# *"No one will touch your body unless you say so":* Normativity and Bodily Autonomy in Australian Indigenous Writing

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## Introduction

In writing by Indigenous trans people from the 1990s to the present, trans existence is frequently affirmed as a part of Indigenous cultures which has persisted from pre-colonial times. Trans and non-binary authored works are critical of the influence of the church and disparaging towards the western understandings of queerness and gender, including the medical model of understanding transgender identity, and emphasise agency, bodily autonomy, and collective negotiations to produce identities and navigate relationships against colonial norms.

This article begins with an exploration of the research done into trans Indigenous people in Australia since the 1990s. I look at the development of a community discourse documented in sistergirl publications in the 1990s and 2000s which rejects what Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck has called a "damage-centred" research framework, instead embracing a "desire-based framework" (416). Drawing from these community texts, I look at three more recent works from Warlpiri, Arrente, and Luritja sistergirl Brie Ngala Curtis and the Mununjali Yugambeh writer Ellen van Neerven. Looking at the works of these two writers, I argue that trans Indigenous writing honours the roles of trans Indigenous people within their communities and problematises western understandings of queer and trans identities.

**Terminology**

'Sistergirl' and 'brotherboy' are collectively understood and adopted terms for Indigenous gender diverse people (see Kerry 2014). They are culturally specific to Indigenous Australian trans people and have been collectively negotiated and agreed on as terms which can be used widely by Indigenous people from all nations. Where appropriate, I use terms which the authors specifically identify for themselves. I use sistergirl and brotherboy to refer to self-identified individuals who use the terms, and I also use "trans" to refer generally to all First Nations peoples with non-cisgender or non-binary identities. I do this to be inclusive of those trans and non-binary identifying people who do not feel that sistergirl or brotherboy describes them.

While I want to provide some background to those outside our community on the histories of these terms, my language will not be streamlined or standardised, and this might seem inconsistent, imperfect, or confusing at times. It is intended to be. It is vital to understand the terminologies of trans and queer from within the context of colonial history, and to displace and unsettle their use as catchalls. Damien Riggs has linked the development of terminologies of western LGBT identity with the "possessive investments" of whiteness in Australia (2007, 112). The term 'trans' sits uncomfortably with me, because, as Riggs writes,

> such terms fail to acknowledge the cultural contexts that shape the category "sistergirl"…it is important to acknowledge the sovereign relationship to country that sistergirls hold, and how the ontological implications of this relationship differentiate them from other groups who may be located under the umbrella of 'trans and gender diverse.'"(112)

Following on from Riggs' observation, I use the terms queer and trans through this article with some necessary nuance attached. The non-binary Wiradjuri author Sandy O'Sullivan has written that "I know my responsibility is to be multifarious, complex and

inextricable in my identity representation…this is the experience of an Aboriginal lesbian. And it is not" (222). Indigenous queer, non-binary and trans people use a multitude of terms to describe our behaviours, social roles, and identities, with the critical understanding that they are all imperfect and we have to invest in disturbing them. Jawoyn writer Troy-Anthony Baylis comments that this multiplicity and flexibility is a valuable part of Indigenous trans writing which destabilises the reader's desire for a "more digestible" story (17).

I use the term 'settler' to refer to Australian non-Indigenous people and culture. Indigenous Australian people use a range of accepted terms to refer to ourselves, including nation and clan or language group names, as well as collective terms like 'Indigenous', 'First Nations', and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', as well as 'Blak', the political term coined by Erub Mer artist Destiny Deacon[1] which is referenced by van Neerven in *Throat.*

**A Desire-Based Literature Review: Understanding Discourses of Indigenous (Trans) Gender in Australia**

Settler researchers frequently reinforce what Tuck calls a damage-centred framework in relation to trans Indigenous people. In her work "Suspending Damage", Tuck identifies damage-centred research as work which operates "even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" and outlines the need to move from this model to what she calls 'desire-based' research (413). Damage-centred research work aims to

> document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe…It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-

> centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. (413)

Tuck makes note of both the uses of this practice, given the historical "need for research that exposed the uninhabitable, inhumane conditions in which people lived and continue to live,", while making note of the harms of those research frameworks which consequently carry the "possible hidden costs of a research strategy that frames entire communities as depleted" (415; 409). She urges alternative ways of doing research outside of the framework of showing injury as a way of advocating for change. Her proposed model of instead applying "desire" based research is focused on understanding and celebrating "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (416).

