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Vol. 25, issue 1 (2021)

**Indigenous Resistance in the Digital Age.  
The Politics of Language, Media and Culture**

Edited by Anna Mongibello and Bronwyn Carlson

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## Indigenous Resistance in the Digital Age. An Introduction

Our presence is our weapon, and this is visible to me at every protest, every mobilization, every time a Two Spirit person gifts us with a dance at our powwows, every time we speak our truths, every time we embody Indigenous life. It is visible to me in the Unist’ot’en camp, in the hearts of Moosehide Tanners Against Fascism in Denendeh, in the work of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, in the forty years of mobilization against mercury contamination and deforestation at Grassy Narrows First Nation, in Elsipogtog, Kanehsatà:ke, Listuguj, and of course in the phenomenal mobilization against the Dakota Access pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota, by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Oceti Sakowin (The Great Sioux Nation).

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*<sup>1</sup>

To govern ourselves means to govern our stories and our ways of telling stories. It means that the rhythm of the drumbeat, the language of smoke signals and our moccasin telegraph can be transformed to the airwaves and modems of our times. We can determine our use of the new technologies to support, strengthen and enrich our cultural communities.

Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes”<sup>2</sup>

In 1996, Mohawk multimedia artist from Canada, Skawennati, developed and curated a cultural project called CyberPowWow.<sup>3</sup> The project consisted in a series of interconnected chat rooms designed to serve as a gathering place and also as a gallery where online Indigenous artworks could be displayed and where visitors could interact with one another in real time. The project ran from 1996 to 2004, inspired by the revolutionizing tools of digital interactions through avatars, animation and online storytelling. Every two years, CyberPowWow hosted an event during which visitors could log from their homes or from gathering sites scattered across North America. Indigenous artists like Melanie Printup Hope, Bradlee LaRocque, Ryan Rice, Audra Simpson, Paul Chaat Smith and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito displayed their artwork and were online to discuss their work. CyberPowWow unexpectedly offered a possibility for remediating the traditional powwow, an Indigenous ceremony and a dance circle meant to promote and preserve Indigenous cultures, identities and belonging across space. At the same time, it was a response to the dominant discourse of Internet-based art and a counter-force to the imperial structures of the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Overall, CyberPowWow was the first aboriginally determined online territory.

The project sounded as a powerful response to the question posed by Métis and Cree scholar Loretta Todd,<sup>5</sup> when she asked whether Indigenous narratives, languages and knowledge could find

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<sup>1</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resurgence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes Origins”, *Drumbytes*, <http://drumbytes.org/about/origins-1994.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Although both the project and the website are now inactive, some information can still be retrieved here <https://www.cyberpowwow.net/about.html>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhel Proulx, “CyberPowWow. Digital Natives and the First Wave of Online Publication”, *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 36.1 (2015), 203-216.

<sup>5</sup> Loretta Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace”, in Mary Anne Moser, ed., *Immersed in Technology. Art and Virtual Environments* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 179-194.

any meaning in this new territory that she called cyberspace. Todd saw the digital realm as a reenactment of western cultural consciousness, or a western product that replicates the hegemonies of whiteness. In other words, virtuality could be seen as a new *terra nullius* conquered and controlled by non-Indigenous peoples, where the violence of colonization is still perpetuated. *Terra nullius* is the foundational lie of each and every colonial setting. As such, it has always been a lie. The discursive construction of the empty land has justified centuries of colonial occupation across the globe. The occupation of physical and digital territories continues nowadays and is still governed by the violence of colonialism. Suffice it to think of how colonialism is embedded within the construction of infrastructures and systems of digital technologies right onto Indigenous lands;<sup>6</sup> the weaponization of social media and hashtag networks by far-right extremist groups enacting racist discourses online;<sup>7</sup> or the ‘colonial algorithms’ that shape misguided perceptions of Indigenous people and identities.<sup>8</sup>

Despite being often politicized as universal and democratic, the digital world of social and digital media, and the Internet in general, mirror the colonial realm and its violent dynamics. The issue has been widely discussed by scholars engaged in postcolonial digital humanities. According to Risam,<sup>9</sup> colonial influences in the digital humanities are replicated in the making of digital spaces. The risk is that while “digital humanities offers tremendous potential for democratizing scholarly knowledge, such possibilities are undercut by projects that recreate colonial dynamics or reinforce the Global North as the site of knowledge production” (80). So much so that Todd talked about the Internet as a place born of greed, fear and hunger, which risks to duplicate “what already exists – with virtual malls, as constructed by the world of commerce, and virtual museums, as constructed by the academy, or virtual arcades, as constructed by the entertainment industry...remember cyberspace started as a virtual war zone, as constructed by the western military”.<sup>10</sup> Todd’s preoccupation with the digital world resonates in the question raised by Risam, who wonders how digital technologies can be used to undo the technologies of colonialism if humanities-based knowledge production has historically been employed as technology of colonialism in the first place.<sup>11</sup> Both authors conclude that the digital realm could possibly become “a place of nourishment”,<sup>12</sup> provided that Indigenous epistemologies are embedded in its design, that new sets of creative practices that resist settler colonialism are put forth, and that, in general, the transformative possibilities of technologies are used in service of decolonization.<sup>13</sup>

