

'A Space to Vent': Cultivating Indigenous Queer Digital Communities Through Relations of Care and Support.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gender and sexuality diverse peoples are harnessing digital spaces to transcend territorially defined place-based communities of the past, and create new, informal, digital identity communities. These communities are composed of relatively homogenous subjectivities and are centred on shared identities, histories, experiences, practices and resistances.

Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews with Aboriginal Queer women who are content creators and the theory of the Cultural Interface, this article explores how participants agentially cultivate identity communities and kin through TikTok, Instagram and Spotify. Additionally, it exposes the significance of Indigenous Queer digital communities and chosen families to participants experiences of Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Through their digital cultures of care and kin-making participants reveal how Social and Emotional Wellbeing is relationally practiced online and how they harness media technologies to continue and augment existing Indigenous practices and Queer approaches to family that thrive and survive on reciprocity, responsibility and love. In doing so, participants demonstrate how they embody oppositional intimacies, kinship groups and Indigenous LGBTIQ+ identities which transgress and challenge settler norms of intimacy, family, identity, gender and sexuality.

Introduction

Identity communities are collective formations centred on specific categories of sociality, subjective markers and/or common interests, are defined by relations of choice and affiliation, and are roused through a sense that community members identify with one another (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Evans, 2013). These communities, as they emerge now through the affordances of digital landscapes, have a particular and enduring significance for people with marginalised identities, such as those from gender, racial and cultural groups outside the mainstream (Carlson & Frazer, 2021). They hold important capacities to enable socially transgressive relations, intimacies and identities to be embodied, validated and flourished (O'Sullivan, 2019). Additionally, they can provide relatively 'safe spaces' through the highly mobile mutual exchange of care, belonging, intimacy, pleasure, generosity and attachment which can facilitate and sustain everyday survival (Carlson & Dreher, 2018; Frazer et al., 2021; Roth, 2016).

Queer communities are a longstanding example of such identity-based communal formations (Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Queer identities are subjugated, regulated and excluded through law, discourse and violence (Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Consequentially, building safe community locations/spaces within which queer visibility is normative and 'therefore inherently less dangerous' has been a significant function and achievement of Queer communities (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Roth, 2016, p. 441). Today, existing offline patterns of interpersonal interaction and communities-building between Queer people are being transferred into digital social life (Roth, 2016). For Indigenous¹ peoples who are Queer, who can experience compounding forms of discrimination (i.e., queerphobia and racism) and who continue to have their bodies, genders and sexualities regulated in a continuum of racial and sexual violence (Monaghan, 2015; Picq, 2020; Wilson, 2015), the forging of identity communities could play a pivotal role in creating safe spaces to survive and thrive.

In consideration of the above postulation, this article explores the narratives of three Aboriginal sexuality diverse women who are content creators, who have agentially cultivated Indigenous Queer communities and chosen families through Instagram, Spotify and TikTok. Chosen families are Queer rearticulations of family and kinship, founded often on relations of care and support, and organised through ideologies of love, creation and choice (Chandra, 2022; Ritholtz & Buxton, 2021). Frequently, they are sought and developed in response to facing biological family and community rejection (Ritholtz & Buxton, 2021), and to navigate stigma whilst developing meaningful relations and lives that are positioned outside of convention (Chandra, 2022).

There exists a dearth of scholarly research on the (digital and non-digital) experiences of Aboriginal Queer women and Aboriginal women's sexuality in general in so-called Australia (Holland et al., 1993; O'Sullivan, 2017). As such, this article draws on local and international research which explores Aboriginal Queer and Indigenous Two-Spirited² women's experiences of identity and community. This literature affirms the importance of connection to and inclusivity in community, culture, family and kinship for positive identity development and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB). This helps to contextualise the digital activities and experiences of the current studies Aboriginal Queer women as they operate at the digital Cultural

1 Throughout this paper I use the term Indigenous to refer to the two distinct Indigenous groups in Australia: Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, though other terms such as mob and First Nations may be used by participants and these terms are used interchangeably.

2 Two-Spirit is an intertribal term used by some Indigenous peoples of Northern America and Canada to reconnect with tribal traditions related to sexuality and gender identity (Walters et al., 2006). The term *Two-Spirit* indicates the presence of both masculine and feminine spirit within one individual (Anguksuar La Fortune, 1997). Alex Wilson (1996), who is *Swampy Cree from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (Canada)* and a Two-Spirit woman, explains that the term Two-Spirit 'proclaims a sexuality deeply rooted in our own cultures. Two-spirit identity affirms the interrelatedness of all aspects of identity, including sexuality, gender, culture, community, and spirituality' (p. 303).

Interface. The Cultural Interface represents an intersectional site of interaction, contestation, negotiation, and resistance within and between Indigenous and Western knowledge traditions and systems that continue to shape the existence of colonised peoples (Nakata, 2007). Participants expose how they combine Indigenous Queer templates with technologies to build communities and kinships which enact and embody the possibilities of different kinds of intimacies and ethics of care that unsettle settler intimacy, family, sexuality and gender (TallBear, 2018).

