
Introduction: Storywork in Indigenous Digital Environments

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Storywork, cyberspace, and Indigenous digital literary studies

In 2008, through working with the teachings of Stó:lō Elders and cultural knowledge holders, Joann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiim developed the concept and practice of Indigenous storywork. Storywork is a dynamic, multi-faceted, and ever-developing literary tradition, pedagogy, and research methodology. Rooted in the principles of “respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy” (Xiim et al. 1), storywork recognizes and approaches Indigenous literatures—which we understand to be the total gamut of creative narrative expression developed and used by Indigenous peoples, from oral histories to poems to beadwork to novels to personal lived narratives and beyond—as powerful teachers teeming with lessons on how to navigate the world in ethical, respectful, and holistic ways. A storywork reading practice invites the application of Indigenous stories to education in and beyond the classroom (Archibald 3). Storywork calls on audiences of Indigenous literatures to recognize and respect Indigenous stories, and to approach these stories with love and care, for these stories matter and they are powerful (3).

But storywork is not only a way of understanding and making meaning of Indigenous literatures. It is an ongoing and embodied responsibility, a process of accountability and reciprocity, one which calls on educators, researchers, readers, and learners to listen to, study, and work with Indigenous stories in holistic, community-centred, respectful, and active ways. A storywork process refutes extractive and dissecting approaches to reading Indigenous literatures.

As one makes meaning of Indigenous literatures, “[a]n interrelationship between the story, storytelling, and listener is a [...] critical principle” in this process (32). That is, the reader “cannot be a passive observer or armchair reader” (31) but, rather, must be actively and reciprocally participating in the meaning-making process; “synergistic interaction”—or intentional, multidirectional, and respectful interrelation—is necessary in storywork (33). This type of interaction or interrelation requires the receiver of the story to listen not only with the mind, but with the heart, spirit, and body (8). Indigenous “[s]tories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together” (12), and the holistic listening to story that is core to a storywork praxis is ongoing, for, each time we listen to a story, we are invited to make meaning anew (24-5). Storywork helps us to witness and honour the important teachings of Indigenous stories, and it teaches us how to carry these lessons forward and embody them in a good way in our day to day lives.

The digital realm has become a pervasive part of our everyday lives and our society, and the allures but also the risks of the digital realm are becoming ever clearer: these concerns include but are by no means limited to algorithmic bias, surveillance, doxing, and issues of consent and theft by humans and artificial intelligence. Building on Jo-ann Archibald Q’um Q’um Xiïem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo’s (2019) assertion that storywork “offer[s] hope at a time when environmental and social crises threaten all life and ways of being” (11) by providing holistic lessons around navigating these concerns, we posit that so too do Indigenous stories and storywork processes offer lessons of hope for living well, and for centring the heart, mind, body, and soul with and within fraught digital environments.

Amidst digital technologies and structures that have been coded through western protocols, what can Indigenous stories teach us about using these digital tools with responsibility and care for Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and cultures? How might these stories guide the creation of different digital tools that are not programmed through western protocols? How can

these stories guide us in being good relations within digital ecologies? How might taking up and considering cyberspace through a storywork process help us to understand Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite's (2018) question of what it means to "make kin with the machines"? In this context, scholars have critiqued discourses of the digital that separate it from land (Caranto Morford and Ansloos, 2021; Duarte, 2017; Gaertner, 2016; Grubnic, 2023), and Archibald, Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo (2019) further argue that storywork is deeply place-based (12.) Thus, a storywork approach to digital environments reminds us that the digital is never separate from land, asking us what it means to care for and attend to land and land-based relations when we navigate digital realms.

When we approach Indigenous literatures through the process of storywork, understanding the important educational powers of these narratives, we realize that, regardless of whether an Indigenous story is digital or not, it can teach us about living and being in relationship in a good way in this digital age and into our digital futures. At the same time, there are a plethora of Indigenous digital literatures that are being created, published, and circulated. From virtual reality (VR) stories to video games, twitteratures to Instapoems (Ansloos and Caranto Morford, 2022; Grubnic, 2023), Indigenous literary production across and through digital technologies is dynamic and vibrant.