What happened first with CyberPowWow and then after 1996 went precisely in that direction. It is undeniable that the advent of digital and social media has deeply affected and radically transformed the interplay between politics, communication and new technologies, as new possibilities for Indigenous peoples to bring about decolonization and to decolonize the Internet are now available. In response to digital colonialism and cyber imperialism, but also to the stereotypical framing of Indigenous peoples as unmodern, stuck in the past, and then standing in opposition to technological advancements, Indigenous users of digital technologies have been working to establish their own territories in the

<sup>6</sup> See Marisa Elena Duarte, “Connected Activism. Indigenous Uses of Social Media for Shaping Political Change”, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 21 (2017), 1-12; Ashley Caranto Morford and Jeffrey Ansloos, “Indigenous Sovereignty in Digital Territory. A Qualitative Study on Land-based Relations with #NativeTwitter”, *AlterNative. An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 17.2 (2021), 293-305.

<sup>7</sup> See Sarah Jackson et al., *#Hashtag Activism. Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Bronwyn Fredericks et al., “Disrupting the Colonial Algorithm: Indigenous Australia and Social Media”, *Media International Australia*, 183.1 (2022), 158-178.

<sup>9</sup> Roopika Risam, “Decolonizing the Digital Humanities in Theory and Practice”, in Jentery Sayers, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 78-86.

<sup>10</sup> Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace”, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Risam, “Decolonizing the Digital Humanities.”

<sup>12</sup> Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace”, 193.

<sup>13</sup> Risam, “Decolonizing the Digital Humanities.”

digital world, or “decolonising digital geographies”,<sup>14</sup> as McLean defines them. These are digital spaces that offer avenues for change.

As a matter of fact, digital devices have been appropriated by Indigenous peoples in ways that are creative, powerful and political, and that facilitate new modes of resisting to colonial hegemonies. By simply *being* online, Indigenous peoples enact a potent act of resistance that is profoundly political in that it subverts colonial and neo-colonial definitions of Indigeneity, it locates Indigenous peoples in the *here* and *now*, while also projecting them right into the future. In so doing, for instance, Indigenous peoples carving out digital spaces for themselves online address the practices of de-legitimation and invisibilization, push back against existing forms of representation and ultimately advance a decolonial agenda. The online presence of Indigenous peoples demonstrates that Indigenous users of digital devices can gain control over their own identities, as well as on their discursive production, so as to “challenge forces that define them in terms of what they lack, and to make possible other futures”.<sup>15</sup>

As a space of resistance, the digital world is therefore a place of possibility for imagining such futures, in that it allows Indigenous people to agitate, demand political recognition for Indigenous causes, and proffer contesting and challenging views that dismantle colonial preoccupations with Indigenous political unity.<sup>16</sup> Cree/French Métis artist Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, founder of Drumbeats to Drumbytes, a think-tank of Indigenous media artists and culture workers, highlighted that “the digital realm provides Indigenous communities with an autonomous platform to assert an online presence in the face of colonial catastrophe”.<sup>17</sup> Indigenous users of digital technologies are therefore carving out a space for themselves as full participants in the shaping of the cybersphere,<sup>18</sup> in ways that are empowering. For instance, Indigenous movements responding to social and political injustices have reclaimed online counter-discursive spaces of resistance by entering the public arena through social media platforms. This is the case of #idlenomore,<sup>19</sup> a Canadian-based grassroots movement launched as an hashtag by four women in Saskatchewan to expose the threats to Indigenous land rights advanced by the conservative government led by former PM Stephen Harper; #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA, a campaign against a plan to forcibly close up to 150 remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia;<sup>20</sup> #IndigenousDads, an hashtag that condensed the sharing of pictures and messages of Indigenous fatherhood challenging the colonial stereotype of neglectful Indigenous fathers;<sup>21</sup> or the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock in the Dakotas, to contrast tar sands extractions and the Keystone XL Pipeline cutting through the Standing Rock Sioux ancestral lands.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jessica McLean, *Decolonising Digital Technologies? Digital Geographies and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Palgrave, 2020), 91.

