

Lifelines: Reaching out in a pandemic

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Abstract

Please note that there is a discussion of suicidal ideation in this article. Take care with reading this if you are feeling vulnerable. If you need support, please contact a helpline (like Lifeline) or a healthcare professional.

I was finally getting my work on an even keel when the pandemic hit. Last year had been difficult across my work and personal life, serving as a reminder that these two realms are, for many Aboriginal people in the academy, intrinsically connected (Fredericks et al, 2019). I work at the University of the Sunshine Coast as an Associate Professor in Creative Industries, and at the beginning of the year I stepped down from a leadership position to temporarily move into a research and teaching role across 2020. This move - and my more than 10 years of working from home in a previous academic role leading a research centre - should have primed me for being able to hit the ground running in a work-from-home model. Instead, when the Government released the low-contact measures, I struggled. In this article I will frame the challenges, as well as the describe the 'lifelines' that helped me move from feeling trapped into a functional space.

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Connections

As a Wiradjuri academic with 29 years of experience across university teaching and research, I know that this privilege is due to decades of support, guidance and opportunities that have been a part of connecting with Community and colleagues. For First Nations scholars' networks and collaborations are crucial, they assist us in challenging the colonial project and reinstating our place as First Nations' Peoples with agency and enterprise (Trudgett, 2014). So it is unsurprising that our connectedness sustains our work across mainstream disciplines where the number of Aboriginal scholars are few, and where shared experiences and opportunities grow our capacity to work with, and for, our Communities (O'Sullivan, 2019a).

Beyond powerful national First Nations' networks, it was the informal relationships born from these connections, that aided the quick response required across the pandemic. I have written before about the work of Murri business owner and entrepreneur, Leesa Watego in building industry cohorts. She would argue that she doesn't do it alone, but I am singling her out here again as someone always willing to adjust and change and deal with the reality, not just the structures, of our experiences. When the pandemic hit, Leesa found ways to use social media and networks to create opportunities and highlight connections between people. She switched her service delivery to an online video platform and supported other business owners in doing this. She setup Facebook groups for businesses and artists, and tweeted the ways in which we could connect, find solutions, and explained access to government funding. She also took time with individuals and provided support to businesses. Building on the strong platform of Indigenous Business Month, a national event she co-convenes with Indigenous co-creators,

Michelle Evans and Mayrah Sonter (Evans, 2017) she answered questions for our mob, that were otherwise going unanswered.

In spite of seeing amazing work like Leesa's, and the willingness of national Indigenous scholars to support students and staff across universities, it took me weeks to push myself into service. The solitude and uncertainty led to feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome (Carlson, 2020) and the experience of being at a standstill. What made it worse, was knowing that I had the support of colleagues, and feeling like at this stage of my career and with all of my experience, I shouldn't need to rely on them, and I should be ready to support others.

A lifeline

It was an inquiry on social media that delivered the first lifeline to better manage my time and wellbeing. Professor Alex Wilson (Neyonawak Inniniwak from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation) was teaching Indigenous students in Canada via a Zoom class. Alex wanted to value-add to the student experience of online learning by inviting Indigenous scholars to engage from across the globe. In the wee hours of a Sunday morning, I woke up to a group of Indigenous students keen to hear, and talk, about the 470 museums I visited across a ten-year project – one that was coming to a close for me. They brought questions that reignited my excitement about my final work on a book around First Nations' engagement in museum spaces, a project I was finding hard to focus on. Engaging with First Nations' students on the other side of the world, hearing that the work was useful to them and listening to their ideas and feedback, renewed the sense of purpose that I had lost.

Being validated in this way was wonderful, but research is often solitary. What made it different in a pandemic? For me, it was a few things. I was in the last stages of skin cancer

treatment, so was feeling unwell and isolated. To compound this, a day before the Zoom call I had gotten sick with flu and had no way of knowing if it was COVID-19 as tests were only available if you had just travelled internationally or had contact with a confirmed case. What we knew at the time of COVID was that it was virulent, and people were dying. I also knew that due to few medical factors, I was in the highest risk group to have a bad outcome; I was worried about my mortality. I went into required solo isolation for 18 days missing basic human interactions like shopping, exercise, and visiting my elderly mother who lives with Alzheimer's. Crucially, I was struggling with guilt that I may have spread illness to Mum over the preceding week, when I had seen her daily, and that her need for contact was being affected by a decision I may have made to go out in the early stages. In addition, I could not visit two other members of my family who were very unwell and in hospital, and who required support. It was the perfect storm for feeling isolated, though I recall using an alternative, compound term that also ended in 'storm' to describe it at the time.