As Indigenous storywork expands into digital realms, it is crucial that the field of Indigenous literary studies accounts for the profound impact of digital narrative expression in redefining storytelling methods, asserting cultural sovereignty, and reclaiming narratives of oppression. Indigenous digital literary studies, as an emerging sub-field, seeks to honour the resilient forms of storytelling manifesting in digital places that counteract the historical marginalization and erasure of Indigenous voices. Engagements with Instagram posts, X (formerly known as Twitter) threads, and other digital platforms have opened up new ways of telling stories that exceed and even challenge physical boundaries. Many of these stories, as the essays in this

collection point out, have provided opportunities for Indigenous people to re-frame narratives of Indigenous life in ways that foster healing and acceptance. Whether that be through challenging stereotypes, re-framing histories of loss and oppression, facilitating community engagement, or contributing to cultural preservation, digital spaces are overflowing with Indigenous stories that are enriching the tradition of storywork.

And yet, these stories are not always tangible, at least not immediately so, in the sense that they emanate from material forms like the book or the gallery wall. Similar to oral stories that transform in their retelling (Archibald 1997), digital storytelling undergoes various changes; it adapts and alters its form or appearance throughout its evolution. Considering storywork in digital space is not as simple as conducting a close reading contained within a more static and stable form like the print novel. As Steven Loft (2014) explains, cyberspace is a “networked territory.” Storywork takes place through the connections people make online—connections that lead to conversations, new and old relationships, and storied networks. Digital storywork leads to a proliferation of new stories in a myriad of forms. Whether through the more ephemeral stories exchanged through social media threads, or the more physical installations of exhibition spaces and VR games, digital narrative expression thrives in fluid environments. These spaces for telling stories matter for the simple reason that Indigenous literatures matter (Justice 2018).

These nuances prompt questions concerning not only how to bring digital stories into Indigenous literary studies, but about how to care for and protect them. Similar to how oral histories so often get discredited, the ephemerality of the digital realm is often used to minimize storytelling that happens in the margins, like Facebook posts and Instagram stories, despite their transformative potential and impact on Indigenous worldviews. How do we protect and honour Twitter pages and social media archives, for instance, when the user ultimately does not have control or complete ownership over them, or when their visibility is dictated by algorithmic processes? How do we ensure these issues do not overshadow the stories themselves? What sorts

of structural and financial supports are needed to uphold the vitality of Indigenous storywork in digital space? To safeguard requires an ethical, desire-centred approach that not only respects the cultural significance of these narratives, but that also navigates the intricate, often transient nature of digital networks with a balance of critique and respect.

Reading and witnessing storywork in this special issue

Our primary objective for this special issue is to foreground and further develop storywork as a vital theoretical lens within the context of Indigenous digital literary studies. We believe it holds profound implications for understanding and amplifying Indigenous peoples' contributions in these digital spaces. By situating Indigenous literary traditions with storywork at the intersection of engagement with digital environments, social media, and all things virtual, we aim to demonstrate the complex importance and dynamics of storying self-determination in cultural production and sociopolitical movement in online spaces. This matters to us because it contests the subtle devaluing of these material contexts of Indigenous life; helps to bolster a growing field of Indigenous digital literary studies scholarship; and brings to light the nuanced ways Indigenous communities engage with, adapt, repurpose, read, share, tweet, and transform digital media for telling the stories that matter. Furthermore, we hope it matters to you, our readers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, as it provides a means of increasing our collective ethical engagement and appreciative reflection on the contributions of Indigenous storytelling traditions, their evolving interactions with digital technology, and the importance of their recognition in literary studies. This special issue celebrates these contributions critically, creatively, and compellingly.