<sup>15</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “‘They Got Filters’. Indigenous Social Media, the Settler Gaze, and a Politics of Hope”, *Social Media + Society*, 6.2 (2020), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “Indigenous Activism and Social Media. A Global Response to #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA”, in Anthony McCosker et al., eds., *Negotiating Digital Citizenship. Control, Contest and Culture* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 115-130.

<sup>17</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes.”

<sup>18</sup> Jason Edward Lewis, “Preparations for a Haunting. Notes toward an Indigenous Future Imaginary”, in Christine Ross et al., eds., *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 229-249.

<sup>19</sup> See Anna Mongibello, *Indigenous Peoples in Canadian TV News. A Corpus-based Analysis of Mainstream and Indigenous News Discourses* (Napoli: Paolo Loffredo Iniziative Editoriali, 2018); Alex Wilson and Zheng Corals, “Shifting Social Media and the Idle No More Movement”, in Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund, eds., *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up: The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism* (Ithaca: Rutgers U.P., 2021), 14-31.

<sup>20</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “Indigenous Activism and Social Media”, 115-130.

<sup>21</sup> Bronwyn Carlson et al., “Trauma, Shared Recognition and Indigenous Resistance on Social Media”, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 21 (2017), 1-19.

<sup>22</sup> Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future. Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019).

Some of these movements were organized and led by women and Two-spirit warriors, healers, and land and water protectors; although starting as largely spontaneous, they nonetheless transcended geographical boundaries and led to massive online/offline mobilizations, which, in cases as #idlenomore, turned into pan-Indigenous solidarities. They grew bigger and bigger in the face of the criminalization, sometimes even the demonization, of Indigenous fights by mainstream media and politicians. In Canada, for instance, the representations of Idle No More by mainstream media networks like CBC and CTV shifted the attention away from colonization and land occupation to focus on the chaos and violence allegedly caused by Indigenous protesters.<sup>23</sup> Such representations further crystallized Indigenous peoples' marginal position, delegitimized their requests, and worked through myths and assumptions that were codified in language. However, through the hashtag campaign #idlenomore, Indigenous peoples and their allies managed to overthrow the mainstream narrative by offering an alternative coverage, as well as by mobilizing and enhancing solidarity. Something similar happened with #SOSBlakAustralia,<sup>24</sup> when the protest against the policy that would see the closure of hundreds of small Indigenous communities across West Australia was framed as standing in the way of progress, or when the protesters at Mauna a Wākea in Hawai'i opposing the construction of a massive telescope on their sacred mountain were dismissed as "obstructions on a march to 'the future'".<sup>25</sup> Despite the de-legitimizing attempts to diminish the political impact of these campaigns, through online activism Indigenous peoples managed to legitimize their struggles and tell a different story.

Indigenous digital media innovators have also used Web 2.0 technologies and the possibilities offered by virtual worlds in highly creative digital projects such as Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, an Aboriginality determined research-creation network, co-founded and co-directed by Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati, whose goal is to ensure Indigenous presence in the web pages, online environments and video games.<sup>26</sup> Video games, in particular, have had a long history of inaccurate representations of Indigenous characters, usually portrayed as human targets in games like *Red Dead Revolver* (2004) and *Gun* (2005), or as mystic chiefs and Indian princesses in *Oregon Trail: American Settler* (1985), that featured stereotypical Indigenous individuals wearing war bonnets and wielding tomahawks. In general, Indigenous peoples in video games have been either underrepresented or appeared as secondary characters,<sup>27</sup> usually stereotyped in ways that are diminishing and offensive. Digital media offer a new challenge in this sense, as video games are now produced and designed by Indigenous peoples to express the reality of Indigenous cultural contexts and to communicate Indigenous narratives. They are also used as adaptation sites hosting Indigenous storytelling and worldviews.

Such movements, projects and forms of individual and collective uses of digital media attest to the dynamic ability of Indigenous resistance to renew itself by drawing from its more traditional forms and being translated into digitally inspired initiatives. This is because Indigenous resistance goes way back before the advent of digital technologies, of course. Despite the enormous heterogeneity of its local realizations, Indigenous resistance worldwide has been characterized by years of struggles for defending Indigenous lands, relationships and ways of life. Indigenous peoples have always had to fight for their lives, being "a problem that needed to be fixed",<sup>28</sup> as they stood in the way of the quest for the white nation. They were an inconvenient reminder that "the land was not new, but was stolen

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<sup>23</sup> Mongibello, *Indigenous Peoples in Canadian TV News*.

<sup>24</sup> Carlson and Frazer, "Indigenous Activism and Social Media".

<sup>25</sup> Noelani Goodyear-Ka'opua, "Protectors of the Future, Not Protectors of the Past. Indigenous Pacific Activism and Mauna a Wākea", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116.1 (2017), 186.