The dichotomy between damage and desire is relevant to the development of research on trans Indigenous people. Research interest on trans Indigenous people has increased since the 1990s, with a strong emphasis on health and social vulnerability. Given the research funding imperatives around sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention in the 1990s and 2000s, attempts to better understand Indigenous trans lives from within the fields of medical and academic research have typically emerged from local gay and lesbian history projects and from government-funded research into the health and well-being of LGBT communities in the 1990s. This has meant, as Stephen Craig Kerry has documented, specific "attention being paid to the impact of HIV/AIDS" and "the lived experiences of transgender Australians," and more recently, focus on areas like suicide prevention (173–74). That wave of funding, research, and organising around HIV/AIDS and sexual health contributed to enabling the establishment of discussion of sistergirl and brotherboy life on a national level, while also closely tying it to research on the experiences of gay cisgender Indigenous men.

To use Tuck's words, the development of emerging bodies of research on such previously 'invisible' populations can be considered "a mixed signal of progress" (410). On the one hand, that research can be considered useful in leveraging for the community's needs and gains, and this is particularly evident in research related to health and HIV/AIDS prevention strategies and resourcing. On the other, those research interests and imperatives have the potential effect of "usher[ing]" in outsider researchers to our communities with little knowledge of the proper way to write and think about our lives (410). Settler researchers in this field consequently position Indigenous trans people as doubly marginalised, subject to experiences of racism within the Australian society, and subject to transphobia and violence in their own communities.

Much of the earlier research on trans First Nations people centres around identifying the specifics of risk and vulnerability among our LBGTIQ community members. In the literature, sistergirls and brotherboys (if brotherboys are mentioned) are defined by our levels of economic instability, social exclusion, illness, vulnerability, and finally, invisibility. Kerry, for example, summarises how "indigenous transgender Australians face issues pertaining to HIV/AIDS, identity, alcohol and substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, and community engagement", and they explain how additional burdens of racism within the wider community contribute to "complex matrices of discrimination" which "intersect cultural traditions, personal and social identity, and colonization" (174). They frequently refer to social invisibility and the need to address the 'dearth of data' on trans Indigenous life.

Research from within the community explicitly problematises the simplicity of this view, revealing a more complex situation. Trans Indigenous writers identify violence and transphobia, but alongside this, they identify strong family and community supports, respected positions of sistergirls within family, recognition of

belonging and social roles within culture both pre-colonisation and since. They problematise the western definitions of transgender and speak to the role of the church and the medical profession in creating marginalisation and violence against trans and First Nations people. The complex understanding held within Tuck's desire-based frameworks are evident in the work of Indigenous trans and sistergirl/brotherboy writers and researchers, and it is from within the same spirit, the same investment in desire, that I proceed.

**Community Self-Definition**

Despite the pervasiveness of the damage-centred framework, the First Nations trans and sistergirl/brotherboy community has been active in producing its own discourses. The first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Gay Men and Transgender Sexual Health Conference, Anwernekenhe, took place in 1994 on Arrente country. Following the establishment of its national working party, three further Anwernekenhe events were held across the next 15 years. The government funding for this was auspiced by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO). The funding and leadership of the AFAO and Anwernekenhe organisations enabled the first national gathering of sistergirls on Magnetic Island in Queensland in 1999, and that event along with its report back and recommendations to the AFAO, shaped by the contributions of those gathered, has been foundational in shaping the way trans, sistergirl and brotherboy First Nations peoples understand ourselves in so-called Australia.