As editors, we propose three central provocations to inspire your engagement with this special issue, each designed to deepen, extend, contest, complexify, and creatively contextualize storywork as a conceptual framework for Indigenous digital literary studies. First, we ask, "What

is storywork as imagined by these articles?” This question invites each of our readers to explore the diverse interpretations and applications of storywork across these contributions, highlighting the expansive, generous, and porous ways that storywork might be conceptualized. It encourages reflection on how storywork intersects with, and diverges from, western and other literary conceptions of storytelling. Second, we wonder, “Where does storywork happen?” This provocation challenges the conventional boundaries of storytelling spaces, urging readers to consider the geographies and conceptual multitudes of digital platform contexts where storywork takes place. From social media to VR to code to tweets, this question opens up consideration of the spatial dimensions of digital storywork, emphasizing its fluidity and adaptability across different digital contexts. Finally, we ask, “What does storywork do?” This inquiry delves into the impact and implications of storywork in digital contexts. It encourages our readers to think critically and practically about the role of digital storywork in shaping Indigenous life both personally and collectively, spanning sociopolitical and cultural projects in an increasingly digitally interlaced world.

Through this lens, we aim to inspire critical scholarship in literary studies that gets at the transformative potential of storywork, especially in the digital. Put another way, we consider how Indigenous digital literary traditions foster and nourish change at various scales. The articles that make up this special issue engage with a wide array of literary traditions, including but not limited to poetry, fiction, autoethnography, beading, VR, and photography. They invite us to think carefully and caringly about the possibilities, responsibilities, ethics, power, and futurity of storywork that is occurring within and supported by digital environments. They remind us that cyberspace is a vibrantly Indigenous literary space.

In Andreas P. Bassett's essay “Death Canto: The Urban NDN Nature Poem in Tommy Pico's Nature Poem,” we encounter a multifaceted exploration of the intertextual, interspatial, and intertemporal nature of contemporary Indigenous poetry, demonstrating how digital media and

various forms of storytelling contribute to a rich, layered understanding of settler colonial and capitalist contexts. Here, storywork points to the interconnectedness of each part of Pico's work. Rather than viewing each quote or reference as an isolated element, Bassett encourages readers to see them as integral parts of a collective story. This approach extends feminist citational practices as a form of relationship building with multiple people and places, and across time, showcasing how digital communications technologies enable a kind of storytelling that is deeply connected and expansive. The essay also highlights the porous borders between various media types, studying genre and form to reveal the interplay between poetry, digital media, and cultural storytelling. We see this evidenced in Bassett's analysis of "Nature Poem" in its intertextuality, interspatiality, and intertemporality. It manifests in the sourcing of Black music, the incorporation of internet slang and hashtags, and the strategic placement of multisensory excerpts, all while referencing literary work from the late 1800s to Beyonce in the present. These elements are not always immediately legible but become apparent upon closer and perhaps more intimate and proximal examination.

This relationality in reading Pico's poem extends beyond attention to the interconnected segments; it's evident in the citational practice and in how Bassett engages with Pico to create an adapted piece, reflecting a thoughtful process of negotiating consent and acknowledgment. The essay suggests that each component of the poem contains meanings, not so much hidden in plain sight as patiently awaiting acknowledgement, urging a reading strategy that appreciates the depth of intertextuality, interspatiality, intertemporality, and the importance of clustered close readings. This porous and permeable citation practice highlights the necessity of reading across different canons and fields, like Indigenous, Latinx, and Black studies. It emphasizes a deliberate disordering of traditional narrative structures, viewing this type of bricolage as central to future-oriented literary projects. Bassett's analysis engages key tensions in Indigenous literary studies, including the complex interplay between past and present literatures, tradition and innovation in

literary form, and community identity, collectivity, and individual expression in contemporary Indigenous and other literatures. As such, it offers a gift: it encourages us to revisit with Indigenous literatures, including those familiar to us, reminding us that these works not only nourish relationships but also possess the remarkable ability to transcend space, time, discipline, genre, and form, both enriching and unsettling our sense of the present. Bassett's essay thus serves as a bridge, linking canonical notions of Indigenous storywork with the gravity of the present, and inviting readers to perceive Indigenous literature through a lens that appreciates its depth, complexity, and evolving nature.