<sup>26</sup> *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*, <https://abtec.org>.

<sup>27</sup> Dmitri Williams et al., "The Virtual Census. Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games", *New Media & Society*, 11.5 (2019), 815-834.

<sup>28</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life. The Practice and Politics of Being Indigenous in Social Media* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 168.

from others” (168). Today, as long before the advent of the digital age, Indigenous peoples are resisting the ongoing violence of colonialism and settler policies, as they have always done.<sup>29</sup>

The translation of these practices of resistance into the digital realm implies that Indigenous online resistance now encompasses digital forms like networking,<sup>30</sup> the revitalization of ancestral languages and cultures through blogs, educational apps, interactive maps, social media etc.,<sup>31</sup> the digitalization of traditional Indigenous knowledge and the promotion of online dissent, activism<sup>32</sup> and solidarity.<sup>33</sup> As Pascua Yaqui/Chicanx scholar Marisa Duarte explains, “we also have to continually conceptualise how Indigenous peoples uses of social media are grounded in not just contemporary political exigencies, but also in the tribal philosophies, spiritualities, traditions, and historical legacies of peoples with memories reverberating through eras well before the founding of modern nation-states”.<sup>34</sup> The translation and re-mediation of Indigenous resistance online does not imply that the physical reality of resistance stands in opposition to the virtual realm where it takes place. On the contrary, online and offline dimensions converge into the creation of a stream of reality that is both virtual and physical at the same time. It is virtual because of the digital tools that are employed; it is physical because of the material outcomes that derive from the usage of digital tools. The affirmation of Indigeneity online is not less ‘real’ or less political than any other Indigenous identity affirmation taking place outside the virtual world. Therefore, in the digital age, Indigenous peoples are resisting power, domination and control, affirming their sovereignties and creating networks of anti-colonial solidarities in ways that collapse the traditional opposition online vs. offline, thus enhancing their possibilities of subverting contemporary colonizing systems. This does not mean simplifying or dismissing the complex intertwining between virtuality and reality, online and offline, nor that online resistance has an immediate, easier to achieve, material outcome. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, for example, points out how, despite the significant amount of online activism towards eradicating Indigenous stereotypes, there have not been enough action or discussion about land issue. Condemning racist stereotypes is now an easy win, so much so that nowadays it is not acceptable to wear a headdress at a dance party. However, it is still acceptable to build pipelines over stolen lands, to target Indigenous women’s bodies and to undermine Indigenous body sovereignty and self-determination.<sup>35</sup>

Far from wanting to provide a comprehensive account of contemporary Indigenous resistance, the special issue of *Anglistica AION* aims at offering some perspectives and insights into the processes, the outcomes, the languages and the discourses of Indigenous resistance, its different configurations in digital environments, as well as the political agenda underpinning these configurations. In so doing, we sought to suggest possible ways of looking into the way digital technologies are used to mobilize as well as to resist and subvert mainstream narratives about Indigenous peoples, their identities and their claims. Since the connections between Indigeneity and new technologies have recently been investigated from a variety of perspectives, employing several critical lenses and methodologies<sup>36</sup> in

<sup>29</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

<sup>30</sup> Monica Isabel González Arribas et al., “ViTu. A System to Help the Mexican People to Preserve and Celebrate Their Culture”, *CHI’11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2011), 971-976.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Sumida Huaman, “Indigenous Language Revitalization and New Media. Postsecondary Students as Innovators”, *Global Media Journal*, 11.18 (2011), 1-15.

<sup>32</sup> Duarte, “Connected Activism.”

<sup>33</sup> Joe Waitoa et al. “E-WHANAUNGATANGA. The Role of Social Media in Māori Political Empowerment”, *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 11 (2015), 45-58.

<sup>34</sup> Duarte, “Connected Activism”, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 113.

<sup>36</sup> A non-comprehensive list of works dealing with Indigenous peoples and digital and new media, in addition to those that have already been cited in this introduction, includes Thomas R. Hilder et al., eds., *Music, Indigeneity, Digital Media* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2017); Kerry McCallum et al. “Community Business. The Internet in Remote Australian

the fields of Information Studies, Ethnic Studies and Media Studies mostly, our hope is to widen the current critical debate through contributions that approach case studies from Indigenous and ally perspectives. The issue explores the political dimensions of language, culture and the media as sites of resistance and mobilization where and through which Indigenous peoples in the digital age have disengaged from dominant colonial narratives. In this sense, we can see digital technologies as both a site and a tool where counter-discursive resistance to the dominant discourse of settler colonialism takes place.