While these events took place under the auspices and frameworks of HIV/AIDS prevention, they took on much greater meaning for the delegates. It is clear from reading the forum's report that the discussion that took place there responded to the application of sexual health and AIDS prevention discourse with one that, as Tuck writes, "seeks to construct a fuller representation" (418). Michael Costello and Rusty

Nannup, authors of the report back, note that "The forum had a focus on sexual health, however it became apparent that this is but one aspect of a much broader predicament" (4). The conference addressed issues of health, violence, racism and exclusion, but alongside this, it was concerned with the development of a community identity and with acknowledging and examining the history and role of sistergirls and people "with transgender qualities" in Indigenous communities (Costello and Nannup6). The Magnetic Island forum of 1999 is where the term sistergirl was formally adopted as a shared community identity, and this was achieved through collective agreement. The report back explains:

> Anwernekenhe II saw a change in terminology from "Indigenous transgender person" to "sistergirl". Sistergirl delegates felt that "transgender" terminology should only be used for bureaucratic reasons, as it was not representative of the diversity within the community…The usage of sistergirl terminology is clearly influenced by the diversity of communities, and will often be defined within a community depending on geographical location. (Costello and Nannup 1999, 6)

The report outlines a careful consideration of how the term sistergirl, which is understood as both culturally specific to particular nations in the central desert, but used widely, was agreed by "all delegates" to signify a range of individuals, including both urban living and rural women. To the idea of transgender as "bureaucratic", sistergirl advocate Kooncha Brown added that,

> The relationships within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have their own unique make-up and are often entwined with other cultural and spiritual structures. The western identity construct of transgenderism does not easily fit within these structures. (2004, 6)

Nannup and Costello's report back from the 1999 gathering notes that "sistergirl" is understood differently across diverse experiences of Indigenous groups but was intentionally embraced as an inclusive word after a long process of negotiation that was "sometimes volatile but ultimately constructive" (6). Further, the term was intended as a placeholder to be revisited at a later time "to determine an appropriate Indigenous name to replace [it]" which would reflect the whole community (Nannup and Costello 2004, 6). The term brotherboy has seen a similar (and more recent) emergence, being adopted as a collectively agreed upon word within community which refers inclusively to trans masculine Indigenous people from across Australia. Nicole Anae notes that there was a significant presentation on brotherboy identity at the 2016 National LGBTI Health Alliance's Mind Out mental health conference which signalled a greater recognition of brotherboy as a distinct term, though it had already been in use for some time:

> This presence marked an historic step in forging a stronger Brotherboy visibility and included speakers such as Dean Gilbert, the Brotherboys support group, and Brotherboy presenters Jay Delany and Kai Clancy (2020, 77).

Representations of belonging, negotiation and agency as part of our experiences differentiate trans Indigenous texts from those written about us and express a desire-based framework that acknowledges complexity and agency. While the work of writers like Costello and Nannup and Kooncha Brown on trans First Nations people acknowledges harm, adversity, and social difficulty, it is important to note that they also acknowledge pleasure, belonging, and agency. The final words of the report back on the Magnetic island conference state that the forum ended with a party:

> The final night, after conference proceedings, provided an opportunity for all conference delegates to come together to celebrate this historic

> forum and its achievements. The theme for the night became Island Night, an opportunity for all to let their hair down or, in some cases, to put it on. With many newfound talents and old alike, show time proved to be possibly the largest showgirl event ever staged. (Costello and Nannup, 5)

This celebration is just as important to the report as the identification of social problems and forms of violence the sistergirls face and highlights the complex dichotomy of trans Indigenous writing which is in direct critique of damage-centred research.

Peer-authored literature on trans First Nations people is critical of the influence of institutional power in shaping the western understanding of trans life. Heightened experiences of violence and ostracism are, as Kooncha Brown importantly points out, heavily influenced by the Christian church's impact, which she notes is "a powerful force in fostering discrimination" (25). She also notes the influence of the medical profession, which has long held a pathologising and diagnostic view of trans embodiment rejected by many First Nations people (Brown, 25). Western identity discourse is taxonomical and categorical and neglects the understanding Indigenous people hold of our relationality. As Brown illustrates: "I am Kooncha. I'm seen as a woman, a daughter, a sister, an aunty, and a mother - a valuable part of the family, a carer and a supporter…However in western culture, I am seen as 'black' and 'transgender'" (25). Kuku Yalanji brotherboy Madi Day, in collaboration with Wiradjuri queer researcher Corrinne Sullivan, also takes great care to write back to a damage-centred framework in their examination of trans masculine Indigenous sex workers. They explicitly acknowledge the common notions of their research participants as "victims" and actively shift their language to recognise them as "people working from a position of autonomy and agency" (Sullivan and Day, 1). The Indigenous trans people

described inSullivan and Day's research "negotiate and construct their identities" and "navigate" their financial and social needs. They have "tactics for managing their sexuality, gender and emotion", and "resist as well as rework" the discriminations the participants face in work and social life (2). This language is deployed intentionally and is seen by the authors as necessary within the broader context of damage-centred research which has come before. In this way, Sullivan and Day's research embodies a trans Indigenous standpoint.