Pablo Montes, Luis Urrieta, and Judith Landeros's "Refiguring Digital Landscapes: Online Pedagogical Hubs of Indigenous Latinx Youth" demonstrates that social media platforms like Instagram have been refigured as Indigenous Latinx storied spaces by Indigenous Latinx youth—living libraries (which they conceptualize and discuss as "hubs") featuring transformative and collaboratively written Indigenous Latinx literature that is multimodal, transnational, and rooted in land relations, community responsibilities, and survivance (Vizenor 1999). These literary works tell stories that challenge and undo the ongoing colonial invisibilization of Indigenous Latinx youth. And, against mainstream conceptualizations of the digital and land as separate, this literature reveals that they are, in fact, intimately interwoven—for the stories within this digital library are deeply connected to place and land-based geographies and relationalities. In so doing and being, these stories bring forth the presence and, hence, the presents and futures of Indigenous Latinx lives and ecologies. Montes, Urrieta, and Landeros's research suggests that, in the active plurality and transnational, co-creative nature of Indigenous Latinx literary production on social media—where Indigenous Latinx youth within homeland and diaspora are constantly revising, editing, undoing, rewriting, and adding to the stories within the library through dialoguing with each other—necessarily contentious, contested, messy, fraught, difficult, and, ultimately, urgent and generative storywork is occurring. As this article posits, the storywork of Indigenous Latinx

dynamically represented through digital and computational media, thereby reconfiguring our understanding of Indigenous narratives.

Through the development of a Cree coding language, Corbett infuses his programming with Indigenous ontologies, teachings, and connections to ancestors, land, and the body. This approach aligns with Archibald's views on storywork as a form of Indigenous knowledge and emphasizes the role of the creator's emotional and spiritual disposition in storytelling. Corbett's contemplative and meditative engagement with beadwork, as a form of prayer and introspection, transforms the act of creation into a narrative process, highlighting the importance of affective elements in storytelling. Moreover, the article reflects on the role of "Four Generations" in language revitalization, cultural preservation, and the protection of Indigenous knowledge through digital encryption. It contributes to broader discussions in anthropology, critical code studies, and esoteric programming, underlining the significance of embedding Indigenous stories and perspectives within these fields. In a sense, Corbett's contribution in this collection invites us to think how creative practices can be collectivized, and how Indigenous storywork not only changes us, but connects us to worlds of meaning and the intricacies of connections between Indigenous peoples. As Corbett makes clear, beadwork is not a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012). Storywork stitches us together and, through that creative act, we become something more.

Hugh Burnam's "'We don't need settler permission': Recalling the Haudenosaunee Thought Project (#htp) through Indigenous autoethnography" invites us to consider Indigenous autoethnography as a literary genre that embodies and invites storywork. Through sharing stories of the social media-based project #htp (The Haudenosaunee Thought Project), Burnam not only reveals how social media has emerged as a storied space for and of Indigenous autoethnography; he uses Indigenous autoethnography as a story-based methodology for learning about and practicing ethical relationality in digital spaces. His autoethnographic accounts

offer important lessons about honouring consent, sharing truths unapologetically, and protecting sacred knowledges from settler consumption online. Burnam’s care-filled approach to story-telling demonstrates the importance of process to Indigenous autoethnography, engaging in relational and ethical practices that are not always readily visible. That is, as Burnam shows, Indigenous autoethnography is not simply about connecting the personal with wider sociocultural and sociopolitical issues; while it certainly does this, it does so much more. In the stories it tells—and the processes embraced to tell these stories—Indigenous autoethnography is always collective; always rooted in supporting and affirming Indigenous sovereignty; always “heart work” that provides profound healing from colonialism for both the teller and for Indigenous listeners; and that refuses non-Indigenous narrations of Indigenous life. Thus, as Burnam posits, embracing Indigenous autoethnography as a digital research method helps to break the cycle of harmful research practices that have been far too common within western academia and across mainstream internet spaces. Indigenous autoethnography as digital research practice and digital process helps to bring into being digital research and digital environments that are guided by Indigenous ways of being and that are geared towards Indigenous life, love, community, and futurity.