The issue collects contributions by scholars with different backgrounds in a range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, who adopt a combination of theoretical approaches and methodologies that range from Indigenous Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics to Multimodal Analysis, Media Studies, Social Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, among others. The authors engage with case studies initiated in Australia, Canada and USA, where the situated forms of resistance, individual or collective, took an online turn. The practices of resistance under investigation are also specific to the virtual realms where they occur, as well as to the digital tools and the technologies being employed. These are not only limited to the social media platforms TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, but also include the strategic uses of digital resources to create archives of knowledge and video games as devices meant to readapt Indigenous storytelling. All the contributors explore the case studies herein included as political practices in the framework of decolonization, and therefore as counter-discourse or counternarratives, examined through qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies. Experiences of resistance emerge that disclose about the current situation of Indigenous struggles for social justice, against hegemonic grammars of representation, to affirm Indigenous responses to discourses of colonialism, racism, and hate, and to re-establish Indigenous sovereignty, both online and offline.

Our special issue opens with “The Queen Died, Colonisers Cried and the Walls Come Tumbling Down” by Bronwyn Carlson. Drawing attention to the overwhelming outpouring of emotion expressed across social media as the news broke of Queen Elizabeth’s death this article tries to make sense of the dominate pro-monarchy “Queen-mania” that engulfed the globe. As a counter to the frenzy, this paper brings responses from Indigenous and other colonised peoples who took to social media to highlight the extent of the violence and harm the British empire has caused around the globe. Following the #AbolishTheMonarchy movement across social media this paper asks, are the walls about to tumble on the British empire?

“Black Deaths in Custody. Digital Strategies of Indigenous Mobilization” by Chiara Minestrelli zooms into the online rhetorical and visual strategies used by Indigenous activists in Australia, following the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis (USA) to protest the loss of ‘Blak’ people in police custody. The analysis focuses on the website and Facebook page Stop Black Deaths in Custody as well as on the digital materials circulated on social media platforms by Indigenous activists. The paper foregrounds the interplay between visual and linguistic elements from a social semiotic perspective framed around Multimodality, or Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The results suggest that mobilisation is mainly conveyed through a rhetoric that evokes and directly addresses affective connections while strengthening international advocacy.

In “TikToking the Black Box”, Georgia Coe reports on the individual and collective digital strategies of two Indigenous Australians who identify as gender diverse as they navigate TikToks governing algorithms and looking at how algorithms drive political online activism. TikTok has

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Indigenous Communities”, *New Media & Society*, 11.7 (2009), 1230-1251; Alopi S. Latufeku, “Remote Indigenous Communities in Australia. Questions of Access, Information, and Self-determination”, in Kyra Landzelius, ed., *Native on the Net Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 43-60; Juan Francisco Salazar, “Self-determination in Practice. The Critical Making of Indigenous Media”, *Development in Practice*, 19 (2009), 504-513; Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart, eds., *Global Indigenous Media* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2008).

become particularly popular among Indigenous youth globally, as it is used to produce content that encompasses cultural practices, humour, and education. However, the platform faces continual accusations of unjust and inequitable racialised platform design. The article explores how algorithmic inequalities are collectively resisted by two popular TikTokers, Tilly and Q. in the digital protest #july31stwalkout. The paper also discusses the role of TikTok algorithm in amplifying queer voices. In doing so, it reveals some of the disparities and freedoms of the TikTok platform. Namely, the algorithmic silencing of Indigenous standpoints and algorithmic promotion of queer voices, which has unique implications for Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people.

Anna Mongibello's paper “#alleyesonwetsuweten. An Analysis of the Wet'suwet'en protest on Twitter”, analyzes Indigenous online activism in Canada by focusing on how the Wet'suwet'en people have recently remediated on Twitter their protest against the Coastal GasLink pipeline, a 670-kilometre-long natural gas pipeline crossing their ancestral and unceded territories. The author's analysis was informed by qualitative and quantitative methodologies and was conducted on a corpus of 2588 tweets posted by the Wet'suwet'en protesters between January 2019 and November 2021. The results show that the Wet'suwet'en make use of specific forms of online activism which characterize Indigenous online discourse of resistance as a medium of positive self-representation, negative other-representation, Indigenous sovereignty affirmation, and digital resistance to neo-colonial practices. The discourses emerging from the analysis of the tweets are of solidarity, mobilization, land claim and Indigenous sovereignty.