Academic research has long overlooked cultures of care that are Indigenous, instead adopting, reiterating and intensifying a Eurocentric viewpoint which is built upon the destruction and erasure of other ways of knowing and caring for people and nature (L. T. Smith, 2012). There is an academic and social need for increased attention to Indigenous *and* Queer informal cultures of care, especially as they can afford necessary safety and strengthened wellbeing and empowerment for members in these separate and intersecting communities (Byron, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Further, formal care has been experienced as regulation and surveillance for many QTBIPOC³ (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2022). Informal interdependent Indigenous Queer caregiving practices through digital spaces can thus provide a culturally safe and supportive counter to this, as those involved can engage in social and community practices of intimacy that are not visible to colonisers and outsiders (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Wilson, 2015). Lastly, until quite recently the digital activities of Indigenous gender and sexuality diverse peoples in Australia had been overlooked, making this article a contribution to this burgeoning field (see for example Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Coe, 2022a, 2022b; Farrell, 2021b, 2021a; Sullivan et al., 2022).

Locating Myself

As a non-Indigenous, White, cis-gendered female researcher, I am conducting research on sensitive and complex topics across the *Indigenous communities* to which I am an outsider, and the *gender and sexuality diverse communities*. For many of my younger years, I shared intimate relationships across the spectrum of gender and sexualities. However, I have spent most of my recent past in heterosexual, cisgendered relationships. I had not thought to label or define my sexuality again until this research project. I do not have a resolved sexuality label but I would say that 'fluid' best represents my orientation.

Recognition of my outsider status perpetually raises questions over my capability and motivations to engage in this research. My positionality presents potential risks to the participants of this study, including (but not limited to) misrepresentation and/or exploitation of their knowledges and experiences and risk to participant data sovereignty (Kwaymullina, 2016; L. T.

3 Queer and Trans Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

Smith, 2012; Walter, 2016; Walter et al., 2021). Additionally, there is risk to the validity of this work in relation to the interpretation of findings because I am non-Indigenous (Kwaymullina, 2016). In acknowledging these risks and the harmful legacy of colonial research, which often dismissed and silenced the rich histories and voices of Indigenous peoples and cultures (see L. T. Smith, 2012), this project has been carried out in a way that is guided by and consistent with Indigenous research methods (see for example, Kovach, 2015; Sunseri, 2007). As will be further addressed in the *Methodology* section, all parts of the project are led by my responsibility to nurture and maintain healthy, respectful and collaborative relationships with participants, their knowledges and experiences (Kwaymullina, 2016; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This research is built on honest, ongoing dialogue between the research participants and me (Sunseri, 2007). It recognises and privileges their ways of knowing and ensures no harm was inflicted upon them during research activities (Sunseri, 2007). Respect and accountability to participants and their communities is at the forefront of this research.

Integral to my research partnerships and processes are my own self-dissections which shift and deepen with time as I listen with intent and respect to the expertise of Indigenous peoples. My settler positionality requires me to constantly acknowledge, examine, and be rigorously reflexive of my own power and privilege (Kwaymullina, 2016). It requires me to reflect deeply on the fact that this privilege and power is afforded to me by fact of being White and that it comes largely at the expense of the Indigenous peoples whose land I occupy (Sunseri, 2007). I continue to be engaged in reflexive practices that include ongoing critical reflection about my own core beliefs, fundamental judgements, biases and assumptions and the ways in which these have the potential to impact my research (Kwaymullina, 2016). I critically and perpetually interrogate my own personal, educational and spiritual motivations and intentions for engaging in Indigenous research (Kluttz et al., 2020). I constantly query and wrestle with the ways that I am shaped by colonial influences, which includes reflection on my complicity in colonisation and my position as a White researcher.

Crucially, this research has relied upon the counsel of Associate Professor Corrinne Sullivan, who is a Queer Wiradjuri cis woman and who organised the *What Matters* symposium from which this special issue and article derives. Sullivan brings an intimate, lived knowledge of, and extensive experience in, working with Indigenous peoples in research. Her own research focuses on the lives and experiences of gender and/or sexually diverse Indigenous peoples. Sullivan's counsel has been crucial in ensuring that all research processes are carried out in a culturally sensitive manner, with respect and accountability to participants and their communities at the forefront of all research decisions and practices. Additionally, this article forms part of a chapter in my doctoral research investigating the dual digital and non-digital realities of Indigenous gender and sexuality diverse peoples. Sullivan

is appointed in my supervisory panel. My own critical reflections, Sullivan's counsel and collegiality, and the appointment of the wider projects Queer Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG) are critical in attempting to ensure Indigenous priorities are realised and to interrogating and navigating my problematic settler subjectivity.