In “#HonouringIndigenousWriters: Visiting with and through Indigenous Literatures in the ‘Digital Turn,’” David Gaertner initiates a thought-provoking discussion that asks readers to think about the hashtag as more than a type of metadata or technological function. Rather, his writing enables us to see the hashtag as an element of storywork: it is an archive, convener, and connector. Hashtag networks cultivate online communities where stories can be shared in safe and communal environments. Hashtags are, of course, open networks. They make space for guests—both wanted and unwanted; both familiar and strange. Along these lines, the article asks: what does it mean to be a “visitor” in spaces of Indigenous storytelling, specifically for those who are non-Indigenous, who now have increased access to digital spaces of storytelling due to hashtag

networks and the open nature of the internet? Gaertner, himself a settler scholar of German descent, does not critique the open nature of the internet for allowing non-Indigenous groups to gain entry to intimate spaces of storytelling. Rather, he suggests these communal spaces make room for reparative storywork that moves non-Indigenous groups and settlers to be better guests by acknowledging that hospitality is, at best, earned. Gaertner sheds light on the subtle settler colonial expectations underpinning words like “guest” that take for granted Indigenous hospitality. “Guest” connotes a certain sense of comfort, coziness, obligatory hospitality, or perhaps even permission to overstay one’s welcome. A better word, Gaertner proposes, is “visitor,” a word that places a greater sense of responsibility upon non-Indigenous people to approach Indigenous spaces of storytelling with accountability, relationality, and a commitment to reciprocity. Visiting can invite and move non-Indigenous people to be better guests and listeners, for it “is grounded not in an unconditional welcome, but in the acknowledged presence and responsibility of the guest” (Gaertner 2024, 154). Gaertner’s perspective redefines the act of visiting for non-Indigenous people as an active, at times uncomfortable, commitment to centre care, listening, and a willingness to learn through storywork.

Chiara Minestrelli, Patrick Mau, Despoina Zachariadou, and Alim Kamara’s “‘Virtual Reconnections’: Using VR Storytelling to Reconnect to Indigenous Cultural Artefacts” ponders the potentialities for VR to be a form of storywork. The authors invite us to reflect on a prototype VR experience, which they describe as a digital repatriation. This project would allow internet users, specifically younger generations of Torres Strait Islanders and Sierra Leonian communities, to reconnect with their heritage through an interactive, immersive virtual interface. Through this platform, they would visit African Indigenous and tribal artefacts stolen from Torres Strait communities and now on display in British cultural institutions. Yet this interface is more than just infrastructural. It is animate in its ability to transport visitors to worlds of the past and engage with the ongoing life of these worlds in the present. When artefacts are stolen from communities and

preserved in colonial institutions such as museums, they are storied in harmful and culturally inaccurate ways that lead to their decontextualization and dehistoricization. Engaging in VR storywork presents opportunities for reclaiming these cultural objects, counter-storying and re-storying these cultural artifacts through digitally repatriating them for virtual environments, with Indigenous communities as the narrators. Such initiatives point to the potential for virtual reconnections to form in online environments, and speak to the notion of a virtual landedness.

Yet at the same time, the article invites us to consider ethical implications concerning this digital repatriation and VR experience, elucidating that storywork is a process that carries immense responsibilities and ethical frictions. To do this work in a responsible and accountable way requires attending to absence and loss in an ethical manner and working closely with Indigenous communities. The article and the storywork it shares prompt us to reflect on the question: what is digital repatriation? If a cultural item is not physically returned to the community, and is merely virtually returned, is this truly an act of digital repatriation? We must ask these fraught but necessary questions when engaging in storywork through VR to avoid compounding the history of institutional decontextualization and dehistoricization. While certainly re-storying and re-connecting with cultural items that have been stolen out of communities through digital technology like VR provides an important and healing bridge, any sort of digital repatriation fundamentally requires its physical manifestation. That these artifacts would continue to be steeped in deep histories of loss and theft despite the potential for virtual interaction underlines the limitations of VR for storywork when it does not accompany or lead to action on-the-ground. This article raises difficult and urgent questions around the ethics of VR, and also points to the hopeful futures that VR and digital storywork can provide. And the article demonstrates that there are no simple answers to any of these important questions.

