. Knowledge of these artistic realms is gatekept, enclosed within “masterful” disciplinary knowledge practices that give root to the (white) possessive affect of “knowing” art. Music scholars Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) and Patrick Nickleson (settler) affirm that: “Everyone knows music; but the primary export of music studies has been a disciplinary language that makes music strange to those who know it best” (Robinson & Nickleson, 2023, p. 273). Robinson and Nickleson posit that this disciplinary capture of knowledge is predicated upon dispossessions, which “render others as ignorant, wrong, criminal, or backward and are closely tied to parallel processes of dispossession in land” (p. 273). Similar logics of mastery predominate discourses across the arts and artistic practice (Singh, 2018, p. 10), and can leave non-specialised audiences feeling alienated and ill-equipped to engage in their own processes of interpretation. As has been explored by numerous scholars from Said’s *Orientalism* (1978/2003) on, these are the very mastery logics that underlie much of the colonial project, complexifying and professionalising—and therefore obscuring—the monopoly on ownership ascribed to whiteness (Byrd, 2011; Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Indigiqueer artmaking—that is, art created by queer Indigenous makers that is rooted in the complexities of their identities—is a critical site of resistance and refusal (Dillon, 2012; O’Sullivan, 2023; Whitehead, 2020), and in these creative works by van Neerven and Baylis we find the seeds for “an imaginative re-making of the world” (S. Phillips et al., 2022, p. 182). As Bundjalung and Kullili artist and arts-journalist Daniel Browning asserts, “Indigenous art has a social function, reaching beyond the individual” (2023, p. 265). The creative works and practices of Indigenous artists embody sovereignty and relatedness to Country and to community (McKinnon, 2020), and this is no less true for queer and trans Indigenous artists. Yugambah scholar and editor Arlie Alizzi (2017) focuses in on the *trans* of “trans-Indigenous” (Allen, 2012) to explore the specificity of transformational spaces opened by placing trans/queer Indigenous works in dialogue with one another. As he explains, such contact allows for relationality grounded in “a shared mode of seeing” (Alizzi, 2017, p. 78) rather than the alienation of marginalised otherness as defined by the gaze and curatorial framing of white colonial-settler normativities.

To engage with this *shared mode of seeing* across the queer Indigenous masculinities in van Neerven’s and Baylis’ works, we engage in the readership practices advocated by Wakka Wakka and Gooreng Gooreng scholar, writer, and editor Sandra Phillips: attending to texts (or artworks) in a partner-relationship with the reader (or viewer) for an “iterative pedagogical dance

of intersubjective meaning-making” (S. R. Phillips & Archer-Lean, 2019). Audiences bring their own accumulated knowledges and experiences to their encounter with a work. We develop interpretations less through forcing semiotic readings, but rather through passing these meeting points through their own embodied understandings of masculinities and how they are situated in a broader public imaginary. This “companion thinking” (Rottle & Reardon-Smith, 2023) privileges relationality, connection, and the experiences of being changed through an encounter, over a distanced and objective analysis that lays claim to an artwork’s meaning and significance. Baylis’ and van Neerven’s artworks are not tidy pieces, and are deeply imbued with the personal, inviting audiences into their own collaborative companion readings that bring their own personal histories and understanding into play. Even as we engage our own readings and understandings, we attend to evidence of the artists’ intent, particularly as they have articulated in interviews and additional reflections.

Sport, outside the binary

Mununjali Yugambah non-binary writer Ellen van Neerven’s reflective memoir *Personal Score* (2023) explores the many complexities of their relationship with sport (soccer), culture, and identity through a series of essays, poems, and vignettes. The text is at once memoir and incisive sociocultural critique. Van Neerven vividly recounts their embodied experiences of juggling highs and lows on and off the field, of their sport as it is for them---in turns a powerful liberating force and a violent reinscription of racialised colonial gender/sex norms. They unpack and interrogate these frictions and blockages, and the weight of their affective residues—what it means to build sporting stadiums atop ceremonial grounds, cities atop riverine swamps and floodplains, colonial gendered normativities and expectations atop a body. These tensions and resistances are revisited in van Neerven’s play *swim*, directed by Yorta Yorta/Gunaikurnai theatre maker Andrea James (van Neerven, 2024). In *swim*, genderfluid Murri protagonist E, portrayed by Dani Sib (Baad and Yawuru), returns to the pool after a series of complex and overlapping traumatic experiences, tapping into strength and courage by remembering the loving words and support of their Auntie (played by Gumbaynggirr, Dunghutti and Bundjalung artist Sandy Greenwood).