I hold deep belief in the possibilities of right and respectful cross-cultural research partnerships to bring about differential ways of knowing, understanding and doing, now and in the future (A. S. Smith et al., 2018). This motivates me to engage in this research and to continue the tentative path of working in solidarity with Indigenous (and) Queer peoples. Through my work (and life), solidarity is realised and empowered through establishing right and respectful research and social relationships with Indigenous peoples (Sunseri, 2007). It is also actioned by being rigorously responsible and responsive towards the Indigenous peoples and knowledges I engage with to ensure Indigenous priorities are realised (in research and non-research related settings) (Sunseri, 2007). As such, I join with those committed to embarking on a new path that is invested in critiquing and transforming social and research relations to build a more just, equitable, safe and prosperous future for all (see for example Brown & Strega, 2015). Further, the research presented here builds on my previous research and commitment. That being, my Honours dissertation, a discourse analysis of four Australian policy documents associated with addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 'mental health' and SEWB (see Coe, 2021). Additionally, I have worked on the *Dalarinji, Your Story*⁴ project to which this research is a component, and research pertaining to digital intimacies and Aboriginal sex workers (with Sullivan). *Dalarinji, Your Story* comprised a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and an ARG which also helped mitigate risk in my own project.

Research Background

The imposition of heteropatriarchal colonialism and the Christianisation of Indigenous cultures has been mobilised against Indigenous societies globally, in attempts to dissolve them (Monaghan, 2015; Morgensen, 2012; TallBear, 2018; Walters et al., 2006). In many places, such as Australia, colonising processes viciously removed Indigenous peoples from their homes, dispossessing them from their human and other-than-human relatives (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019) and relocating them in institutions, such as homophobic Christian missions (Bayliss, 2015). Through forced kidnapping onto missions that were externally managed by the state and church,

⁴ See https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ics/projects/Dalarinji_Your_Story

Indigenous peoples had their families, relationships, sexualities and marriages meticulously and religiously regulated, conditioned, intervened and colonised (Day, 2021; Monaghan, 2015).

Consequentially, Indigenous peoples have complex and sometimes fractured relationships with their own cultural identities (Henningham, 2021; Sullivan & Day, 2019). This can be exacerbated for Indigenous Queer peoples who can be condemned and shamed for their sexualities and genders by their communities and communities outsiders due to successful colonising processes (Holland et al., 1993; Walters et al., 2006). This is deeply problematic because connectivity to family, culture and community are considered essential components of Indigenous peoples identity and SEWB (Kerry, 2014; Soldatic et al., 2022). Further, experiences of non-acceptance in and/or disconnection from community can create identity self-doubt and anguish which makes upholding a strong sense of self and belonging difficult (Liddelow-Hunt et al., 2023). In consideration of these challenges, this section proceeds by documenting existing literature which explores the meanings that historical events and communal connections have in shaping the distinct (and at times similar) identity experiences of Indigenous Queer and Two-Spirited women.

Mandy Henningham is an Aboriginal Queer/Bi+⁵ woman and academic who stories her own Indigenous Queer journey through autoethnography (see Henningham, 2021). Henningham (2021) identifies as a hetero-passing and white-passing Indigenous queer woman. She applies borderland theory to explore the difficulties of living between worlds (the heteronormative and colonised) when having an Indigenous *and* Bi+ identity, as well as the challenges in gaining acceptance from multiple cultures. According to Anzaldú a (2009), the borderlands are the places in between where border knowledges and identities are constructed; they are 'unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition spaces lacking clear boundaries' (p. 243). For someone with an Indigenous and Queer identity, like Henningham, they can be tasked to navigate four or more borderland communities: Indigenous/non-Indigenous and mono-sexual/non-monosexual, demonstrating some of the complexities of identity multiplicity (Henningham, 2021).

Henningham's mother was adopted in infancy as a process of colonisation and assimilation; there exists little information on her family history (Henningham, 2021). As a result, Henningham grew up with shattered connections to culture, kinship and Country which she continues to seek and mourn today. She attends cultural classes to share her story with Indigenous peoples and to learn the cultural traditions and practices of the Country she was born and raised in, although it is not the Country of her ancestors

⁵ Bi+ refers to multi-gender attracted identities such as bisexual, pansexual and ambisexual (Henningham, 2021).

(Henningham, 2021). It is here that she experiences cultural connection, in a culturally safe space where she can share, learn and mourn (Henningham, 2021). Henningham (2021) is also 'involved and accepted in the Indigenous community at the University of Sydney' which helps her to feel supported, although she reports experiencing difficulties of cultural acceptance in other Indigenous spaces when there is not someone 'bringing you in' (p. 9).

Henningham (2021) also navigates compounding issues of recognition and inclusion in relation to her Bi+ sexuality which she states sits 'outside of the modern interpretation of sexuality which is understood as a monosexist binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality' (p. 9). Consequentially, Bi+ people can be rejected from biphobic queer spaces and excluded from heterosexual groups, in some cases contributing to internalised biphobia (Chard et al., 2015; Li et al., 2013). Henningham (2021) admits to internalising a dual-wielding oppression which she says is difficult for her to escape: 'I feel that I am not 'gay enough' for queer communities and feel too disconnected to be accepted into Indigenous Australian communities' (p. 10). This leaves her roaming multiplex borderlands (such as Indigenous/ White, heterosexual/ Queer), seeking acceptance and belonging but often feeling 'unseen and alone with no scripts or visual markers to signal my peers' (Henningham, 2021, p. 14). Despite finding some community connections through her work at University, Henningham (2021) says that her experiences of familial, community and Country disconnection, social exclusion and internalised biphobia (all of which result from colonialism) impact strongly on her SEWB as an Indigenous Queer woman. This is unsurprising given that the SEWB of Indigenous individuals, families and communities are shaped by intersecting connections to Country, culture, community, spirituality, body, mind, and emotions, and family and kinship (Gee et al., 2014; Spurway et al., 2020). When there is a disruption to one or more of these interrelated components, an entire person is affected (Calma et al., 2017).