**Genre and Gender as Colonial Binarisms**

Just as Sullivan and Day made the note that the lives of their trans Indigenous research participants "exceed" the discourses of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and homonormativity, the work of trans Indigenous writers exceeds colonial discourses of genre as well as gender, making active critiques of both (6). Wiradjuri scholar Jeanine Leane's identification of genre as a form of colonial binarism alongside gender underlines the limits of western discourses when looking at the texts of Indigenous trans people. Brie Ngala Curtis' oral history, *Kungakunga: Staying Close to Family and Country* is recorded in the collection *Colouring the Rainbow* (2015). *Colouring the Rainbow* is a collection of First Nations queer and trans writing which is separated into three distinct sections or 'genres'. These sections divide the contributions in the anthology into "Life Stories," a series of memoir pieces and recorded oral testimonies; "An Emergent Public Face," which includes pieces that document activist organising and interactions with the mainstream LGBT movement in Australia; and the third section, "Essays," which more embody the style of an academic critique. However, essays within the third section frequently display the tone of memoir and life testimony, and works across the collection often engage with the theoretical languages of critical race theory and queer theory. The introduction by Troy-Anthony Baylis notes the

deliberate choice of the editor not to impose a consistent terminology or a neat classification of writers into identity categories consistently across the collection as a means of preserving the nuance of how each contributor relates to the "slipperiness of our identifications" (17). The division of the works into these three styles of narration and areas of concern, however, may habituate the reader into seeing each segment as discreet, when there are themes and modes of address which appear across the collection.

Van Neerven's *Heat and Light* is also divided into three sections, "Heat," "Water," and "Light." The first section, "Heat," is a five-part family saga which shifts temporally between past and present and details the story of the Kresinger family in southeast Queensland. "Light," the third section, brings the reader back to contemporary Australia. It is a collection of ten short stories which travel across Queensland, Western Australia, and Sydney. The protagonists are most often young women at formative stages, exploring sexuality, relationships, identity, and mental illness. The middle section, "Water," is a longer Indigenous Futurist novella.

The disjuncture between these three stylistically distinct, but interrelated, segments of the book unsettles reader expectations. There is a compulsive habit in the settler literary critic world to try to categorise Aboriginal work within conventions of western genre distinctions, and this continues in reader responses to *Heat and Light*. While Helena Kadmos identifies these three sections in western generic terms as "part short story cycle, part long story, part short story collection" (2018, np), she also acknowledges the limits of western genre discourses which might compel readers to seek these definitional terms at all to anchor their understandings, noting,

> The generic boundaries between texts by Aboriginal writers (such as life story and fiction) were often blurred, a sentiment echoed by speculative fiction writer Ambelin Kwaymullina, who claims that 'Indigenous narratives rarely fit neatly into

> Western genre divisions' (26), and scholar and poet Jeanine Leane, who dismisses western generic boundaries as too reductive for some Indigenous texts (Leane and Kwaymullina qtd. in Kadmos 2018, np)

While reviewers and critics puzzle over the appropriate genre labels to attribute to text like van Neerven's, it should be recognised that Aboriginal writers actively intervene with western genre forms with an intention to disrupt. Leane has described this engagement as embodying an "eclecticism," a playful and intentional interference which challenges what is known about writing in the west (2020, np). Kadmos recognises the troubling effect that Aboriginal women's writing in particular has on the genre borders between fiction and non-fiction, acknowledging that "among contemporary Aboriginal women writers, short stories, often drawing on personal and family histories filtered through contemporary narrative practices, feature strongly" (2018, np). The short story cycle, the label often applied to *Heat and Light* due to its multiple, stylistically and narratively discreet but connected threads, has been attributed to the writing of women and 'ethnic minorities', as Kadmos has written. The episodic form of the cycle has been understood this way due to its ability to engage with complex and multilayered realities, representing a "myriad of truths" rather than a single truth (Kadmos 2014, 32).