I describe this not only to provide a personal account that many readers will understand or share, but to provide a context for how crucial it was to have a lifeline from Alex at the beginning, and how I continued to benefit from colleagues during the pandemic lockdown. There is a complexity to an event like a pandemic, finding strategies to reset or recalibrate can, theoretically, counter the reality of sickness and disfunction. Mackie's challenge to *objective prescriptivity* suggests the impossibility of a shared ethic or a singular solution, framing that there is no central truth (Mackie, 1982, p.115), so that – for me – reading strategies that worked from academics suddenly writing more, or people doing much more work than before, I felt both inadequate and a sense of resistance, but I also felt charged up by the sense of loss and inadequacy. Sickness is not the equal opposite to wellness, and work is possible through this

process. Indigenous challenges to the colonial project are often predicated on challenging the status quo and finding a way around the usual strategy.

Challenges to the colonial project suggest that lived experiences and challenges can deliver solutions and ideas that would not come forth without this variation.

Work

The work I had planned before this started was transformed by the early shape of the pandemic. I had a list: a book, a research grant to write, several articles, some blogs, national meetings, three projects, the development of surveys, teaching into a course being delivered online for the first time, and the gathering of material that would help my non-Indigenous colleagues understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the creative industries. Did you have this kind of list? I think many of us did.

I imagined that I would tick these off my list, and push on every day with teaching, meeting, researching, and writing. When life got in the way through being sick and worried, I realised that this was harder than I anticipated. One of my colleagues had flagged this early on, reminding us that we may think we will have dedicated time and focus, but there could also be stress factors that we cannot anticipate. I was so used to being the ‘Super Aboriginal’ in my work, and getting stuff done, that when I found myself re-reading the same passage across an entire day, the one area in my life where I felt a sense of accomplishment, quickly became an area that I developed deep levels of imposter syndrome across (Carlson, 2020).

Like many Indigenous academics, I have built a career around this understanding - many of us live imposter syndrome on a daily basis - and these challenges. I see myself as a survivor, but

also as someone who persists in challenging the system and recognising my worth in work. Work has – across my life - become essential; and across this pandemic I realised that I have a job that has allowed me to work from home and be safe, while people across my industry were losing theirs or working in unsafe conditions. The industry that I teach and write into – the creative industries – was taking an unfathomable hit. I thought it was important as a part of my job to work across this area to support people who otherwise were struggling. Like Leesa, I thought it would be in providing materials that could be helpful for others. Curating online spaces that provided information about digital museums and providing information for people on gender; but also, the important information of sharing how to find work across the creative industries and assisting in a number of projects I am working on in the field of creative employment. Persisting in work felt like the least I could do. But with the best of intentions, a plan, support, and some crucial lifelines, I was still overwhelmed.

Life

I nearly killed myself, and an Indigenous colleague talked me out of it. While I am hesitant to write this into a public discourse, I firmly believe that if we do not read or talk about these experiences, we add to the isolation and sense of melancholy that many feel who go through this. I hope in the writing it, it doesn't make anyone feel hopeless. As I edit this some months later, I do not feel hopeless and it's because of the help and support I received and because of hearing many stories like this. I also attest that the lifelines that I write about here demonstrate how supported I was, and that show how many of us can locate support. Nevertheless, the feeling was crushing and directly connected to the frustration of isolation and feelings of hopelessness. But this experience was not only borne of the pandemic. All of us had complex lives before it hit, and while some of these issues were exacerbated by it, for me, some are underlying and exist regardless of it.

By way of background, my work focuses on identity and representation, with a specific theme that challenges ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Caswell, 2016). Symbolic annihilation, in particular in the identity presentation work I do across museums and in the fields of gendered performance, locates a place for the visible diversity of First Nations’ People. The work centres on the idea that we must be able to see experiences and representations similar to ours, and that this visibility provides a level of validation, understanding and challenges to the isolation of believing we are alone (O’Sullivan, 2019b). In early 2019 when I came out as transgender at the age of 53, I felt a sense of isolation. My work as a gender theorist, and my capacity to locate others with shared experiences helped me in coming to terms with the changes. A supportive workplace was also crucial, as was a level of family support, but these were also mitigated by a lack of understanding and the roles that we play in one another’s lives. It was the support, affirmation, and information I received from First Nations’ colleagues that reminded me that gender is a key part of the colonial project, and this proved to be the most life-altering (Driskill, 2004). Not long after announcing my gender to friends and colleagues, IndigenousX asked for an article that would help frame this for others, and I was aware at the time that in doing this, Luke Pearson, the founder of IndigenousX, was also supporting me in revealing this affirmation to the public and my community.

I am not glossing over the difficult statement I made a few paragraphs ago about attempting to end my life, but it is important to note that in spite of these networks and this knowledge about the importance of sharing our experiences, I was not sharing how I was feeling with anyone across these first few weeks of the pandemic. The guilt over the continuing work, the sickness, and the gender dysphoria that I was still coming to terms with had meant that isolation was made more difficult. Gender dysphoria is experienced by many transgender people, and I had come to realise – through this time of isolation – that I was incapable of escaping from it in my

household of one. Dysphoria, for trans people, can manifest – and it did for me – in a deep feeling of discontent with the body we inhabit (Iantaffi, 2020). While I – and many other trans people with social media profiles were dealing with a great deal of transphobia on social media, I felt that publicly revealing this dysphoria would make me open to a greater level of vulnerability. But avoiding vulnerability was, ultimately, my central mistake.