Walters et al (2006) analyse the narratives of five American Indian Two-Spirit women, revealing how their identities are strengthened by a sense of interconnectedness with others. Walters et al (2006) assert that the increasing acceptance of Two-Spirit identity among Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada has facilitated national and international gatherings through which attendees have developed an 'intensely loyal bond' (Curve staff, 2020, n.p.). These gatherings serve to mobilise community and foster a safe space to explore and develop an empowered intersectional identity (Walters et al., 2006). Participants Maxine and Winona share how they have been forced to split their identities in the past to find belonging, kinship and/or protect themselves (i.e., due to racism in lesbian communities and queerphobia/ rejection from Native communities). Identity splitting is a process that can heighten feelings of estrangement in both Native and Two-Spirit communities (Walters, 1996). For Maxine and Winona, Two-Spirit gatherings enable a space for them to embody the plurality of their identities.

Maxine says, 'In general, the two-spirit gatherings every year are really helpful to me because it feels like that's the only time in the year, I get to be my whole self in one place ... to me it's healing. (as cited Walters et al., 2006, p. 134). Winona corroborates Maxine's comments:

'I don't feel like I have to divide myself up so much anymore because I went to a lot of [two-spirit] gatherings in the early years

... so I have a lot of two-spirit friends ... it was a space where you could be normal, a week out of the year' (as cited in Walters et al., 2006, p. 134).

The literature reviewed in this section makes evident that some Indigenous Queer and Two-Spirit women are challenged by having to live in multiple worlds and/or borderland spaces (Henningham, 2021; Holland et al., 1993; Walters et al., 2006). The difficulties of finding and empowering cultural, sexual, and personal identity in this multi-fold borderland reality are further complicated by the compounding forms of colonially produced discrimination one can be forced to endure (Curve staff, 2020; Henningham, 2021; Holland et al., 1993; Walters et al., 2006). As a result, some feel required to temporarily split their identities to 'cross the border'/assimilate into one world and disconnect from the other (Walters et al., 2006; Wilson, 1996), or they can find themselves on the borderlands, excluded and isolated from both (Henningham, 2021). As a strategy of strength, resistance and liberation, Indigenous Queer and Two-Spirit peoples are carving out relatively safe spaces for themselves where they can authentically embody and feel empowered in the multiplicities of their identities (Walters et al., 2006; Wilson, 1996). National and international Two-Spirit gatherings are an example of this. In consideration of forging identity-based secure communal spaces, this article explores how Indigenous Queer women are utilising technologies to cultivate safe and empowering relations and places of community and kin online.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger doctoral study that explores the lived digital and non-digital realities and SEWB experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gender and sexuality diverse peoples. SEWB is defined here as an interconnected, multifaced understanding of health which includes, but extends beyond, biomedical understandings of health that are individualistic and decontextualised (Gee et al., 2014). Incorporated within SEWB, are considerations of the 'impacts of stigma, racism and historical trauma, as well as important recognition of Indigenous strengths, sovereignty, communities, and cultures' (Coe, 2022b, p. 2; Gee et al., 2014; Spurway et al., 2020).

I conducted in-depth interviews with purposively identified Indigenous Queer content creators. Content creators were identified through trawling Instagram and TikTok and invited to participate through direct message on the Instagram platform or via email. Purposive selection was applied to ensure that those invited disseminate content specific to Indigeneity, gender and sexuality diversity and/or SEWB. Additionally, participants were selected for the and frequency of their digital engagements and/or their influence/following. Thus, each participant self-identifies publicly and proudly with their intersectional identities on their social media profile/s and are frequently socially and politically active in digital spaces. Decisions around privacy were made with participant autonomy, agency and choice as a priority (Kwaymullina, 2016; Sunseri, 2007). Participants were given the option of anonymity if they wished to protect their privacy or could elect to be identified through their online handle.

The narratives of three participants, drawn from semi-structured, in-depth 'elicitation interviews' (Grant, 2019) are included in this article: Aiesha May (she/her) (personal Instagram handle: @aisha_may) who is Biripi Aboriginal and Tanzanian African who self-identifies as bisexual/fluid and fat; Matika Little (she/her) (Instagram handles: personal @matika_little, podcast @comingoutblak; Spotify podcast: *Coming out, Blak*) who is a proud lesbian/Queer Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi woman; the third participant is a pansexual/bisexual cis woman (she/her) who chose to remain anonymous. The pseudonym *Q for Queer* was self-selected by this participant to protect her identity. The participant will be referred to throughout this article as Q. Q's given names, social media handles and ancestral home are all concealed to protect her. A letter of informed consent was sent during recruitment processes to all participants. The consent letter was verbally restated and agreed at the start of interviews.