*Throat* (2020) is van Neerven's third book. Reviews of the text by Jeanine Leane and Yorta Yorta man Declan Fry both note that the collection challenges western structures of both genre and gender, seeming to collapse one into the other and disorienting both. Fry writes, for example, "*Throat* is a collection that crosses boundaries: of gender, genre, culture, history. Throughout the work you catch yourself, half unconscious, half wondering, dazzled and spent and continually recovering" (2020, np). Leane also identifies the active critique of genre present within the text and links it with the confusion of western gender languages, writing, "There is much in *Throat* in

both form and content that exposes the limits of, defies, critiques and rejects colonial binaries of genre and gender" (2020, np).

**Performativity and Normativity in Sistergirl Narrative**

Brie Ngala Curtis' oral history *Kungakunga: Staying Close to Family and Country*, as told to Dino Hodge, details her story of growing up in a small community, Ackwerrnarrte, near Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. She documents for the reader her early years growing up with her family, 'coming out' as a sistergirl, and her continuing advocacy work for sistergirls both in the territory and at a national level. Curtis' identical twin sister, Rosalina, is also a sistergirl, and 'comes out' as a teenager, while it takes Curtis a little longer to begin a medical transition and identify openly as sistergirl. Both sisters have connections to Warlpiri, Luritja, and Arrente nations, and Curtis is a founding member of the organisation Sisters and Brothers NT, an advocacy and support agency for trans people in the NT in Alice Springs. In the opening pages, Curtis discloses a story of being discovered by her grandmother, a "strong, cultural woman", while dressing in women's clothes as a child:

> I was a really feminine little boy. I always used to play with the girls and dressing up and all that. My grandmother was the first person to catch me cross-dressing. She growled me only because of the fact that I was wearing her clothing. Oh, she swore, and I got upset and started crying. But she said to me to not worry about what people would say about what I'd wear as long as I'm happy. Yeah, we grew up really Christian as well. My grandmother was very Christian. Even though she was really traditional and cultural, she had a really strong Christian background and belief. (36)

Despite how deeply Christianity is rooted in Curtis' family life (she later describes becoming more committed to the church during a difficult period in her life and reflects positively on how finding God enabled her survival and affirmed her sistergirl identity as she transitioned), the presence of the church in the life of her community does not interrupt the recognised place that sistergirls hold in her community. Her staunchly Christian grandmother, when Curtis has grown into a teenager, reflects with her on the accepted history of trans people in her community:

> One day when I was a bit older, in my teens, I sat down with my grandmother and said to her about why she didn't mind me wearing girls' clothes. She said that there were always sistergirls in Aboriginal culture and there always were trans people long before European settlement in Australia. And people like her tribal group - being the last tribe to be discovered in Australia - I believe her for that because she didn't come into contact with a white person until she was a teenager. (37)

Christianity has a complicated place in the life stories of queer and trans Indigenous people. For Curtis, while the presence of the church and the historical legacy of missionaries presents a potential threat to her being accepted, she narrates how the moral codes of the church have been incorporated and integrated into community life and the value system of Ackwerrnarrte. While Curtis acknowledges that she went through "lot of bullying" which forced her out of school, she comments that the church she went to "didn't exclude Aboriginal culture at all" and that religion could be practiced secondary to the community's culture (38). This flexibility enables her to continue participating in family life and feel a sense of belonging.