Under the colonial project, sport and athleticism are designated as masculine. This emerged from the development of international team sport in the early-1900s as a tool of social control that put displays of masculine violence—including anti-colonial resistance—to work in service of imperial powers and colonial-settler states (Connell, 2005/2019, pp. 29–30). The endurance of this gendered attachment stigmatises women and non-binary sportsfolk such that “even straight players outwardly perform straightness and normalised gender expressions” (van Neerven, 2023, p. 77). Sport has a particularly strong association with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cis-masculinity. From very early on under colonial-settler occupation Indigenous

bodies were fetishised and exploited for their athleticism, and Aboriginal sporting prowess continues to be both coveted and feared by settlers. “Sport is often weaponised by political agents as apolitical and benign,” writes van Neerven, “Yet sport is both a social power we can use as mob and a weapon that can be used against us” (2023, p. 184). The inherent violence of colonial masculinity is projected onto racialised bodies, such that expressions of cultural pride like AFL player Adam Goodes miming a spear throw are read as threatening and met with condemnation and heightened racist vitriol (Liddle, 2015). However when explored more deeply, Indigenous masculinities reveal an underlying tenderness that is fundamentally directed towards relationality and love of family and community. Research by Mukandi et al. (2019) found expressions of a “plurivalent Indigenous masculinity” that presents “a different way of thinking about strong masculinities—one not marked by physicality but vulnerability in a world that continually tests the resolve of Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous men” (p. 259). Such vulnerable masculinities line the pages of van Neerven’s works.

Sporting gender/sex rigidities, and particularly the racialisation of the gender/sex binary, were highlighted across the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Prominent anti-trans commentators, which included conservative politicians and high-profile media and cultural personalities, levelled unfounded accusations about the gender identity of women boxers Imane Khelif (Algeria) and Lin Yu-ting (Taiwan). Even as they endured a deluge of harassment, both Khelif and Lin ultimately won the gold medal in their respective weight categories (welterweight and featherweight). Khelif subsequently pressed charges against social media platform X for aggravated online harassment. Arab-Australian writer Ruby Hamad (2024) identified the racialised nature of these attacks, noting the underlying logics of Orientalism and dehumanisation: anti-trans commentators weaponised the racialised gender/sex binary by positioning the figure of the white woman (in this case, Italian competitor Angela Carini, who withdrew just 46 seconds into her match with Khelif) as a helpless innocent in need of protection from the hulking menace of a masculinised-racialised Other, even when that white woman is an Olympic boxer. Such racialised gendering reasoning has been repeatedly deployed as part of the imperial fantasy of Orientalism (see, for instance, Said 1978/2003, pp. 308–315), and is evident in media discourses that justify Israel’s genocide in Gaza by casting civilian Palestinian men as aggressive brutes and Israeli women soldiers as powerless victims (Abdel-Fattah, 2024; Hamad, 2024).

Narrative violences against Indigenous Peoples are wearing. As Bundjalung scholar and poet Evelyn Araluen describes, “Living within the temporal and spatial dispossessions of colonialism, Aboriginal realities are shadowed and concealed by projections of settler colonial archives onto unceded lands and bodies” (Araluen Corr, 2018, p. 487). “But,” van Neerven contends,

“Aboriginal people know the settlers can never destroy everything; traces, connections, sovereignty remains, and all will be returned in time” (2023, p. 193). Their own work in *swim* and *Personal Score* commits to the patient, long-haul work of reclaiming narrative autonomy, rewriting the possibilities of Indigenous masculinities, sporting participation, and a bodily queer Survivance.

