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Indigenous Studies Working Group Statement

Sonya Atalay, William Lempert, David Delgado Shorter, and Kim TallBear

PROLOGUE

Breakthrough Listen is an initiative of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) which, launched in 2015, conducts searches for wavelengths and laser emissions, and uses the Automated Planet Finder (APF) and other telescopes to look for nanosecond optical pulses. Beyond data from observatories and telescopes, the Breakthrough Listen initiative also seeks to investigate the extent of life in the universe. They occasionally host meetings to hear from experts in disciplines other

SONYA ATALAY (professor of anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst) is an Indigenous archaeologist who conducts research in full partnership with Indigenous communities utilizing community-based participatory methods. Her scholarship incorporates Native American and Indigenous studies with archaeology and includes a series of graphic novels about the return of Native American ancestral remains, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. WILLIAM LEMPERT is an assistant professor of anthropology at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. His research engages the dynamic process of filmmaking as a critical mode of political transformation and draws on years of work with Indigenous media organizations in the Kimberley region of Northwestern Australia. That ethnographic fieldwork also informs his current writing on the potential of Indigenous futurisms to reimagine the proliferation of virtual reality and outer space colonization. DAVID DELGADO SHORTER is professor of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at the University of California, Los Angeles. Director of the Wiki for Indigenous Languages and the Archive of Healing, he is the author of *We Will Dance Our Truth: Yoeme History in Yaqui Performances*. He studies the borderlands of science, including the study of the paranormal and concepts of healing across cultures. KIM TALLBEAR is professor and Canada research chair in Indigenous Peoples, Technoscience, and Society, Faculty of Native Studies, University of Alberta. A regular panelist on the Media Indigena podcast and a citizen of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, she is the author of *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. Dr. TallBear studies colonial disruptions to Indigenous sexual relations.

than astronomy, as was the case in early 2018, when the four of us were invited to constitute an Indigenous studies working group that would write and present a statement to Breakthrough Listen. We were asked to respond to the question, “what would you most want SETI scientists to know about potentially making contact?”

We were to keep our statement to roughly three pages and Shorter was specifically instructed to avoid all commentary about whether contact had already begun. The four of us decided to simply take the Breakthrough Listen self-description at face value, which informs us that:

The Breakthrough Listen Initiative, sponsored by the Breakthrough Prize Foundation, is the most powerful, comprehensive and intensive scientific search ever undertaken for signs of intelligent life beyond Earth. The project is using the Green Bank radio telescope in West Virginia, the Parkes Telescope in Australia and the MeerKat Array in South Africa to search for radio transmissions from advanced civilizations. In addition, the Automated Planet Finder at Lick Observatory is being used to search for optical laser transmissions from other technological civilizations.¹

Rather than focus on the mechanical operations of measuring equipment, we chose to focus on the terms “science,” “intelligence,” “advanced civilizations,” and “technology.” We then scanned their website and obvious representations for their ethical statement. We did not, and do not in this *AICRJ* special issue, review the vast, sometimes contradictory views of their members and those communicated at public-facing events.

We attempted in our statement to simply address their question honestly. We could not respond from a unified perspective because Indigenous studies is itself complex, polyvalent, and transdisciplinary. We decided to coalesce around research ethics. We then, without prompting, provided some individual responses to reflect our respective training and research areas. These were neither asked for, nor were they meaningfully engaged by Breakthrough Listen participants. We are providing below our statement because we want it entered into the public record. The statement’s tone is uneven at times, as products of multiple authors often are, though our interests converge around SETI’s ways of imagining species and planetary messages. We feel the unevenness demonstrates a key aspect of collectively crafted communications: if a statement from four people to a dozen seems confusing, then how do we expect to project one message from earth’s population or expect any single reply in return? Who is authorized to author such communiques? We can easily imagine a different four scholars from Indigenous studies having differing, invigorating, and critical responses.

What follows has not been edited in content or in its occasionally ungrammatical form. Please refer to the introduction to this issue by TallBear and Shorter to learn more about this working group statement and the dynamics of our engagement after presenting it to Breakthrough Listen. We believe that many readers reading this statement in tandem with this special issue’s introductory essay will resonate with our feeling of being unheard, despite scientists’ claims of working for all of humanity or the advancement of civilization.

