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Can You See Me? Queer Margins in Aboriginal Communities

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Abstract

The Queer Indigenous body is a site of contention between worlds. When Queer embodiment and Indigenous identity collide the constituent ideological frameworks of each signifier are called into question. This axis has yet to be named and critically engaged beyond being characteristically 'queer' and 'indigenous'. Queer Aboriginal identities are yet to be, in detail, extrapolated for their conforming or irreconcilable qualities. I will discuss the ways in which the Australian Queer Indigenous absence in critical paradigms are due to abject marginalisation- as a product of unmarked performances of identity rendered invisible, powerless, contradictory, and meaningless on the social realms in which they exist. If you cannot see it, you cannot observe it. I ask: Do Queer Aboriginal people exist? Who is accountable for their existence? How are they concealed and diminished? And, how can we make these figures legible? To answer these complex questions I will compare and contrast frames of knowing with established roots in Aboriginal Studies and Queer Theory and utilise them to delineate, test, confront, and make sense of what can be said of Indigenous Queer identities in Australia. My inquiry is ultimately intersectional. Whatever frames I call into action I am reminded, to paraphrase Flavia Dzodan that my understanding of Queer Indigenous people will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!

Can You See Me? Queer Margins in Aboriginal Communities

Andrew Farrell

The Queer Indigenous body is a site of contention.¹ When seemingly contrasting and contested ideas about 'Queerness' converge with Indigeneity each signifier can be called into question. My presentation considers the ways Queer identified Aboriginal peoples may be dispossessed of their identity and humanity- unseen, invisibilised, and isolated from their homes and communities. Through a discussion of lived experiences I argue that Queerness is dependant and victim to the normalising subjectivities of individuals and collectives who dominate spaces of Aboriginality. I also discuss the ways in which Queer Aboriginal people challenge and overcome various forms of adversity. To conclude, I encourage an expanding discourse on the complexities of intracultural issues that occur as Queerness emerges within Aboriginal Australia.

A dynamic approach to ethics is a feature of the Cultured Queer/Queering Culture: Indigenous Perspectives on Queerness symposium. I wish to honour that by utilising Queer approaches to inclusion, autonomy, safety, and dignity in discussions about Aboriginal identities and experiences. I applied a 'safer spaces' approach to Indigenous cultural protocols by utilising "trigger warnings" to foreground intersecting topics of dispossession and violence. An emphasis on the provocation of personal and emotional responses to trauma considers the interpersonal and intersubjective complexities of Indigenous relationships. These approaches ultimately aim to reduce any kind of impact on the safety of Queer Indigenous people.

My name is Andrew Farrell and I am a Queer identified Indigenous person. I belong to a seaside Aboriginal community on the South Coast of NSW. I am an Aboriginal person, first and foremost, and in that space I have come to know and embrace my Queerness. In my community I found that my queerness underpinned various forms of alienating experiences. I moved out of community to pursue living more freely as myself. I became passionate about gender, queerness, and indigeneity in my undergraduate years and am now working towards a PhD thesis on Aboriginal gender diversities at the University of Wollongong. I consider myself in the business of making Queer Indigenous identities visible.

In my presentation I explore 'abjection' as a lens to discuss Queer Indigenous experience. I establish how abjection works, explore its theoretical nuances, and apply it to the specificities of various LGBTIQ Indigenous contexts.

Abjection is framed in this analysis as a theoretical antonym that diminishes and erases diversity. Abjection, theorised by Julia Kristeva (1982), is the rendering of the human as inhuman. This status is attributed if one is to threaten the boundaries of identity in some way. Abjection is utilised in this analysis to describe the casting out of LGBTIQ Aboriginal people from Aboriginality based on the perception that queerness doesn't belong. In such a system

¹ I use the term 'Queer' to describe sex, sexuality, and gender diverse peoples. They are also referred to in this paper as LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer). While there is no consensus on the interchangeable use of 'Queer' with 'LGBTIQ' its use within this paper is about reclaiming ownership and pride in queerness.

Queerness is filtered out as foreign, as a form that “threatens” Aboriginal identity, and therefore must be purged.

Nakata’s ‘Cultural Interface’ theory helps to elucidate the complexities of abjection and anchor the analysis in Indigenous theorising. The Cultural Interface is a “multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations... that inform, constrain or enable what can be seen or not seen, what can be brought to the surface or sutured over, what can be said or not said, heard or not heard, understood or misunderstood, what knowledge can be accepted, rejected, legitimised or marginalised” (Nakata 2007, p. 199).

This theory identifies modalities of power enacted between Queer and non-Queer Indigenous people on the interface. While knowledge is created, it is not without the expulsion of the “other.” In this context, social forms are streamlined (Heterosexual) at the expense of other forms of other ways of knowing (Queer). My personal truth is that Aboriginal society is ultimately diverse; from collective to individual. To expel forms of gendered and sexual diversity is to hinder diversity. By identifying and revealing abjection I seek to re-engage Indigenous peoples understanding of human diversity to include ideas of queerness.