Queer Indigenous embodiment

“Country is like the body,” van Neerven writes, “The body is like Country” (2023, p. 115). Their writing is threaded with links between Country and their queer Indigenous body. The arc of time that they trace in *Personal Score* allows the reader to follow them on their journey of coming to understand this connection, learning how to put words to their experiences of embodied knowing, and how the seeds of this early knowing grow, so that they might make sense of the many violences the colonial project inflicts upon body and Country. Land and body both are archives, “saturated with information” (p. 24). Both are on the frontline: “For First Nations people this was never ever / a choice. Politics was never a luxury / neither sport” (p. 48). Both bear the weight of colonial architectures: like many sporting arenas in colonial-settler Australia, Brisbane sport stadium The Gabba is built atop a bora ring, a sacred men’s ceremonial ground (pp. 58–59), and the racist, cis-sexist, anti-queer bullying van Neerven suffers at school calcifies in their body as crippling shame. Both are weathered, flood-stained, and scarred by colonial extraction and exploitation. And yet all the while in body and Country both: “The materiality lives on; it is repurposed. Its spirit remains” (p. 23).

From this embodied materiality, this Blak sovereign landbodymind erotics (van Neerven, 2023, p. 228; Pyle, 2022; Reardon-Smith, 2023), van Neerven writes survival poetics. They note the multiple bodily origin points of their 2020 poetry collection, *Throat*: “when I opened my eyes and lungs to Turrbal land”; “when I did not let myself speak for many years but carried the burdens of many in my burning larynx” (2023, p. 236). A life poured into the pages “as if to keep a record of my existence” (p. 240). *Personal Score* has a bodily presence that sprouts a forest of dark leg hairs, wrestles sweatily with colonial “narrative terrorism” (p. 194), with nerves strung taut, pained by a struggle that predates understanding.

Such bodily physicalities are further expressed by Dani Sib’s embodiment of E in *swim* (2024). In the opening scenes, they navigate the gendered changerooms at their public swimming pool, overflowing both with flesh and the judgmental glares of those self-charged with policing the colonial boundaries of gender/sex. Such hostility emerges from the belief that they, in van Neerven’s words, “as a visibly Aboriginal, visibly queer and visibly gender non-conforming person, don’t belong in that space” (in Story & Bremer, 2024, Types of Belonging, para. 10). E endures the scrutiny of their bodily differences, even as it brings them painful discomfort and highlights

their strained relationship to their body, housing as it does the accumulation of traumas and violences enacted interpersonally, socially, environmentally, and systemically. Groomed and abused by a teacher and sporting mentor, harmed by the pressures and expectations of institutionalised competitive sport, caught in a rip of climate change-warmed oceans, and grappling with family and community torn and splintered through generations of colonialism, E's way back into the pool is one of troubled waters. They access their own queer Indigenous masculinity through the guideropes of their Aunty, matriarch, knowledge keeper, and truth teller. As Yugambah, "we belong to the water," says van Neerven (in Story & Bremer, 2024, *Types of Belonging*, para. 2), both saltwater and fresh. E's bodily autonomy is written through with water sovereignty, with:

how so many of our mobs across the nation and the world are dealing with the issue about how to have access and rights around their water, [and] how to protect and care for rivers and seas like we have been doing for thousands of years. (van Neerven, in Story & Bremer, 2024, *Types of Belonging*, para. 5)

As a butch child, van Neerven found their own bodily resonance with the threads of masculinity that stitch together the panels of a soccer ball---the sport came about as close as could be to a safe place for their gender-divergent body. In adulthood, they recognised and began the process of "coming in" (Wilson, 2015) to their trans non-binary identity, "slowly and as if I was dipping a toe into hot water" (van Neerven, 2023, p. 259). Being non-binary is a challenge to the sport world's violently policed colonial binary gender/sex segregation, which is both heteronormative and explicitly trans-exclusionary, defining spaces that van Neerven describes as "forceful dystopias" (p. 246). Resisting these rigidities can crack open new freedoms for all players, as van Neerven (2023) articulates:

Playing sport while openly identifying as non-binary broadens the spectrum of how people can be when they play. It exposes the gender hypocrisies in forced gendered uniforms, gendered facilities and pay gaps. It demonstrates that we don't have to play 'like' girls or boys, we can just play as ourselves. ... When non-binary people come out in sport and are like, 'we are here', it ruptures the binaries that organised sport hinges on. It makes us all more human. When we remove gender as a condition of play, we become freer. (pp. 267–268)

The deployment of the colonial-racial gender/sex binary in sport is slowly being reshaped, so that generative new possibilities may push through. "Playing and living," writes van Neerven, "I insist on doing both" (p. 265).