Elicitation interviews involve showing participants pre-existing 'documents' or requiring them to bring/create 'documents' of their own which act as a stimulus to the discussion (Edmondson et al., 2018; Grant, 2019). Ahead of the interviews, participants self-selected up to ten individually created and posted documents from their own digital feeds which they then used to lead the discussion while we explored their interpretation of their posts. Through this, and through using digital documents that participants have created themselves, they were able to define their own reality and produce their own data, albeit shaped by the project brief and interview guide (Walter et al., 2021). This method made the interpretive process increasingly equal and ensured that participants could exercise their own expertise and agency (Barton, 2015; Pain, 2012), and have a pro-active role in the research processes (Edmondson et al., 2018).

Through elicitation techniques the expertise and agency of participants is valued and privileged (Grant, 2019). Elicitation techniques enable Indigenous data sovereignty to a greater degree than standard qualitative techniques because they encourage participants to exercise their own control in data analysis and narration (Pain, 2012; Walter, 2016; Walter et al., 2021). Further, they increase the likelihood of responses being grounded in own experiences and knowledges, recognise and privilege participants experiences as a valid basis of knowledge and can reduce power imbalances between researcher and participant making research processes more collaborative (Barton, 2015; Grant, 2019; Sunseri, 2007). Thus, these methodological decisions were made to encourage a level of participant agency and control in research processes, to privilege the Standpoints and experiences of participants and to reduce my dominant position as interviewer (Barton, 2015; Grant, 2019). Additionally, they were selected to ensure participation was meaningful and that the interpretation of meaning of participants' documents was accurate (Barton, 2015; Grant, 2019).

The duration of interviews ranged from 1 hour 20 minutes (Matika) to 3 hours 26 minutes (Q). All interviews took place via the online meeting platform *Zoom* which was chosen by participants, apart from Matika's interview which she selected to do via telephone. Interviews were video and audio recorded. Audio files (only) were sent to an online transcription service where they were processed by human transcriptionists. Transcripts were returned to participants digitally for review prior to analysis.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a 'conventional content analysis' method as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Content analysis as a research technique is used to analyse the content, contextual meaning and inferred message/s of text data (Zhao, 2014). Patterns and themes are systematically identified and coded during analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Conventional content analysis is a distinct 'inductive' approach wherein researchers derive categories and/or themes inductively throughout data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This requires researchers to immerse themselves in the data to enable a richer understanding to develop and insights to emerge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The advantage of the conventional approach is that knowledge generated from content analysis is based on the unique communications and perspectives of participants without the imposition of preconceived and potentially presumptuous researcher categorisations (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thus, this approach (coupled with elicitation interviews) allowed me to represent, centre and privilege the knowledges and perspectives of participants accurately and respectfully in analysis and presentation of findings because participants played an agentic role in selecting, narrating/analysing and producing their own data. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that I had a role in shaping the data which I have attempted to circumvent with ongoing dedication to self-reflexivity and commitment to honouring communications from transcripts.

The scrutiny of participants was sought at every stage of the research project (including when preparing conference presentations and publications), giving them multiple opportunities to revise their stories, give and retract their consent or remove it completely, and to disagree or agree with my framing of their lived realities, knowledge experiences and Standpoints. This reciprocity upheld my relational accountability to participants, and ensured they had ownership of their own stories despite me being the conduit through which the telling takes place (Kwaymullina, 2016; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Nothing has been included in this article that was not clearly consented to and agreed upon by each individual participant. Despite this, I can never be certain that misrepresentation has not occurred to some degree due to my positionality. Individual transcripts were thematically coded through a qualitative coding process using the software program NVivo. Each participant had a separate code book so that their individual content and distinct lived realities could be recognised and encapsulated accurately before the findings from all participants were triangulated into one primary codebook, and made sense of, and conceptualised through, Nakata's theory of the 'Cultural Interface' (1997). The Cultural Interface is theorised as the domain where the shifting trajectories of two different cultures, histories, practices, and ideologies intersect, establishing conditions that influence how Indigenous peoples participate within and make sense of society (Nakata, 2007). The imperative for Nakata, is to recognise the complexity of the knowledge Interface, especially when attempting to understand and analyse the everyday of contemporary Indigenous life. This includes acknowledgement that Indigenous peoples have embodied, complicated histories of refusing and ignoring colonial demands, observing colonial impacts, appropriating western understandings for Indigenous purposes and interests, and in some instances, conforming to colonial demands (Nakata et al., 2012). Nakata's understanding of increasingly engaged histories realises Indigenous agency, and both the continuity and discontinuity with former selves and social meanings (Nakata et al., 2012).