INDIGENOUS STUDIES WORKING GROUP STATEMENT TO BREAKTHROUGH LISTEN (MAY 26, 2018)

Thank you for asking for our thoughts regarding your endeavor. We are collectively scholars who are Indigenous or work with Indigenous communities. We teach courses in Indigenous Studies, research methods, knowledge mobilization, theories of knowing, media studies, and even classes on aliens and UFOs. We explicitly appreciate the territorial acknowledgement on your webpage. And, since we are new to the conversation, we also appreciate your patience if our very recent reading of your materials repeats previous contributions and critiques. Because of the fundamental importance of our ethical mandate, and that this is the first time we've been invited to speak on this socially important endeavor, we cannot hold ourselves to a one page maximum. Thank you for this as we learn how to be heard in your fields.

We will first respond to the materials you sent, make one recommendation, and then three of us offer individual contributions as a means of personalizing our respective research areas. In reading your preliminary "Group Statement," we are impressed by your ability to bring so many concerns into a concise positionality. As we are evidencing, group statements are difficult to compose while making everyone happy. Yours accentuates not only the history but the key questions you are considering at this point. Please consider our points of articulation below as suggestions about where you could further improve such statements. Drawing together diverse areas of learning in this interdisciplinary way is crucial for success in the important endeavor you are undertaking and braiding such knowledges together will make this work more rigorous.

First, we note that the "Group Statement" starts with the intention that, "we are attempting to make contact," but without a discussion of the ethics of contact or indication that there are protocols of care in place around this research endeavor. Our professions have learned hard lessons about how crucial such protocols are. Our research fields and those of us in this working group have extensive expertise and experience in issues of consent, care and protection of human subjects through explicit research protocols; rigorous review through Institutional Review Board requirements; and more importantly the general ethics of research in and with diverse communities, Indigenous peoples in particular. We are concerned foremost with what seems to be a lack of clear statement and method of communicating your regard for the health and well-being of "others" that you may contact.

Many Indigenous ways of greeting others begin with an intention of well-being. And, as long as cultures have been making "first" contacts with other people, consequences undeniably follow. In almost every contact situation with Europeans, the Indigenous people of the Americas suffered disease, wide-scale death, and destruction. BL and SETI researchers should explicitly consider their own cultural grounding and reflect on how the assumption that there are "advanced civilizations" that encounter less advanced peoples (and associated excitement and fear) are forged in the fires of settler colonial violence in the Americas and elsewhere. These well-known colonial encounters form much of the intellectual foundation for current ways of thinking

about “civilizations,” often leading to uncritical assumptions about progressive linearity in the development of life. With this in mind, we suggest developing research protocols and a statement clearly outlining the principles of care you are using to guide your attempts at contact.

Second, we note that your working group statement could be substantially strengthened by demonstrating your understanding of the complexity and diversity around several terms.

Currently, the statement shows clear anthropocentric and Western bias. For example, you write: “Moreover, irrespective of the intentions of a putative extraterrestrial civilization, the detection of spectrally or temporally compressed electromagnetic radiation represents one of the best-known means of remotely sensing an extraterrestrial technology, and by extension, an intelligent civilization.” Cultures are not either intelligent or not. You’re using a measurement that was designed for a person, on a collectivity (a group of people) which is a form of both racism/speciesism and essentialism. Work in our fields clearly demonstrate how such terms have dire unintentional consequences, particularly in situations of first contact.

In order to measure intelligence, one would have to agree on the terms of evaluation: linguistic diversity, skill acquisition, development of arts, large scale economic systems, etc. Please keep in mind that each of these have already been shown to be poor and inadequate indicators of intelligence, misrepresented when seen, or not seen at all due to the chasm between expectations and reality. The “intelligence” (and related concepts) in your statement requires some contextualization, which would help demonstrate your awareness of variables in intelligence measuring. Intelligence is contextual and your definition, as stated, is based on technology as if technology is also not contextual.

Said another way, excellence in one thing (time/space/dimensional travel or long range signaling) does not mean advancement in anything else. And we know from countless books that contact between cultures is highly dependent upon the fantasies, fears, and expectations of otherness. Our working group members can speak at length about contact scenarios throughout history on multiple continents, recounting stories told both before and after contact, by both the contacted, and the contactors. Understanding these “contact zones” is our professional bread-and-butter. And we unequivocally want to express that we are setting ourselves up for quite a surprise if we think that an entire culture, or civilization, or a population is “more advanced,” or less so, comparatively. Also, Jill Tarter and others have made important contributions about searching for “technology” rather than “intelligence” (though see Shorter’s individual response below regarding contextualizing technology).