Masculinity adorned

From June to October of 2023, a serialised selection of Jawoyn artist Troy-Anthony Baylis' creations spanning 2006 to the present filled the art museum of their alma mater, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The sculptural works of *I wanna be adorned* (2023) moulded, crocheted, knitted, sung, appliquéd, ensconced, signposted, stitched, hung, draped, and bedazzled in technicolor glory Baylis' vision for "an alternate dimension, one that embraces incongruity to celebrate the body, sexuality, Indigeneity, pop culture, art history and queer aesthetics" (QUT Art Museum, 2023). Baylis engages the slow, feminised labour of "repetitive crafting" in their artmaking (Waters, 2012), interweaving colonial heteropatriarchal assumptions of "men's business" and "women's business" (Carlson et al., 2023) in ways that challenge norms and open conversations around maleness and masculinity.

Knitted sock-like sculptures recur throughout *I wanna be adorned*, calling to mind a range of gendered associations and objects: feminised crafting and domestic labour, condoms, softness, football beanies, pride flags. The works also allude to two Indigenous artefacts frequently captured and displayed in colonial museums: the dillybag and the penis sheath. The former evokes feminised weaving practices and women's labour, while the latter has been engaged by colonisers as exoticised demonstrations of a masculine 'primitivism,' contrasted to their supposedly 'evolved' and 'civilised' morals and modesties.

O'Sullivan and Day (2023) detail the ways in which museums continue to uphold the colonial gender/sex binary through practices of categorising and explaining the use value of artefacts contained within their collections. Such interpretive work reproduces and extends the colonial project of gender. Artefacts taken from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities displayed in colonial museums have been severed from their complex and storied relations, captured instead for use in the colonial narrative of contrast and distinction between "primitive" and "civilised" (McKinnon, 2020). In the archive, the gallery, or the museum, categorical distinctions and valuations are themselves made on the basis of binary gendered interpretations---one prominent example of this is the distinction between arts (masculine) and crafts (feminine).

Dilly weaving

Dillybags are bags and baskets of variable size woven from natural materials such as reeds, and commonly worn around the neck to carry foodstuffs and other items (Baylis, 2012). Quandamooka artist Elisa Jane (Leecee) Carmichael has, along with her mother Sonja and supported by her sister Freja, engaged deeply with a reclamation practice of their family's dillybag weaving traditions, following several generations in which the practice was interrupted due to the impacts of colonisation. Leecee and Freja write of their

processes of connecting with community knowledge through discussions with Quandamooka Elders on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) and knowledge-sharing by Bundjalung women's collective, The Wake Up Time Weavers, as well as through access to Ancestral materials held in museum collections (E. J. Carmichael, 2017; F. Carmichael, 2020). As Freja writes, "Ancestral memory is embodied in the living material that is harvested and transformed by the hands of First Nations people to give expression" (F. Carmichael, 2020). Such cultural and artistic reclamation of weaving has frequently been understood by settler ethnographers and curators as 'women's work,' such as can be seen in anthropologist Louise Hamby's concept of "women with clever hands" (in Stolte & Oliver, 2021).