The paper by Maria Cristina Nisco, “Practices of Resistance in Social Media Discourse. The Case of Grassy Narrows First Nation” focuses on one of the worst community health crises in Canada. The case came to public attention in 1970 when a number of residents were found to display symptoms of the Minamata disease, a neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning. It was later revealed that the source of the pollution was Reed Paper Ltd chemical plant operating upstream from the reserve. The paper examines, through a linguistic and discursive analysis, how Twitter users frame issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows First Nation. The results show that tweeters resort to some key topics and themes including mercury poisoning and health crisis, healing, justice and resistance. Overall, Grassy Narrows is still mostly framed as Canada's shame, and moral outrage seems extremely common in users' posts, protesting over past and present injustices, infringement of Indigenous rights, lack of healthcare resources, and assistance for vulnerable people.

Vincenzo Bavaro's paper, “Counternarratives of Maunakea: Crossing Digital Spaces, Claiming Ancestral Knowledge in Hawai'i” examines the Native Hawaiian or Kānaka Maoli resistance to the proposed construction of the Thirty Meters Telescope, the largest telescope in the Northern hemisphere, on the peak of Maunakea, the sacred mountain on the island of Hawai'i. The author explores the legal and cultural clashes behind the protests as well the strong social media presence of the Maunakea protectors, while two waves of protest took place, between 2015 and 2021. The paper shows how Kānaka Maoli have responded to this crisis and transformed it into a generational opportunity for resistance, decolonization, and solidarity.

Last, but surely not least, David Gaertner's paper on “‘A Game 10,000 Years in the Making’: *Never Alone/Kisima Ingitchuna* and Adaptation as a Future-Oriented Technology” provides an insight into the burgeoning field of Indigenous video game studies to show how the translation of Indigenous stories into video games foregrounds community sustainability, cultural flexibility and resistance. The author argues that adaptation is a future-oriented storytelling technology that offers an exciting and dynamic space to further a conversation in which Indigenous communities are gathering stories in video games. The paper investigates the case of *Never Alone*, which is an Indigenous video game by the Iñupiaq people. *Never Alone* is not a new story, but it is an example of *ikiaqtaq*, which means “a song that has been adapted.” In this sense, it shows how adaptation can be mobilize to retrofit digital space so that video game platforms can speak with and even as traditional technologies.

Overall, the papers collected in this issue look at Indigenous practices of counter-discursive resistance as counter-hegemonic affirmations of Indigenous realities. Despite the different perspectives, methodologies and analytical frameworks, all the papers present evidence of the disruptive power of these affirmations, while also proving, through critical examinations, how Indigenous resistance is experiencing an ongoing transformation, taking new directions that cannot be ignored. Most of all, the articles illustrate the dynamic, complex and heterogeneous intersections between Indigenous communities and digital media by focusing on the creative potential of such intersections, as well as on their ability to produce social, political and cultural change.

#### Note on terminology

There are many different terms that Indigenous peoples use to refer to themselves and their communities. These terms are as varied and diverse as their experiences, cultures, languages and struggles across the globe. Here we use the term ‘Indigenous’ when addressing practices of online resistance in general. This is to say that Indigenous resistance does have an internal pluralism and richness that makes it heterogeneous. Our intent is to highlight that Indigenous resistance has some common features, as for example the anticolonialism underpinning the different configurations of resistance, and the digital tools, platforms and technologies that are employed by Indigenous users. The particular uses of these tools by Indigenous groups in specific geographic locations, as well as the outcomes achieved, are diverse and vary depending on the struggles they are serving. In this issue of *Anglistica AION*, whenever possible, the names of Indigenous-identified communities and individuals are expressed to refer to the cultural contexts of production where Indigenous resistance takes place.

## The Queen Died, Colonisers Cried and the Walls Came Tumbling Down

**Abstract:** It is difficult to comprehend the overwhelming outpouring of emotion evidenced on social media following the passing of Elizabeth 11. It is not that this cannot be understood in the context of the dominant narrative. The difficulty lies in comprehending what the British monarchy has come to represent to so many. Fifty-six nations are still part of what is known as the Commonwealth. In Australia alone, over 500 Indigenous nations existed prior to the British Crown's invasion and its subsequent attempt to decimate those nations and claim British sovereignty. This paper seeks to understand how and why the dominant ideology of the Crown has manifest into a deluge of sadness, even despair. The paper will look at responses, interactions, and reactions by public figureheads. It will also demonstrate the sorrow felt by many Indigenous people at these responses themselves which to so many, betray a deliberate forgetfulness of what this event represents to them.