We end our exploration of storywork—what it is, where it happens, and what it does — with an interview from Paul Seesequasis. In conversation with Tanja Grubnic, Seesequasis

introduces readers to the *Indigenous Archival Photo Project*, a social media project that he began almost a decade ago. Through studying the archives of museums, institutions, auction houses, and digital sources like *Getty*, Seesequasis finds photographs of Indigenous community members that have been stored away in archives and brings these photographs out of storage into the open to reclaim stories and images of Indigeneity through the lens of joy and strength. Against colonial stereotypes, images, and tropes surrounding Indigeneity, Seesequasis's project shares historical photographs via social media that document the vibrancy of everyday Indigenous life. His project is a reminder that photographs, as storytelling devices, are deeply literary. In short, the photographs that make up the *Indigenous Archival Photo Project* are literatures that offer deep possibilities for storywork. The project reveals the link between reclamation and storywork. As Seesequasis circulates these photographs on social media, community members who witness the images remember and share the kin, events, and narratives attached to them. The reclamation of these photographs and their narratives by community offers healing through liberating Indigenous images and stories from storage spaces and colonial framings that have stifled and hidden these stories and that have prohibited communities from connecting with them. This project emphasizes that the returning of these stories to their lands and peoples is an integral aspect of storywork, and that social media can help to ignite this storywork.

The *Indigenous Archival Photo Project* further reveals storywork as simultaneously memory work and world-making. As Seesequasis discusses, photographs embody past worlds and help family, community, and kin to remember those past worlds and the past's rooted connections to the present and future. Through digital spaces, the storywork of these photographs—the memory-making and world-making—has been collaborative and continuous, unfolding as various community members engage with and tell stories about the photos, and unfolding ongoingly amidst the rapid and wide spread of information that often occurs through social media. This storywork is also collaborative in its multimodality: while the project was ignited by social media,

since its conception, it has taken on a variety of forms, ranging from social media and the digital realm, to print magazines and books, to various in-person exhibitions and talks. This multimodality signals that the digital realm is always connected to the physical and the land-based. As Seesequasis's insights illuminate, social media serves as the initial gathering space from which this project's storywork can develop and spread into various digital and physical realms and manifestations, but storywork never just occurs online—it is deeply place and land-based, traversing land and digital alike. As Seesequasis's extensive project archives and ignites vibrant storywork online, we hope that this special issue can provide a small archive of the dynamic storywork that is happening online, and can perhaps ignite and inspire further storywork across digital environments and beyond.

Conclusion

This special issue celebrates and recognizes the urgency and the potency of Indigenous literary life online. Indigenous digital literary studies is not just an emerging subfield nor is it separate from other literary spaces and contributions. It is rich, dynamic, vibrant, expansive, and multimodal, extending beyond cyberspace and always connected to Indigenous lands, waters, and place-based relations. Aligned with this dynamic expansiveness, the Indigenous stories emerging from digital media are not secondary to conventional storytelling media, genres, and forms; they are essential to Indigenous storytelling traditions and narratives not just of the present, but of the past and future—and they connect relations and foster kinship not only in the here and now, but across the generations past and future too. Digital media have enabled Indigenous peoples to reclaim and share their histories, to assert their presence and presents, and to envision and world-make their futures. And, as such, the digital is an integral space of storywork. Indeed, a digital storywork praxis takes seriously the ability for digital spaces to support Indigenous life, storytelling, and education, while simultaneously teaching about the need to use digital

technologies with care and in ways that centre Indigenous narratives. Through storying digital spaces, Indigenous peoples are continuing a long practice of crafting, developing, and using the latest technologies towards supporting and nourishing Indigenous life, literary tradition, and storywork. We are excited to share these Indigenous digital literatures and digital storywork teachings with you.

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