Third, your statement offers a key moment of self-perception when you write that “And the kinds of signals we look for are based on extrapolating from our own technology.” Please extend this line of thinking to other aspects of your project. Everything that you are relying on as “standard” is in fact culturally specific (not only anthropocentric, but Eurocentric) and is formed out of a metaparadigm. As Thomas Kuhn wrote in his benchmark book on changing scientific practices: while we might recognize that paradigms will shift (such as an understanding of cultural categories or a scientific

method), we rarely recognize how *meta*-paradigms shift since our practices of making and sharing knowledge are rooted in historically limited group think (peer review) and precedential methods (assuming what was right before is right now). More importantly, meta-paradigms shift perhaps every couple hundred years. No one can see them within a lifetime or even in a few generations. Yet, a couple hundred years is not very long in the long duration of galaxies, black holes, wormholes, planets, big bangs, and multidimensionality. Most extraterrestrial literature has failed to recognize that the life in other dimensions or galaxies might not in fact be carbon based, might not rely on our laws of physics, and might not share any of our biological or psychological needs and desires. Accordingly, we conceive of bodies and selves as having certain characteristics and functions. Such concepts are human-ly and culturally biased as well. Allopathic medicine already often fails to consider ourselves as more than physiological responses. As Indigenous people around the world are aware, humans and others are more than their physicality. Any concept of a “being” should be open to including telepathy, energetic, non-local, collective, spiritual, empathetic, and on and on.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

We collectively discussed the many aspects of your project that are of interest, value, and concern. However, we remain unsure of how our contributions will be heard, much less implemented. We have accordingly decided to keep our suggestion as simple and direct as possible. Thus, we have one actionable item that summarizes our advised step toward a more ethical project.

In light of the above points of discussion, we recommend that your organization devote effort to the crafting of a Mission Statement, “Charter,” or “Principles of Research Ethics.” Breakthrough Listen and SETI’s intention of making contact is, from our current standing, immoral. When we think about the long history of culture contact on this planet, the evidence is troubling. SETI could do one thing that draws a distinction from the missionaries, resource extractors, conquistadors, explorers, traders, colonizers, slave raiders, and travelers that have been engaged in contact situations before: SETI could express their intentions in making contact while also acknowledging the complex matters of the endeavor. We note that Billingham (1991), D. Tarter (1992), and others have called for Principles to be in place following detection. We agree principles are very much needed at that stage, but we also strongly feel that ethics principles and guidelines are urgently needed at this stage of listening and to provide ethical guidance demonstrating utmost care in your efforts to contact.

A statement of intent, no matter how you label it, would go far in dispelling a range of criticism and even outright dismissal. A statement of goals and best practices forces you to show that you have at least thought of possible harms. Just as we were asked to sign IRB forms for your meetings this week, how has SETI similarly worked to ensure the ethical practice of their work? We recognize that we were sent a range of materials, links, and documents. We were hoping for one, primary, statement on ethics, which addresses the following:

- ♦ We agree with Jill Tarter and others' assessment that the use of "intelligence" in SETI's name is inaccurate as the search is actually for "technologies". Despite the name recognition of "SETI", we think being straightforward about this misnomer is crucial and being outright about this provides the opportunity to demonstrate your recognition about the diversity of "intelligences" that exist (as we've outlined in our statement above)
- ♦ What is the most direct and simple answer to WHY contact is important to the involved scientists, organizations, and funders? The benefits to them should be explicitly stated.
- ♦ What are SETI's methods, specifically in content and form? How much assurance do you have that the content and form (waves/particles/electrons/vibrations) of your attempts at contact will not cause harm to not-solely-earth-based-life?
- ♦ Where do you acknowledge that life might look much differently, so much so that notions of bodies, thinking, emotions, perception, carbon-based life, might not apply? Since natural resource extraction has fueled much culture contact around this planet, might you feel compelled to say outright that animacy will be assumed until proven differently? How will you determine who is living versus what is not? Can you recognize that on that one simple issue, "Who is alive?" Indigenous people on this planet generally (though not completely) disagree with object-oriented scientists.
- ♦ Where do you acknowledge that no society is wholly intelligent or that there is no objective way to judge that one society is more "advanced" than another?
- ♦ Where do you state clearly that life, in all forms, has a right to refuse contact? Can you state that, as the people seeking contact (demonstrating the will and intent), the responsibility lies with you to protect those contacted from your contagions, influence, and societal interruption?