In various ways my work conceptualises Queer Indigenous intersectionality in Australia. Intersectionality, theorised by Crenshaw (1991), is a critical lens that charts the complexity of identity politics through layered marginal status. Crenshaw’s critique is useful in this presentation as a tool to evoke visible complexities experienced by Queer Aboriginal people. Intersectionality ensures that no facet of identity is muted and excluded in the overall narrative of identity and experience. In this presentation, Intersectional narratives are quantified by the testimonies of LGBTIQ Indigenous peoples.

I gather stories from a range of positions along the LGBTIQ Indigenous spectrums. I discuss topics such as coming out, isolation, authenticity, fear, homophobia, physical violence, vulnerability, self-abjection, and suicide. Acts of resilience, autonomy, visibility, radicalisation, and acceptance follow on as a vision of the future of LGBTIQ Indigenous identities.

Homophobia and transphobia in relation to forms of violence and abjection is consistent in the range of testimonies gathered in this topic. Passive and structural homophobias are identified, however, it is the day-to-day confrontation of overt and aggressive forms of phobias that are frequently expressed. In an article submitted to the online magazine *Archer*, Stephen Lindsay Ross (2014) stated that “[w]hen I came out to my father, he told me he used to bash people like me. Whenever we fought, homophobic insults were not off limits...I have seen this prejudice in other families too”. The unthinkable, threats of death by violent action, is not off limits either. Similarly, in the documentary *Sistagirl* (2011) produced by Aboriginal artist Bindi Cole, one of the subjects Laura recalls her childhood trauma, “[my parents] used to come and hit me with a stick and a hose. I tried to talk to dad to make him understand and he said he would take me down to the bush and shoot me with a gun and leave me there”. The anticipation and expectation of such violence is also of concern. An anonymous transgender identified source confided in me that she was scared; scared of the consequences of approaching or being approached by men who seek sex and relationships. She said “you don’t know if they’ll kiss you or kill you.” These examples illustrate the presence of abjection as a “normal” feature and consequence for being Queer. This is unacceptable.

Queer Aboriginal people are not just victims. They are innovative and have found ways to overcome adversity. Some of their approaches include grass roots advocacy, harnessing online platforms, and a visible presence in mainstream media outlets. The Sistergirl and Brotherboy community have been prolific in making transgender Indigenous identities visible. The previously mentioned documentary *Sistagirl* reveals the lives of a group of transgender identified Indigenous women living on Tiwi Island (Cole 2011). Recently, as of mid-2015 Brotherboys disseminated a self-made short documentary with a following news feature produced by the NITV program Living Black (*Brotherboy* 2015). Sistergirls and Brotherboys are an example of the strength of collectivising and building autonomy around converging ideas of queerness and Aboriginality.

On a grassroots level LGBTIQ Indigenous political and social justice is ongoing. Today, various grassroots organisations and groups have emerged. This includes the online social networking groups ‘Sistergirls and Brotherboys’, ‘Sisters and Brothers NT’, and ‘Moolagoo Mob & Blak Lemons’, and ‘Indigilez Leadership and Support Group’, and ‘Anwernekenhe Us-Mob’ on Facebook. These groups promote visibility, act as agents of autonomous organisation, provide social and cultural spaces for gender diverse Indigenous people and their allies, and act as a portal for information and formal and informal consultation. These examples demonstrate how Indigenous LGBT peoples are active in the fight against a range of issues present in this presentation.

My work addresses a number of “gritty” topics that expose the undercurrent of LGBTIQ issues in Indigenous Australia. The erasure of Indigenous Queer identities is problematic and ongoing. Simultaneously, we as Queer Indigenous peoples are the instigators of progress. The idea that the Queer Indigenous body is a site of contention between worlds is a discussion of issues that render ‘Queer’ and ‘Indigenous’ as fundamentally oppositional. The range of responses from LGBTIQ identified Aboriginal peoples challenge that notion by blurring the lines of authenticity and re-engaging us with a perspective that insists on the fluidity of identity within Aboriginality. Change is essential to our survival. We, as Aboriginal peoples, sometimes fail to see that we will someday be ancestors. We can continue to uphold inherited cultural values such as diversity while also being innovators actively engaging, accepting, and embracing those of us who are sex, sexuality, and gender diverse.

About the author:

Andrew Farrell is a PhD candidate in Indigenous Studies at the University of Wollongong. From an Aboriginal community on the South Coast of NSW Andrew identifies strongly as both Indigenous (Wodi Wodi) and Queer (genderqueer). This identity correlates with Andrew’s research interests which explore a range of Indigenous gender identities in Australia focusing primarily on non-binary and non-conforming genders.

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