As she explores her identity, going through a "sort of evolving" process of trying to be "straight," then living as a gay man "for a few years," before eventually transitioning, Curtis describes complex conversations and negotiations with family

members around her gender expression. At a difficult moment, when confronting puberty and contending with tumultuous emotions, she experiences the pressure of expectation to undertake initiation: "My feelings as a teenager were really intense. I've had family members saying, 'Oh you're reaching puberty now. You're almost ready to go through men's ceremony', and all that" (Curtis, 38). However, Curtis is given control over her self-identification as a sistergirl in a formative conversation with her father:

> my father being a tribal law man himself, he sat down - because obviously he could see I was different - and he said: 'No, it's your decision. You do it, whatever you want. If you want to go through it, you can go through it, but nobody's going to touch your body unless you say so'. Yeah, he's very strong and he gave us that option. I've never been through men's ceremony and I'm not intending to. (38)

Ceremony, as discussed between Curtis and her father, is a way of marking her body culturally and socially as male, and this process is done as part of a collective group. However, in this passage, it is made clear that this social marking is to be done only with her explicit and full agreement. The process of becoming a man in this context is achieved collectively through ceremonial practices which would mark her body irreversibly and induct her into a gendered social role within community.

This is a powerful moment. Many of us, as Indigenous trans people living in a colonial culture in Australia, particularly those of us who are urban living, have had to continuously negotiate the social experiences of being gendered without our consent. Curtis's identity, in this passage, is the subject of an affirming and active negotiation of gendered social relationships in a collective and ongoing discussion. This negotiation is premised on bodily autonomy, consent, and belonging. Markings made on her body are to be determined by her and won't be forced, and thus gendering is, in this passage, negotiated in relation to others, but not coercive or disciplinary by any

means. Curtis's story provides us with both the opportunity to demonstrate some of the ways we make sense of gender as well as providing some complexity in how it reveals the limits of a disciplinary understanding of gender.

Disciplinary normativity is a central concept in the western queer theoretical lens. It is integral to the construction and understanding of queer and trans subjects and is characterised as coercive and inextricably linked to power relations. Foucault's history of sexuality, for example, provides an account of how disciplinary power produces sexual identity. Exploring homonormativity, Eliza Garwood notes that queer theory's central concern and method comes from an understanding of disciplinary biopower and normativity, citing the "routine erasure of marginalised non-normative sexual identities and practices" which normativity engenders, "while enhancing regulatory power relations within and between certain legible identity groups" (6). Queer Indigenous studies scholars, expanding on Foucault's understanding of sexuality as a conduit of power, have conceptualised sexuality as an "especially…dense transfer point for specifically imperial power" and have argued, as trans Murri scholar Oscar Monaghan has done, that "the centrality of sexuality to colonial power relations help explain its importance to settlers" (Monaghan. See, also Morgensen and Smith for further development of this idea).

The primacy of normativity within queer and trans studies has also been problematised by Indigenous scholars and other scholars of colour. Sahiba Allouche, in her exploration of "strategic nomadic marriage" between same sex desiring people in Lebanon, notes that "it is the theory, rather than the queer element itself, that often is hegemonized in queer scholarship (9), and instructs readers that "To write wilfully from and about queerness from a non-western standpoint is to question western academics' insistence on queering stuff'' (11). When looking at sistergirl life stories, the logic of normativity, bound up as it is in processes of coercion, discipline, and biopower, is

challenged. Sistergirl identity is entwined with, as Brown has stated, cultural and spiritual structures, not just disciplinary and institutional structures which act to regulate Indigenous life. When Curtis goes through important moments of 'coming out' and begins to articulate her identity as a sistergirl within her family structure, her belonging within culture and her bodily autonomy, and the broader belonging of sistergirls in the clan groups to which she belongs, are reaffirmed. Curtis is able to negotiate her ability to mark herself culturally in gendered terms or withhold from a social categorisation as male. Sistergirls, Curtis is told by her family, lived among the community as women pre-colonisation:

> the trans women at that time would join the women to do traditional women duties like cooking, collecting bush fruit, growing up the children, and making bush medicine. They go through women's ceremony and they'd be respected as women. They'd have relationships with men and be married. (37)

Queer and trans Indigenous people have also related critically to the idea of performativity and agency in understanding how we navigate the complex and power-laden fields of gendered colonial power. The western idea of performativity in relation to gender has been criticised for the lack of attention it gives to how Indigenous peoples relate to gender. Riggs and Toone have noted, when discussing sistergirls, how critical understandings of gender

> fail to acknowledge the cultural contexts that shape the category "sistergirl"… it is important to acknowledge the sovereign relationship to country that sistergirls hold, and how the ontological implications of this relationship differentiate them from other groups who may be located under the umbrella of "trans and gender diverse." (229)

