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Queering Ideas of Indigeneity: Response in Repose: Challenging, Engaging and Ignoring Centralising Ontologies, Responsibilities, Deflections and Erasures

Sandy O'Sullivan
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

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Abstract

This presentation and accompanying soundtext video work ponders the responsibility of Aboriginal queers to find or argue our own place within an external understanding of Indigeneity. If we have this responsibility, then what corresponding responsibility does ours or the broader community have in understanding who we are? And who are we? Do we face the same homogenisation of our experiences that we encounter in the pan-indigenising of our communities? Or can we act as individuals and cohorts to demonstrate diversity and flag difference as a robust act of sovereignty? Must we blend - and yet make visible and discrete - each aspect of our multifarious identities in order for us to be comprehended? Both the paper and soundtext video work further worry these expectations, and they do so in repose, from a comfortable, centralising ontology and reflection assisted by the application of a framework that requires understanding to be accomplished by those who find us challenging.

Queering Ideas of Indigeneity: Response in Repose: Challenging, Engaging and Ignoring Centralising Ontologies, Responsibilities, Deflections and Erasures

Sandy O’Sullivan

Cultured Queer/Queering Culture: Indigenous Perspectives on Queerness was held at the home of the Forum for Indigenous Research Excellence (FIRE): Wollongong University. The University is located in a vibrant community that prides itself on being both a part of, and separate to, the megalopolis of the Sydney corridor. Where better to explore the outliers of culture than to disrupt the centralizing ontology of authority? Wollongong has always had a voice in the space of marginalization (Barnes et al 2006). And a further disruption—necessary, because this was being held in a major university setting—all participants were First Nations’ people, the MC was a well-respected Aboriginal (Kullilli) radio presenter, Daniel Browning, and we were welcomed to Dharawal Country, by local Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Gerald Brown (Uncle G). This disruption of the centred focus allowed us to rest, reflect and proceed to engage in the discussion.

Repose forms an act of rest and stillness that remains unavailable to many First Nations’ peoples. Our communities are tired of constantly resisting, redressing, and rearranging ourselves into the colonial structures made to house us (Kovach 2009, Kealohapau’ole Hewett-Fraser 2008). It is the space that centralising ontologies inhabit, and their capacity to promote and inculcate ideas as fact (Bourdieu 1988). Gumilaroi theorist Bob Morgan describes the position of Indigenous academics operating within a ‘guest paradigm’, where we are welcomed until we demonstrate dissent and difference (McConville 2002). The resulting unease reminds that our acts are always subject to surveillance, and that we must remain in a space of heightened awareness. The resulting self-regulation and accord, both required and resisted by Indigenous peoples across the academy is exhausting (Hart 2003, Fredericks 2009). This tension is further compounded by intra-cultural as well as externally imposed regulation and expectations around gender, sexuality and self-presentation tropes that result from narrowed views of colonised communities. This is now being challenged in emerging First Nations’ scholarship that both interrogates and resists these centralising ontologies (Clark 2015).

Important as it is to fight this homogenizing of our bodies and our peoples, providing spaces where we come together to discuss how we seed and foster the discussions to be more inclusive, are at the heart of effecting meaningful change across the academy. At the *Cultured Queer/Queering Culture Symposium*, through the welcoming to Country, the voices of invested national and international queer First Nations’ scholars and with an audience poised to engage diversity and dissent, the crucial act of resistance gives way to repose. By inscribing centrality in our position, while always requiring description and resistance, the rhetoric becomes respectful, inclusive and engaged, and the stage is set for genuine rhetoric around matters at hand.

Museums: Expectations of Representation and Engagement

In 2010 I was funded by the Australian Research Council for a multi-year, multi-museum review to consider the capacity of nationally-significant museums to

represent and engage First Nations and First peoples. The project focused on the three meta-nation communities of Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. It sought to ask a central question of what worked across these national museums. With a wide scope—in the end 450 museums were included in the study—there was a prevailing risk of pan-Indigenising peoples, or of forgetting the nuances of Communities and their distinct characteristics and diversity. Presenting at *Cultured Queer/Queering Culture* has allowed me to review the material for some instances where diversity in gender and sexuality was managed, not considered or confusingly ignored.

Museums, like universities, are spaces where resistance is necessary, occasionally welcomed, but by definition, contained. Like the university, the modern national museum is shaped by a dominant paradigm that presumes a license to explore, interrogate and reveal, with neither equipped for self-reflection on the impact of these interrogations (O’Sullivan 2013, Lonetree 2012). Across the social history museum space, the disruptions of these dominant forces, are often only managed where museums are community controlled, or where there is significant input from communities (Grieves 2013, Lonetree 2012, Bunten 2011), where they can be powerful agents to support better understandings of our individual and collective diversity as Indigenous peoples. Audre Lorde posited that, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde 2003), so when our communities have license to shape and hone our own tools, and in the context of museums author our own referents, we still have some work to do to regain significant power over the refinements of our representation. As a colonial structure of Enlightenment (Bennett 1995) the museum then undergoes a deconstruction that can reveal the real and nuanced Indigenous community, culture and body, with a level of authorization that neither requires nor welcomes broad stereotype. For museums located in our Communities and for those in the broader population that foster enduring relationships with First Nations’ peoples, the data from the museum review reveals an imperative to shape the ways in which we are described, leveraging our own experiences and curating our own stories, and showing our own diverse representation.