The Cultural Interface is an appropriate framework because it points to the complexity of competing trajectories and systems which can shape the existence of Indigenous Queer peoples within terrains of knowing and being (Farrell, 2017), while enabling acknowledgement and understanding of how Indigenous Queer lived realities are conditioned by the complex relations that exist at the Interface. Importantly too, this methodological approach was chosen because I am cognisant of my own positionality and acknowledge and respect the importance of valuing Indigenous research paradigms and knowledges. Eurocentric research has been part of a colonialist agenda done towards Indigenous peoples without their consent (Nakata, 2007; Sunseri, 2007). Western social researchers, 'while achieving the status of authoritative voices of research about Indigenous peoples', have disrespectfully misrepresented Indigenous peoples, knowledges and cultures (Sunseri, 2007, p. 94). They have also disregarded established Indigenous ethical protocols

(L. T. Smith, 2012). In acknowledging the destructive legacy of extractive Western research, this project remained committed to grounding all processes within Indigenous research paradigms and/or processes (Kovach, 2015; Kwaymullina, 2016; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). In doing so, this research project and researcher humbly joins with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous social researchers who are invested in interrogating, critiquing and transforming research methods, relationships and social relationships with one another (Brown & Strega, 2015; L. T. Smith, 2012; Sunseri, 2007).

Prior to submission, this article was reviewed by the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council's Human Research Ethics Committee who approved the project on 21 September 2021 (Ref. 1825/21), meaning that both the article and broader project have received ethics approval. All quotes used were verified and approved for publication by participants in acknowledgement of their ownership and control of their own stories.

Findings

Indigenous Queer Digital Communities

Matika focuses her digital immersions around nurturing safe, encouraging and empathetic spaces of community and connection for Indigenous Queer peoples online. Matika forms normative spaces of Indigenous Queer visibility, relations and empowerment through her advocacy in the podcast series *Coming Out, Black*, 'a podcast dedicated to supporting First Nations mob in the LGBTQ+ community', as well as through her Instagram profiles. Matika underscores her intersecting motivations by drawing on the critical importance of close-knit Indigenous community and kinship relationships, and the cruciality of chosen kin for Queer peoples. Matika says,

'The element of community is such an important thing for a First Nations persons in Australia because community and family is such a core part of our culture and how we interact with the world and where our values come from. So, by extension of that, within the Queer community is this element of chosen family

that is so important to so many people. And I know it is a huge part of so many people's mental stability and mental health of having that chosen family.

So, when you are First Nations and Queer it only doubles up about the importance of having people around you who support and love you. Both through your cultural [Indigenous] family and your chosen family. So, when I am sharing things [on Instagram] and on the podcast, I always come from a viewpoint of trying to create community and helping others to not feel alone and helping them feel empowered'.

Matika foregrounds the sprawling Queer First Nations community she has tactfully established by detailing an array of listener feedback she has received in response to *Coming Out, Blak*. The feedback Matika shares highlights the deeply supportive impact the podcast series has had on numerous listeners. Additionally, it reveals the importance of her digital work for producing a sense of Indigenous Queer community and kin-like relations of support and belongingness. Matika communicates,

'There have been so many messages of people who, who have reached out to us and said, *I really connected with what you are saying and thank you so much for making this podcast*. There was a time, these two non-Indigenous women who were fostering – who were lesbian partners, and who were fostering two young Indigenous girls, messaged us and they were like, *We love your podcast. We actually foster two little girls, and we were wondering if it might be okay if we asked you some questions about how we can make them really proud of who they are, and we are trying to do a really good job*. And it was really awesome to have that conversation with them.

We've had conversations with Queer Indigenous mob who have messaged us and said, *I'm having a baby and my dad is not being supportive of me and it's really hard but listening to the podcast makes me feel like I have a community*'.

Aiesha shares that she carefully curates a space of relative self-safety and empowerment on Instagram through the content creators and accounts she selects to expose herself to and engage with. In sharing her reasoning behind her meticulous curation of her Instagram feed, Aiesha relays the critical role of social media affordances in facilitating her connection with people who she identifies with, such as fat, Black, Queer women. Additionally, she reveals how her digital connections to like-identifying individuals have affirmed and emboldened her intersectional identity (Farrell, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2019). Aiesha explains,

'I spent a lot of time over the last few years curating my online space to be reflective of who I am and a safe space for me to express myself and to also learn to see other people, you know? Particularly fat Queer people as well. Seeing people being themselves, and be happy, and be proud, and be vulnerable. I think that really gave me the push to be comfortable ... I went, *fuck it, you know? I'm here. I'm Queer. I'm proud of it*'!

Aiesha's and Matika's individual comments reveal how they are involved in the purposeful production of public and personal digital identity communities, assembled for the purposes of Indigenous Queer kin-making, visibility, identity work and interdependent belonging, intimacy,

empowerment, safety and joy. Matika's narrations demonstrate that these communities hold the possibility to foster chosen family relations that are built upon shared non-dominant identities and mutual exchanges of support, care and love. As Matika suggests, Indigenous Queer digital chosen families are grounded in Queer approaches to kinship (Ritholtz & Buxton, 2021) *and* in traditions of Indigenous relational practices, making them and the belonging and attachment they foster, multi-layered and unique (see Dudgeon & Bray, 2019; Tynan, 2021). Indigenous relationality is premised on a truth that all things exist in an intricate web of relatedness and connection, which envelopes all human and more-than-human (animal, plant, spirit) kin (Tynan, 2021). Relationality as a practice is based on interdependent care-giving responsibilities and obligations to kin and Country (Tynan, 2021, p. 601). Thus, these Indigenous Queer digital identity communities and/or families are underpinned by important relational factors which are tied intimately to one's Indigeneity and cultural care-giving obligations.