The links between dillybags and Aboriginal women and their labour are drawn upon by prominent contemporary Aboriginal artists. Waanyi artist Judy Watson's sculptural work *jugama* (2020) takes the form of a giant woven bag wrought in weathered steel, inspired by the dilly bags or net bags made by Gadigal women from tree barks. Watson writes that, "This artwork pays homage to the important role of Aboriginal women who gathered food and bush medicine to feed, nurture and heal their communities" (in Urban Art Projects, 2020). In Badtjala artist Fiona Foley's *Black Velvet* (1996), nine white linen bags hung from long straps each display a bold and simple vertical lanceolate in red and black appliqué. This repeated representation of a vulva upon dillybags is titled with a euphemism used by white colonial frontiersman to mean sexual access to Aboriginal women, suggesting the multiple layers of violence and exploitation enacted upon the bodies and labour of Aboriginal women by white colonial-settlers, as well as their lasting impacts (Foley, in QAGOMA, 2013).

None of these associations are lost on Baylis:

My knittings destabilise the legacy of knitting as a domestic and gendered occupation. They subvert culturally established traditions of Aboriginal artefact making, by using materials and techniques that are alter/native to what is normally considered Aboriginal textile art where objects are made from natural fibres sourced from the land. (Baylis, 2012, p. 100)

Baylis' artmaking challenges notions of land and Country, body, and gender as fixed. They describe their knitting practice as "highly migratory" (2012, p. 100), taking place in spaces public and private, in parks and on transport, as an act of performance. While noting the dual role played by dillybags as container and ornamental neckwear, Baylis' own "dillies" (p. 100) stand alone as sculptural objects, removed from and yet referencing the body.

Cozy genitals

At the exhibition entrance of *I wanna be adorned* were three knitted bikinis—*Modesty Set 1, 2, & 3* (Baylis, 2013)—consisting of matching tops and ‘cock socks’ in bright colours, striped like football beanies. Baylis’ knitted penis cozies are not unlike the Croatian *nakurnjak*, genital warmers or woollen codpieces, intended to keep a penis and testes comfortably protected from such dangers as saddle sores and frostbite (AFP News Agency, 2020). Such ‘cock socks’ have emerged contemporaneously as novelty gifts and humorous modesty coverings in nude photography, burlesque performances, and drag.

The condom-esque sock shape of Baylis knitted creations also calls to mind the powerfully successful Indigenist health campaign of “Condoman,” created by Birrigubba, Kalkadoon and South Sea Islander Professor Aunty Gracelyn Smallwood in the 1980s to promote condom use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in response to the HIV-AIDS crisis. Despite the demonstrable success of Indigenous- and queer community-led health campaigns in terms of trust, effectiveness, and uptake (Biesty et al., 2024), queer Indigenous people are still far too rarely attended to in healthcare (Jolivéte, 2020). In stark contrast to the colonial-settler grim reaper scare campaign of the time, Condoman cast a positive heroic figure that appealed to both straight and queer community members (Willett, 2014), illustrated by an Aboriginal comic artist inspired by popular character the Phantom and proclaiming “Don’t be shame, be game. Use frenchies”----‘condoms’ in North Queensland vernacular (Fela, 2024; Smallwood, 1991). The character was later relaunched in 2009 with a new sidekick, Lubelicious, ready to take on all manner of supervillains that presented as sexually transmitted infections (Pearson, 2017). Condoman demonstrates the fundamental necessity of queer Indigenous-led health initiatives, grounded in what Watego et al. (2021) call Indigenist Health Humanities.

Like Condoman, Baylis’ work draws on humour and camp in the tradition of the trickster. Two-Spirit Cree playwright and author Tomson Highway writes of the Native Trickster as having special significance for gender-divergent Indigenous folks, as the Trickster is at once genderless and gender-full:

first and foremost, s/he is a shape-shifter. S/he can change into and be anything s/he wants at any given point in time. She can be a man, he can be a woman----the absence of gender in Cree facilitates the process (2022, p. 121)

As Baylis describes, there is a similar slipperiness to the genderless Aboriginal Mimi spirits: “tall, thin beings that live in the rocky escarpment of northern Australia” (2014, p. para. 17), whose trickiness and resistance to capture sparks “understanding of the artifice of the colonial depiction of Aboriginality – a depiction that somehow has managed to survive as one and

the same copied image” (para. 18). Mimi spirits inspire some of the humour with which Baylis approaches the harms and violences of colonialism. The long thin arms of *Schutzmantelmadonnamimi* (2019) extend tottering in loving affection over the top of its pet collection of dillies, which in their inversion carry quippy one-liners rather than objects. Titled *The Blindcited* (2020), these dillies are scribed with an adapted version of lyrics from Scottish band Primal Scream’s 1991 song *Movin’ On Up*: “We were lost. Now we are found. We were blindcited. Now we are seen” ([*Plaque with Background Information on Schutzmantelmadonnamimi and The Blindcited*], n.d.).