The Breakthrough Initiatives web page featured a claim that we as a civilization are now adults. Without going into why such a concept is civilizational and progressivist, allow us to simply go with this notion that somehow, we as a society are smarter and more "mature" than we once were. In that case, we feel that maturity would entail stating your intentions clearly and also acting responsibly regarding the welfare of beings/life forms besides our own. Considering both the *United Nations Declarations of Rights of Indigenous People* and the *United Nations Doctrine on the Responsibility to Protect*, you have some reliably well-reviewed general statements for guidance. Moreover, that you have invited our opinions and have offered links such as J.T. Wright and Michael P. Oman-Reagan are good signs. The "Territorial Acknowledgment" on your website also demonstrates that your organization might be in a particularly fertile moment, and we suggest you not lose this traction toward a clear, overt statement on your reasoned, informed, and historically conscientious ethical intentions.

WORKING GROUP MEMBERS' COMMENTS

Beyond the points raised above, three of us would like to point out how some of the areas of our research have already theorized issues surrounding contact.

Sonya Atalay

Intent \neq impact, we must consider *both*. You may have no harmful intent and only positive intentions, but we know from Indigenous-European contact that good intentions without careful concern for impact can be *disastrous*. School children today learn about past explorers/culture contacts with critical eyes; likewise, our descendants will judge our actions. What plans are/can be put in place that show we've learned from those massive errors of the past to ensure first contacts with ETs can be non-harming/non-exploitative? We provide suggestions above in our call for developing a statement of care and interspecies research protocols. If we consider a 'first, do no harm' approach, how do we best consider what may harm?

For considering and becoming familiar with diversity of science knowledge frameworks, it will be helpful to familiarize yourself with this statement:

<http://www.esf.edu/Indigenous-science-letter/>

To whom is this effort responsible? To "science"? To all humans and other life on earth? Is there consideration for Indigenous responsibilities for seven generations into the future, or to other concepts of "responsibility"?

William Lempert

There is a reason that virtually all Western science fiction imaginaries project violent settler or resource-extraction colonial encounters. Indeed, there is a built-in assumption that either they will kill us (*Independence Day*) or that we should kill them (*District 9*). This is a clear projection of a violent colonial disposition onto other beings. Essentially, dominant Western imaginaries assume that they would be like "us." Even in heartwarming buddy alien films (*E.T.*), there is a backdrop of governmental agents trying to find and, in all likelihood, torture, that being. Even in the recent film *Arrival*—which provides an interesting take on temporality and language in understanding extraterrestrials—the governments of the world are on a hair-trigger alert to potentially attack them.

To what extent are SETI and Breakthrough Listen colonial endeavors, and what are their potential outcomes, intended or otherwise? (As Sonya articulates above). Many in the "NewSpacer" class argue that outer space exploration represents a sort of "moral colonialism" without Indigenous people, drawing on colonial tropes around "frontiers," "colonies," and "voyages." However, beyond seemingly high-minded discussions around scientific benefits of, say a Martian base, is a desperation to preserve "Western civilization," especially in light of a quickly devolving global environmental crisis.

When we more deeply consider the pragmatic ends of such endeavors, as with European colonialism, there is a similar desire for capturing territory and resources. As noted, one could argue that there is a colonial dynamic in the framing of this very working group, as the questions posed are framed around inclusionary engagement and lessons regarding cross-cultural communication, rather than some of the more fundamental queries asked of other groups, which might challenge the foundational tenets of these discussions. For example, what if we examined the implications around following question: "*Is it morally defensible for Western countries to attempt to contact life beyond Earth in light of the overwhelming history of violent colonial encounters?*" This

would make for an altogether different kind of discussion directly relating to key insights that Indigenous studies scholars might offer.