It is vital to consider how sovereign relationships to country shape how Indigenous people experience and articulate gender. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, for example, notes how Indigenous women's standpoint is constructed and exercised relationally, involving connections to land, ancestors, and the spirit world (see Moreton-Robinson 2014). The Larrakia poet and activist Laniyuk has written in *Colouring the Rainbow* about how she navigated racism and homophobia growing up in Darwin and Adelaide by purposefully "manipulating people's perceptions of me" (Garcon-Mills, 76), has also made an important intervention into performativity discourse by explaining how Indigenous people's gender performativity is inherently tied to our engagements with our ancestral Country (Laniyuk 2018, np). Gender identity, then, for Indigenous peoples, is necessarily bound up with how we experience our cultural and collective belonging. These written life stories critically emphasise both the need to, as Butler and Williams write, "figur[e] out how to live with and against the constructions—or norms—that help to form us" and to, on occasion, "reject those vocabularies, or actively develop new ones" (Butler and Williams 2013, np). They also, vitally, expand on this analysis by showing how Indigenous peoples experience our genders in collaborative and ongoing negotiation with community and country.

**Ungendered Ancestors in Ellen van Neerven's Water**

In the novella "Water", the dystopian Indigenous Futurist story which sits between two short story phases in *Heat and Light*, trans and non-binary author Ellen van Neerven writes a relationship between a young queer Yugambeh cultural liaison worker and an Yugambeh ancestral being (van Neerven 2014). Their relationship takes place on Yugambeh country, on the islands of Moreton Bay, in the context of a destruction of country in the area under the new 'progressive' regime of President Tanya Sparkle. The fictional future President Sparkle is intent on solving the problem of Indigenous land

rights by islandising the waters of Moreton Bay to create 'Australia2', a new country which dispossessed Indigenous people can live on. Kaden, van Neerven's protagonist, is seduced by Larapinta, a member of the Jangigir or 'plantpeople'. The Jangigir, a mysterious race of creatures, neither human, animal, nor plant, are 'discovered' during the islandising project by the staff of the Science Centre who are in charge of managing the area in preparation for Australia2's construction. Kaden carries on a secret sexual relationship with Larapinta for some time before it is revealed by an Uncle that the Jangigir are her ancestor beings,

> our old people. Spirits. Something happened when the dug brought the sea up. They rose with it…their knowledge goes back, big time, Bub. They've helped us piece back our language. And they're going to help us stop this. (van Neerven 2014, 113)

The sexual relationship with this ancestor being provokes Kaden to reconnect to her country and community and take action against the science centre's project.

Because of the ways that Kaden and Larapinta's relationship is explored in *Water* as a transgressive human/nonhuman queer sexual encounter, this story has been described by some critics as a queer ecofeminist text (see Grassi 2017). However, the story actively resists queer language and presents an unresolved relationship to gender and sexuality. Kaden and Larapinta's genders remain ambiguous. Kaden reflects in conversation with Larapinta, when asked about whether she feels like a woman, that "even though I have short hair…I tell her that hair is the least of it" (van Neerven 2014, 95). The plantpeople express their gender through responsive social adaptation. Among the jangigir, "both the males and females are identical. She has no breasts. I understand they are ungendered; see, their gender is not predetermined and is only communicated" (78). When Larapinta asks Kaden directly how she identifies, Kaden responds, "'Queer, I guess.' I say. 'I know it's an old-fashioned word…some words are

loaded, will always be loaded,'" to which Larapita replies, "'That is fine. I do not know the common usage of words. They are bricks, aren't they?'" (95). This designation of words like queer as 'bricks' recalls the description by Rusty Nannup of transgender as something which can only be described as "bureaucratic"; bricks are blunt, functional, and impersonal. They can also be used as a tool or a weapon.