To be Purposefully Divisive: Why Show Diversity?

A non-Indigenous curator at a major museum asked me if I believed that Indigenous peoples would still be around in 100 years time. When I answered that I was sure we would, but I wasn’t so sure about museums, she looked horrified. I should note that she looked substantially more horrified than when she suggested that we may all die out. I had talked to her about the importance of representing diversity within the presentation of separate Indigenous communities, and she argued back that people wanted to see difference, not similarity, and that the concept of diversity would be foreign to them.

While this was an ineloquent and difficult exchange—and uncommon in my experience of curators, who generally wanted to engage and consider issues of diversity—it highlighted how some curators find difficulty in presenting complex ideas of representation. At several museums curators expressed concern that gender fluidity would be a difficult concept and may not be all-ages appropriate, in other instances they were concerned that to promote this would be to highlight difference, rather than showing the main tenets of culture. It is difficult to read this as anything other than a desire to present a reductive view of a cultural group. Further, the concept

that gender, gender fluidity or the multitude of sexualities present across cultures, would be confronting or difficult when discussing an individual cultural group, is fascinating since these factors are so central to the human experience.

Those who refuse to engage our diversity to tell a more complete story of who we are, and who deem it impossible to display, should look to Aboriginal-led spaces like Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum for instruction on how to do this well. There are many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and even straight First Nations' peoples who give voice to the oral histories section of the exhibition. They talk about the great protector, Bunjil, they talk about their lives and experiences, they even sometimes talk about their gender and sexuality, and rather than central, it is integrated (Grieves 2013).

For museums that consider our diverse genders and sexuality places us centrally as failing to demonstrate difference, and therefore unsuitable exhibits, they should consider why they are attempting to present their own framed container of identity. When Congolese Mbuti man, Ota Benga was exhibited at the Bronx Zoo via the American Museum of Natural History in the early 1900s, there was already dissent about the shocking idea that a person could be observed without engagement, and as an othered, representation of difference (Blume 1999, Bunten 2011). That in the twenty-first century we are still arguing for diversity and a desire not to perform our cultures in a reductive, palatable way remains a struggle in our representation (Sleeper-Smith 2009). As gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersex and queer First Nations' peoples, we have a right to representation that we engage and desire, and others have a responsibility to show this as a part of the richness of our Cultures. And if our own people are locking our stories out of representation, it is reasonable to ask if they are reflecting their own fantasies of our past or present Cultures, boundary-keeping by performing a role of native as a palatable, knowable object.

Representation and Responsibilities

This discussion ponders the responsibility of First Nations' queers to find or argue for our own place within an externally contained understanding of Indigeneity and of our specific communities. If we take on any aspect of this responsibility, then what corresponding responsibility do ours or the broader community have in incorporating us respectfully? And when we are included, do we face the same homogenisation of our experience that we encounter in the pan-indigenising of our communities, or can we act as individuals and self-defined cohorts to demonstrate diversity and flag difference as a robust act of sovereignty? Can we blend—and yet make visible and discrete—each aspect of our multifarious identities in order for us to be comprehended?

While we may not be able to respond to this from the comfortable, centralizing ontology in repose, we should continue to be the authors of this referent. If a community or community member is overseeing representation in these public spaces, we have a right to demand engagement and for our stories to be a part of the discussion about how we are perceived as diverse peoples. It is in this way that we break open the container of representation and reveal our robust lives, and of peoples who will 'still be around in 100 years', because of our diversity, agency and complexity.

About the author: Sandy is a Wiradjuri woman, a Senior Indigenous Researcher and an enduring Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow. She is currently Director of the Centre for Indigenous Research Collaboration (CIRC) at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory of Australia. Sandy holds a PhD in Fine Art and Performance, in which she focused on the intersections of sexuality, gender and Indigeneity. Her research work is often arts-based and focuses on identity and representation, she is currently completing an Australian Research Council-funded fellowship examining First Peoples representations in museums around the world. Sandy is a practicing performance artist, and is working on a cycle of soundtext works on cultural boundaries, both physical and imagined.

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For many years I have debated and concurred with Associate Professor Bronwyn Carlson across issues of Indigenous identity formations. These discussions have been in the context of our individual research work and within her internationally-focused Forum for Indigenous Research Excellence (FIRE), developed and fostered to encourage and engage these polemics. Bronwyn's work has been passionate, necessary—her scholarship on social networking and community formation is ground-breaking and eminently citable—and she has created a safe space in which national discussions around identity/ies can grow exponentially. Her work goes beyond descriptors of common experiences of identity, and into the individual journeys that form our cultural complexity.

It was through this lens of complex identity and support of marginalized voices that Bronwyn's engagement in identity constructions took a surprising turn when she became the queer-ally architect of the first Aboriginal-led symposium and workshop on queered Indigenous identities. It is surprising because, anecdotally, I know of many queer Aboriginal academics exploring identity production; it was the focus of my own PhD in Art, ten years ago. Yet, it took a straight Aboriginal queer-ally concerned about this entanglement of representation to provide a space of safe and diverse conformation. Bronwyn, was—as is so often the case for us in the academy – inspired by a passionate PhD candidate engaged in her program, Andrew Farrell. Andrew's work on the confluence of Aboriginality, gender, sexuality, performance and all things trans, led the direction the conference would take. And, as with all exemplary research leaders, Bronwyn made it happen.

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