Western scientists and societies are poorly equipped to identify, understand, or ethically engage with extraterrestrial life. For example, the track record on Earth with other obviously “intelligent” creatures (e.g., dolphins) or even those incredibly similar to humans (e.g., great apes) has been nothing short of disastrous. Indeed, it is likely that all such beings will be extinct in the wild in a matter of decades, not to mention other beings whose intelligence scientists are even less likely to understand or value. Any life we encounter beyond Earth is certain to be exceedingly more perplexing for scientists, with perceptions of time, self, and communication that are incommensurate with Western ways of understanding.

David Shorter

The burgeoning field of multi-speciesism is born from a conjunction between the history of the Science, ethnographic methods, theories of ontology, and Indigenous Studies. From that literature, we have learned much about how other societies understand relations “beyond the human,” meaning with rocks, plants, landscapes, planets, meteorological events, and of course animals. People clearly have been understanding intersubjectively what “Western Science” (a problematic label we can address later) has considered an objective world. Here lies the crux of major disagreements between STEM knowledge making and Indigenous knowledge making practices. If the world, and its best practices for discerning truth, rely solely on object-oriented epistemology, then we disagree on ontological matters (or what or who is real). And if we cannot see any common ground on ontology, then we have little hope of agreeing on axiology (how to value, establish moral action).

“Things” might not be “things” at all. It follows that if we understand communication in only its physical form then we are studying only a particular technology of communication, which would be born from a particular history of a particular communicator or communicative community. If we open our notion, then, of how communication takes place within and across species and beings, then we see how communication is possible beyond writing and speech (which are two very particular technologies of communication). And if actions are themselves types of communication, then your group is communicating not only in your content, but also in your attempt to contact someone in any particular manner. Do you know that the means of communication is not only not offensive, but not harmful? We are not asking you to theorize that you might not do harm; but to literally demonstrate that you are not doing harm. Otherwise, you are not passing the first step of your Institutional Review Boards.

As a conceptual shift, I’d suggest thinking of Contact not as a singular event on a given day; contact is a phase that happens in multiple ways. In various continents, peoples spent time watching, listening, trying to understand others before shared presence was attempted. The language of the documents I reviewed seem to be pointing to some moment that will happen, rather than a long process that has already begun by our attempt to hear and see. That’s part of the contact phase, which makes getting the ethics right so important early on.

CONCLUSION

Considering how long people have been ignoring Indigenous knowledge-making practices, we appreciate you hoping to learn from those in other fields and we think that such interdisciplinarity is the only way this effort will see success. If Breakthrough Listen would like further assistance connecting with other Indigenous knowledge keepers who may wish to share concerns and information directly with your organization, then it will be important to discuss how BL, SETI, and affiliated research groups engage with these individuals ethically and showing respect for their time and knowledge. Cautious, yet hopeful, we look forward to hearing how you plan on sharing space with us and the communities that our research often hopes to respect.

SUGGESTED READINGS PROVIDED BY WORKING GROUP TO BREAKTHROUGH LISTEN²

- John Billingham, Michael Michaud, and Jill Tarter, "The Declaration of Principles for Activities Following the Detection of Extraterrestrial Intelligence," in *Bioastronomy: The Search for Extraterrestrial Life—The Exploration Broadens* (Lecture Notes in Physics; Berlin: Springer, 1991), 379–86.
- "Breakthrough Listen Initiative," University of California Berkeley Department of Astronomy, <https://astro.berkeley.edu/research-facilities/projects/breakthrough-listen/>.
- Julie Cruickshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005).
- Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," in *Teachings from the American Earth. Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock (New York: Liveright, 1975), 141–77.
- Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).
- Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013).
- Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1962]).
- Kenneth Morrison, "Animism and A Proposal for a Post-Cartesian Anthropology," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013), 38–52.
- Greg Sarris, *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013, 1997).
- Donald E. Tarter, "Interpreting and Reporting on a SETI Discovery: We Should Be Prepared," *Space Policy* 8, no. 2 (1992): 137–48, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0265-9646\(92\)90037-V](https://doi.org/10.1016/0265-9646(92)90037-V).
- Native Science Fiction Film Online Video Archive, <https://medium.com/space-anthropology/native-sci-fi-films-and-film-trailers-ce6d3c4d8309>.

NOTES

1. See <https://astro.berkeley.edu/p/breakthrough-listen>.
2. Note that these suggested readings have been reformatted in Chicago style.