The existence of these digital intimate and sprawling communities and families holds the potential to trouble the dominant hierarchies of heteropatriarchal colonial social and family life. This is because they make visible socially transgressive identities, intimacies and relations such as those that are Indigenous *and* Queer, that have long been maligned, policed, excluded and dissolved by subjugating settler colonial mechanisms (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; TallBear, 2018). For instance, Indigenous peoples have had their relationships, sexualities, families and marriages meticulously controlled, regulated and intervened upon under the auspices of 'protectionism', which was enshrined into legislation through numerous state-based policies (Day, 2021; Liddel-Hunt et al., 2023). This was key to larger efforts to eliminate Indigenous peoples by forcibly amalgamating Indigenous racial, sexual and gender difference into Whiteness and White settler heteropatriarchy (Morgensen, 2012; TallBear, 2018). Indigenous Queer digital identity communities are a resistance to this attempted erasure and are a strategy of strength and liberation employed as part of the development of empowered identities and communities (Wilson, 1996). As such, they provide a space where Indigenous Queer identities can be emboldened, as well as a place to achieve presence and belonging in community, all of which are essential to positive SEWB (Gee et al., 2014; Spurway et al., 2020).

'A Space to Vent'

Speaking about the significance of mutual support giving online, Q shares how she experiences relief and affirmation from the TikTok comment section when it acts as a debriefing tool for Indigenous Queer content creators. For Q, 'debriefing' refers to exchanging emotional affinities in private group chats in response to violence being enacted by discriminatory users at the digital Cultural Interface. Specifically, Q discusses how instances of gaslighting are collectively debriefed, often corroborating and validating the legitimate

emotional responses of the victims. Gaslighting refers to an abusive power tactic enacted to mentally manipulate someone through the creation of an environment of distortion wherein victims are made to seem or feel 'crazy' (Sweet, 2019). Through a sociological lens, gaslighting is understood as being rooted in social inequalities, especially of gender and sexuality (Sweet, 2019). Sweet (2019) explains,

'The grooves of social inequality and cultural stereotyping provide footing for gaslighting strategies. Specifically, gaslighting is gendered due to the association of femininity with irrationality, which makes women [and particularly women on the margins] more vulnerable to this form of abuse' (p. 857).

Q's following commentary on negative TikTok encounters, such as being exposed to cultural appropriation, supports sociological conceptualisations of gaslighting that consider the social characteristics that give it its power (Sweet, 2019). Q begins this dialogue by describing a TikTok video whereby a White female content creator was, '...basically, trying to culturally appropriate the didgeridoo [by playing the instrument in a TikTok video to gain clientele] and claim that it was a Swiss instrument, and that she used it for sound healing'. Q says that when this content creator was 'called out' by Indigenous peoples she 'called us sexist and archaic' in response.

Q describes being 'very upset with this person', particularly because 'she was not receptive to being told that she was incorrect. She was not open to being told that what she did was culturally inappropriate'. In retort, Q made a reaction TikTok. Q deviously relays that the response video

'...facetiously encouraged her to do another thing that we are told not to do as Indigenous people, which is whistle at night. I got told that as a five-year-old that if you whistle at night that the bogey man, or the Yowie, or something's going to come get you'.

Q expresses that authoring and publishing the TikTok provided her with some emotional relief, but that mostly, this was effectuated in the comments section through Indigenous contributors who shared their affinitive emotional reactions to the incident. Q elucidates:

'I think it [relief] more happens when like, people will then comment who are also understanding of the situation. Because then it becomes more like a debrief, that all of us are now in my comments section going, *That was really weird, and I hated that. And did everybody else feel the same way?* And everybody goes, *Yeah. Gross. What the hell was that about?* And then, you know, we can all start to move on because we've all acknowledged each other's feelings about it are valid.

'Cos I think a big thing that I've struggled with, and a lot of – because a lot of the other Aboriginal creators I follow are young girls, or like, young women. So, they get slapped with the *Angry Black Woman* label a lot of the time where it's like, *Oh I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to have emotions because now I am the 'Angry Black Woman' who is to not be listened to because she's being too dramatic*, or something like that.

And there have been like, way worse instances that other creators have gone through. And so, they need to have a space to vent and so, whether that's like, a 'close friends' [only] story on Instagram or you can make videos on TikTok to only your friends.