Keywords: *Indigenous, social media, colonisers, empire, colony, global solidarity*

“All the King’s horses and all the King’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again”<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

The falling walls of Jericho, a Palestinian city on the West Bank, provide an apt metaphor for this paper which seeks to examine the phenomenon of coloniser’s grief displayed at the recent death of the monarch, Elizabeth 11. The bible story of Jericho’s fall due to the claims of victory by potential colonisers has not been substantiated historically, nor have archaeological excavations corroborated the fall of the city.<sup>2</sup> According to the legend, God commanded the city be taken and all citizens be murdered as well as oxen, donkeys and sheep. The few who were spared, a prostitute and her family, were incorporated into the land of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Many argue that this myth betrays the nationalist sentiment of the time. “The walls came tumbling down” has been used metaphorically by various churches to demonstrate the wrath of God,<sup>4</sup> but also, and more relevant to this paper, it has been used as a motif for civil rights,<sup>5</sup> worker’s rights and in this instance, for what can be seen as the impending fall of colonial edifice: the colonisers’ cries are the cries of grief but, as I will demonstrate, they are also indicative of the fear of the fall of empire. Such outpourings are the stuff of disbelief—and indeed, fascination to many—and as I will argue, cannot be solely attributed to Elizabeth’s death. They are the ‘last hurrahs’ of the falling edifice of colonial control.

This paper takes much of its evidence from social media where the stark distinction between colonisers’ responses and Indigenous peoples’ responses to the death of Elizabeth 11 can be

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<sup>1</sup> I draw from this ambiguous rhyme to illustrate vision of change and a possible fall of empire which, for many of my people, makes the riddle of “humpty dumpty” more meaningful. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humpty\\_Dumpty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humpty_Dumpty), accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Friedmann, “The Fall of Jericho as an Earthquake Myth”, *JBQ*, 48.3 (2020), 171-178.

<sup>3</sup> Dudley Rutherford, “Walls Fall Down. 7 Steps from the Battle of Jericho to Overcome Any Challenge” (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Bowden, *Jericho* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down. A History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1940-1970* (New York: Prentice Hall Direct, 1974).

scrutinised. Why is this so? It might seem obvious: many Indigenous people despise what the British monarchy represents and many settlers are proud monarchists. But there are variations within these categories that betray their ‘neatness’. The paper seeks to understand, explain and give weight to the idea that the walls of empire, despite the outpouring of sympathy and the sentimentality that has accompanied the Queen’s demise, are a source of extreme anxiety. I will also demonstrate that this death symbolises for many Indigenous people a sigh of relief, for ourselves, our peoples and our futures. I will focus specifically on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander responses to the death of the Queen across social media and particularly Twitter however, I will also draw on global conversations between colonised peoples and the event. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are avid social media users<sup>6</sup> as are Indigenous peoples globally.<sup>7</sup> Social media has provided Indigenous peoples around the world with a platform for global connectivity and solidarity in relation to the violent and ongoing impact of colonialism. For many, the Queen and the monarchy in general, as the most powerful colonial establishment, are ongoing symbols of violent dispossession. They represent the theft of lands and resources and the massacres of Indigenous peoples. The Crown is without doubt the architect of colonialism and the substantial beneficiary of the efforts of colonisers to eliminate Indigenous peoples.

## 2. For the Love of Elizabeth

Settler Australians have had a long love affair with the idea of the Queen. Whenever she visited the colony, no expense was spared in her honour. The Queen visited this continent on 16 occasions during her rule as “Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God Queen of Australia and Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth”.<sup>8</sup> The first encounter was in 1954. It was the first time a reigning monarch visited these shores. The last encounter was in 2011. Back in 1954 when the Queen visited, the then prime minister Robert Gordon Menzies hosted a banquet at Parliament House in Ngunnawal Country (Canberra) in her honour. Menzies’ spoke about the “deep and warm and unaffected love” that Australians felt for “their Queen” and went on to declare, “on behalf of all Australian people, of all creeds, of all political parties, you may count on us. We are yours. There is nothing ambiguous about our loyalty or our will”.<sup>9</sup> Menzies was an ardent monarchist and his flag-waving fervour played a significant role in establishing the monarchy in the hearts and minds of the already British-identified Australian public. He is the only Australian prime minister to have been awarded a knighthood. Ewan Morris drawing from print media accounts highlights the love of the Queen referring to it as “Queen-mania” and notes that millions of people turned out to get a hopeful glimpse of the monarch with some camped overnight to secure a good spot.<sup>10</sup> It was estimated that an

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<sup>6</sup> See Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life. The Practices and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> See Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up. The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism* (New Jersey: Rutgers U.P., 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Giselle Baskin, “16 Visits over 57 Years. Reflecting on Queen Elizabeth 11’s Long Relationship with Australia”, *The Conversation* (12 September 2022), <https://theconversation.com/16-visits-over-57-years-reflecting-on-queen-elizabeth-iis-long-relationship-with-australia-170945>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Ewan Morris, “Forty Years On. Australia and the Queen, 1954”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 18.40 (1994), 1-13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

astonishing 75% of Australians saw the Queen during that first visit.<sup>11</sup> During the early visits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not included and were strategically kept away.<sup>12</sup>