What changed was for me was when I did reveal this and other vulnerabilities. Colleagues – in particular my close Aboriginal colleagues – drew me out, as well as my very strong non-Indigenous discipline-cohort at work. I had the occasional post on Facebook or Twitter about feeling low, in spite of the risk of transphobic attacks, and of course the majority of people were kind. But in a public space I was concerned that it could have a negative impact on my students, family or colleagues who were going through so much themselves; I was never going to talk about how low I was really feeling. This, in turn, led me to understand why there are sometimes few signs, and why some people who choose to end their lives don't leave notes. I couldn't imagine wanting to burden people with what was going on in my mind, because in that moment I thought, why would I do that to people I care about?

Yindyamarra Winhanganha and Guwiiny – lifelines in language

Yindyamarra Winhanganha is a Wiradjuri phrase that translates into English as 'the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in (Knowles, 2020).' I live by those words. It was being reminded of this by the colleague, an Aboriginal scholar/collaborator/friend, that talked me out of it. They formed a crucial, and literal, lifeline. Language is important for a number of reasons. If I reflect that the language of English has been formed and enacted to exclude the nuances of my gender, in this way it has played a role in undermining my assuredness of finding a place in the world. It was Wiradjuri scholar,

Professor Sue Green, who reminded me that our shared Wiradjuri language has no gendered pronouns. Instead, it uses a single word for all genders: guwiiny. The invocation of this pronoun reminds that not only is language powerful, but that the inverse is true, and language has been a central tool of the colonial project, it erases (Driskill, 2004). I am constantly misgendered, because the colonial project's central ideal is to form others in their shape, in this case, male and female, never departing from the assigned gender you are born into except through the ultimate escape.

In the here and now; onto the future

I am not on the other side of this. Nor are we at the other side of the pandemic. Our feelings and strategies will change, intensify and they will transform our world(s). Aboriginal scholar and colleague, Bronwyn Carlson speaks of our persistence as Aboriginal Peoples, and that we carry this persistence into our work in the academy (Carlson, 2020). We carry resistance too, we endure in spite of the system, we should be prepared for the adjustments that COVID-19 has delivered, from changed family commitments to a very different university system, but we cannot let go of the enormous positive changes that have occurred as we have found our rightful place(s) in the academy (O'Sullivan, 2019b). We must remember that in addition to these changes, we continue to have a system that needs improvement, and one that will make choices that we need to interrogate. Carlson says that the essential requirement is trust in our own selves and our own choices as a community and as a people (Carlson, 2020). We can only get there by offering one another support and, when we need it, a lifeline.

I wish I could write that the only time I had a colleague talk me out of drastic measures was four days after my 54th birthday, but the last time it happened was today, May 7th, 2020¹. I

¹ I began this article on May 7th, 2020 and concluded the writing in late September.

contacted a work colleague this time. She is both a staunch ally and confidante who, on their behest, I contacted when I felt things could develop. It was their interaction with me that stopped the event. I mention this as a reminder that we can work towards transformation, but in that work, we can arrive back at the same point. Feeling and voicing this has served as the most recent reminder that not only do I need better strategies and help, and also that there is no weakness in this. Our feelings are not something to be managed to a conclusion, as much as to be understood and dealt with along the way.

I know that I cannot commit to make a better world, nor achieve Yindyamarra Winhanganha, if I am absent from it. My response was to write this, to locate the points at which I know I was buoyed and supported and to recognise that I have to continue to do the same for others. It was also to recognise that even as someone who has a great deal of privilege at this moment in my life, that isolation from Community still left me feeling vulnerable and without purpose. Obviously, I don't have answers, but I do know that it helps to celebrate the work of people like Leesa Watego and to see how their carriage and grace in the world changes things for others, and to aspire to that. Along with not worrying that I am doing less, this is an important part of the answer for me in moving forward. It is harder to support our students, colleagues and the community at large, if we are not owning, revealing, and dealing with difficult feelings, and working towards solutions. It is also essential to understand that after this is over, some of these same issues will remain, and we will face new issues as well as strategies that arise from the isolation and reshaping.

Fortunately, for First Nations' Peoples this has been the persistent response to the enduring colonial project. The world unchanged, is not the goal of anyone involved in anti-colonial, critical race work, nor in the identity work of challenging symbolic annihilation. If we can

understand why these changes occur, if we can hear the first-person experiences of those of us engaged in making these adjustments, then we will have a changed world, and hopefully a better one.

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