Public and private debriefing tactics between Indigenous content creators are a harm reduction technique and connection of care, compassion, safety, and support elicited through the acknowledgement of shared Indigenous experiences and feelings (Frazer et al., 2021). These interdependent demonstrations of emotional solidarity illustrate ways that Indigenous peoples respond collectively to colonial encounters at the digital Cultural Interface in efforts to hold each other in spaces of relative safety and support. This is one way that Indigenous Queer content creators harness technologies to retain and reconstitute cultural practices of relationality to one-another online.

Q raises the experience of Indigenous women who are content creators being gaslighted through the *Angry Black Women* trope (Sweet, 2019). This predominantly occurs when they are speaking back to injustices by publishing their perspectives and emotions online (Jones & Norwood, 2017; L. T. Smith, 2012). The so-called Angry Black Women stereotypes Black women as unreasonable, aggressive, animalistic, morally deficient and more (Jones & Norwood, 2017). It is weaponised against Black women to disempower, denigrate, regulate, discipline, suppress and silence their bodies and minds (Jones & Norwood, 2017). This has the potential to disrupt SEWB because freedom from abuse is considered a most fundamental determinant and human right (Gee et al., 2014). Black women are especially 'slapped with'

this trope when they are perceived to be acting against the colonial feminine heteropatriarchal form. This 'form' expects women to be polite, accommodating, obedient, modest, tender, nurturing and so on. The Angry Black Women stereotype is weaponised against Black women when they are viewed to be acting 'true to form' as a person and women of colour (Jones & Norwood, 2017).

The intentionally private practices of relationality Indigenous women enact towards one-another in response to aggressive digital encounters that are premised on gendered and racialised stereotypes (Jones & Norwood, 2017)

work against and 'outside' of settler power relations (Carlson & Dreher, 2018). Private debriefing is a way for Indigenous women to extend support, empathy and compassion to one-another without the imposition of gaslighting perpetrators who wish to erode their realities (Sweet, 2019). Non-public venting through Indigenous digital communities also provides a space for members to emotionally react, assess and respond. Here, they can express themselves in safe spaces. These intimate networks of community and chosen kin are crucially validating, affirming and comforting which, as Q communicates, can play a vital role in protecting and supporting each other's SEWB online. Further, Q's narrations demonstrate how sexuality is not always the most important factor in creating digital families of choosing for Indigenous Queer peoples (Chandra, 2022). For Q, and the Indigenous women she digitally kins with, shared Indigenous experiences (good or bad), connected emotional affinities and cultural care-giving obligations tie them together in ways that sometimes go beyond sexual orientations and/or gender diversities. Thus, for the Indigenous Queer women in this study, their Indigeneity can be just as important as their sexuality (and perhaps more or less at times) when creating families of choice online.

Conclusion

Matika's *Coming out, Blak* podcast series and related Instagram; Aiesha's curated 'fat, Black and Queer' Instagram network; Q's Indigenous Queer TikTok 'debriefing' groups, each function as identity communities which cater to their marginalised and disenfranchised Indigenous Queer identities in larger dominant heteropatriarchal settler society. This catering is achieved through the intentional building of digital communities that allow members to cultivate non-dominant Indigenous Queer identities, furnish belonging, ideological affiliation, and extended kinships, as well as seek and receive emotional validation and support in relatively 'safe spaces'. These digital communities are thus formed, in part, by their tensions with larger conventional norms and dominant ideologies which have created distinct hierarchies, rules, boundaries, and exclusions around certain identities, intimacies, cultures (including sexual cultures), relationships, ethics of care and more (TallBear, 2018).

These distinct Indigenous Queer digital kin-like communities raise an important challenge to heteropatriarchal settler colonialism because they enable a diverse array of public and private transgressive intimacies and identities to form and flourish, along with new kinds of kinship groups and families. In doing so, they contribute to building increasingly Indigenous *and* Queer public intimate worlds, built upon variant comradeships, identities, intimacies, families, and communities, which are underpinned by practices of cultural relationality and Indigenous Queer kin-making.

For Indigenous Queer individuals who often navigate the borderlands of a colonised world that was imposed upon them and a heteropatriarchal society created so that they 'do not fit' (Henningham, 2021), identity communities and kin-making cultures can foster inclusivity and SEWB. Additionally, they can assist members to navigate the complexities of everyday life at the dual digital and non-digital Cultural Interface. SEWB can be restored and/or strengthened through these communities because they provide an arena to be exposed to and connect with like-identifying individuals. Connection to community, family, kin and culture, whether agentically constructed/chosen or not, are integral components of SEWB (Gee et al., 2014). As participants expose, these connections of cultural and familial belongingness can assist to affirm, strengthen and embolden intersectional subject formations (O'Sullivan, 2019; Walters et al., 2006). Further, participants express feeling validated in their existence and emotions when seeing and/or engaging with other people who share complex identity formations and experiences. As well, digital identity communities are sites of support, pride, care, compassion and safety for Indigenous Queer peoples. Again, these aspects of wellbeing that are often rooted in interpersonal interactions and connection are central to positive experiences of SEWB (Spurway et al., 2020). Therefore, Indigenous Queer communities and the expressions of care and safety therein are highly significant, important and valuable in ensuring the individual and collective SEWB, livelihood and future thriving of Indigenous Queer peoples.



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