Another dilly, encased in a glass dome, wears the words “am an animal and a plant” (Baylis, 2023a) to twist a reclamation out of the British colonial invaders’ myth of *terra nullius*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander campaigners for recognition as part of Australia’s population in the 1967 Referendum declared at that time that they might as well have been governed under the (nonexistent) ‘Flora and Fauna Act.’ “We weren’t citizens, we had no status as people,” said Kuku-Yalanji, Waanji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimithirr artist Vernon Ah Kee, “We were more considered literally property of the government” (in Thorpe, 2017). Baylis’ work references Ah Kee’s own text piece addressing the referendum, *not an animal or a plant* (Ah Kee, 2006). *am an animal and a plant* insists, however, on the relational philosophy of Indigenous knowledge systems, refusing colonial definitions of the “human” and standing in sovereignty under what Tanganekald, Meintang, Bunganditj, and Potaruwutj scholar Irene Watson calls “Raw Law”: “undressed from the baggage of colonialism” (2015, p. 12).

Masculinity slippages

In Baylis’ *Two Hearts* (2022), there is a literal slippage of the edges as two overlaid heart-shapes become a singularity. Lyrics from Prince, Kylie Minogue, and Olivia Newton-John give expression to the transcendence of a loving encounter with another. Like seeing double, the boundaries and containers of the lone heart are materially exceeded and transgressed through relational connection to another. Masculinity in the colonial-settler project is predicated on violence and possession, especially on display in the conventional public imaginary of sporting masculinities. But queer Indigeneity refuses to be bound within the containers of the colonial project. The creative projects of both van Neerven and Baylis transgress these hegemonic barriers and boundaries, queering and Indigenising queer Indigenous masculinities, leaning especially on the slippages of what masculinity is and could be. By reading across and between their works—these bodies in relation—compound, complexified understandings emerge that enlist masculinity as a practice of resisting the colonial gender/sex binary, pushing back against simplicity and the insistence on discrete binary categories.

I wanna be adorned (Baylis, 2023b), *Personal Score* (van Neerven, 2023), and *swim* (2024) are all persistently about bodies. “Relationship requires bodies,” as Cherokee author and scholar Daniel Heath Justice writes; “bodies connect; connections make good relations possible and meaningful, but they’re always complicated, contradictory, messy” (2018, p. 137). Bodies are sites of oppression. Racialised, disabled, and binary gender/sex divergent bodies are construed as aberrations, disciplined into conformity with white colonial normativities even as they resist stereotypes, all the while contending with the fact that experiences of trauma and oppression that are metabolised and stored in the body (Leighton, 2018). Many of the pains of this bodily archiving are explored and expressed in the works of Baylis and van Neerven. However, both Indigenous Survivance and trans joy also insist upon bodies as sites of liberation and affirmation. As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer, scholar, and musician Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, “Queer Indigenous bodies are political orders” that “house knowledge, relationships, and responsibilities ... and generate a wealth of theory and critical analysis regarding settler colonialism that straight bodies cannot” (2017, p. 127). Choctaw scholar Jodi Byrd insists that, furthermore, queer Indigeneity calls “into critical relation straightness in all its iterations” (2020, p. 122).

Works of queer Indigenous creativity and resistance like those by Baylis and van Neerven refuse the strictures of colonial masculinity, leaning instead into the full complexities of Indigenous non-cis masculinities and anti-masculinities that are vibrant, curious, playful, powerful, living, and queer. “This could be what survival feels like,” writes van Neerven, “knowing there are others like us, that this will continue” (2023, p. 240).

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