**The Subversion of Damage and the Celebration of Blak non-Binary experience in *Throat***

Van Neerven's 2020 work *Throat* is divided into five segments: *they haunt-walk in*, *whiteness is always approaching*, *I can't wait to meet my future genders*, *speaking outside*, and *take me to the back of my throat.* It is their third collection of writing, following *Comfort Food* (2016). Like "Water," it is a work that refuses easy definition in how it presents gender and sexuality. The early pages of the book, *they haunt-walk in*, address an episode of vicious online harassment of van Neerven by high school students on twitter and Facebook following the inclusion of one of the poems in *Comfort Food* in the HSC exam in 2017. On the opening page, they remember the harassment and their withdrawal:

> memories sometimes come backwards. They haunt-walk in. Haunting, walking, and sugar and chocolates my friends give me after 'the incident'. 'We are in admiration of how you handled yourself. We thought you conducted yourself with such dignity and grace'. I did nothing but lie in my bed (2020, 3)

*I can't wait to meet my future genders* explores body dysphoria and discomfort, but maintains a sense of clarity and desire. The text critiques white queer culture. The limits of western queer language bend and break when confronted by the experiences of the Blak non-binary body:

sometimes I want to create a dictionary together
because this body is rejecting the common names
and the common ways (2020, 76)

The limits of queer language are again highlighted when sharing conversation with queers from South East Asia while travelling. Together, they touch on other possibilities to experience gender and sexuality outside of that same colonial dictionary:

We speak about gender before colonisation
we speak about love before colonisation
Remembering-forgetting-knowing-needing (2020, 83)

The poem *Dysphoria* describes a defamiliarised and suffocating experience of the body, the disjuncture between the internal experience of the body and its externality. They write of the desire

to take clothes off
to take them off but also take
off another layer underneath
peel away those expectations
get closer to my truth (2020, 77)

A dissociative experience of dysphoria is there in the writing, but it sits alongside complexity. The poet is "juggling shame, guilt, and alienation with the desire to feel free, connected, and powerful" (van Neerven 2020, 76). Disorientation and pain are a part of the experience of their body and how they connect to others, and they describe seeing someone "in an embrace with another part of me" (76). But with these experiences, there is also clarity, love, and a hopeful desire for another space in which to express the language of the body. The relation of van Neerven's work to pain and trauma is complex and open, allowing for possibilities and power. Just as Eve Tuck

invited all of us as her peers to "consider the long-term repercussions of *thinking of ourselves as broken*",van Neerven openly plays with conceptions of themselves which fixate on trauma (Tuck, 409). Leane, in her review of the work, reflects how the work's "stoicism and strength" subverts the gaze of any reader who define it in terms of trauma. The power to be still—immovable in the face of challenge and adversity—should not be underestimated, nor should it be misread as inertia…the poet refuses to be intimidated by it. Nor will they be reduced by it. When they write - "*So I'm walking-dead-haunting-live and there seems nothing left to write about but my trauma*" - the sentiment is the opposite to the words on the page. It is a case of appearance versus reality and an example of the poet critiquing another pernicious stereotype of Aboriginal people, that we are nothing but the sum total of ongoing colonial trauma. (Leane 2020, np)

Leane takes care to recognise van Neerven's autonomy and strength. She makes note of the strength of their stoicism against both the acts of racism they suffered, as well as the presumption of their passivity in its face. Yorta Yorta man Declan Fry similarly notes the explicitness of desire in the work, which responds directly to the experience of harassment, refusing to let it be the centre of the writing. He asks whether, following *Comfort Food*, "Perhaps the intervening years, and the moronic inferno of their bullying, revealed comfort to be a troubled and uneasy refuge for the poet" and recognises that "Van Neerven remains, however, implacably hungry" (Fry, np).

**Conclusion**

When examining western texts on performativity and normativity, Indigenous trans writing provides frameworks for complicating settler colonialism's influence on how sexuality and gender are understood. Our texts negate damage, and in establishing

desire-based frameworks across a diversity of forms, they do the work of honouring histories of trans life in our communities and questioning non-normativity and disciplinary power as the condition of queer and trans identity formation. In writing this analysis, I seek to open discussion, through these texts, of how normativity and performativity can be understood in settler colonial contexts and within the lived experiences of Indigenous trans people. Hunger, desire, and complex experiences of affirmation and belonging live in these works, along with active challenges to western queer norms.

*Notes*

[1] See a brief history of Deacon's use of the word 'Blak' here: https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/05/07/why-blak-not-black-artist-destiny-deacon-and-origins-word-1.

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