In 1970 the Queen again visited the colony for the bicentennial of James Cook's 'discovery' of this continent. The Queen and her entourage arrived at Kamay (Botany Bay) on the royal yacht *Britannia*. As Katrina Schlunke argues, this "'legal' landing added a performative gloss to the white Australian claim to possession of the continent that had been inaugurated by Cook".<sup>13</sup> While the Queen watched the re-enactment, Aboriginal protesters across the bay at La Perouse lay funeral wreaths in the water to drift into royal view. They lined the beach and held signs with the names of Aboriginal groups from across the continent that had suffered greatly because of colonisation. On one side of the bay there was a celebration of the 'birth' of a nation, on the other there was mourning for death.<sup>14</sup> When the Queen and her entourage left the bay onboard the *Britannia*, the Aboriginal protesters turned their backs on them. In 1986 the Queen visited again but this time to sign the Australia Act<sup>15</sup> ostensibly drawing to an end the ability of the Crown to make laws for Australia. This may have indicated a change in direction where the monarchy was losing flavour. This is partially borne out by an increasing interest in republican debates.

## 2.1 #PlatinumJubilee

More recently, in February 2022 the world celebrated the Queen's 70<sup>th</sup> year on the throne. Colonisers were quick to use this occasion to further pay homage to their head of empire. Anthony Albanese had just been elected as Prime Minister and had begun publicly spruiking a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for a voice to parliament.<sup>16</sup> One of the new Prime Minister's first acts was to rename Aspen Island, the island in Lake Burley Griffin on Ngunnawal Country (now known as Canberra), as Queen Elizabeth II Island.<sup>17</sup> In a speech Albanese acknowledged the traditional owners of the land before moving quickly on to talk about the royal family. The ceremony included a twenty-one-gun salute and a Royal Australian Air Force flypast. In the UK, the four-day celebrations there cost taxpayers over 28 million pounds. Other nations in the commonwealth also contributed millions<sup>18</sup>. Media outlets framed the cost as being worth it for a celebration to honour all the hard work that the Queen had done on our behalf for decades. The royal family used social media platforms to send thanks to their loyal subjects. On Twitter for example, @RoyalFamily, the official Twitter handle

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<sup>11</sup> See National Archives of Australia, "Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Robert Menzies at a Function During the Royal Visit", <https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/government-and-democracy/prime-ministers-and-politicians/queen-elizabeth-ii-and-prime-minister-robert-menzies-function-during-royal-visit>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> David Hill, *Australia and the Monarchy* (Sydney: William Heinemann Australia, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Katrina Schlunke, "Entertaining Possession. Re-Enacting Cook's Arrival for the Queen I", in Kate Darian-Smith and Penelope Edmonds, eds., *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers. Conflict, Performance and Commemoration in Australia and the Pacific Rim* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 227-242, 227.

<sup>14</sup> See Stephen Gapps, "Commemoration and Contestation at Kurnell", *Sea Museum* (11 May 2015), [www.sea.museum/2015/05/11/commemoration-and-contestation-at-kurnell/](http://www.sea.museum/2015/05/11/commemoration-and-contestation-at-kurnell/), accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>15</sup> See Mark McKenna, "Shed the Queen [View of the Republic]", *Eureka Street*, 9.8 (1999), 24-29.

<sup>16</sup> Bronwyn Fredericks and Abraham Bradfield, "'More Than a Thought Bubble...': The Uluru Statement from the Heart and Indigenous Voice to Parliament", *M/C Journal*, 24.1 (March 2021), <https://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/2738>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Katherine Murphy, "Albanese Honours Queen Amid Jubilee Celebrations", *The Guardian* (2022), [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2022/jun/04/australia-news-live-update-anthony-albanese-labor-minimum-wage-coalition-peter-dutton-jubilee-energy-crisis-cost-of-living-gas?page=with:block-629ab1888f08c28a9854c537#block-629ab1888f08c28a9854c537](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2022/jun/04/australia-news-live-update-anthony-albanese-labor-minimum-wage-coalition-peter-dutton-jubilee-energy-crisis-cost-of-living-gas?page=with:block-629ab1888f08c28a9854c537#block-629ab1888f08c28a9854c537), accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Gagnon, "A Right Royal Rip Off. How Much Should Commonwealth Nations Pay for the Queen's Jubilee", *The Conversation* (2022), <https://theconversation.com/a-right-royal-rip-off-how-much-should-commonwealth-nations-pay-for-the-queens-jubilee-5227>, accessed 2 November 2022.

of the monarchy, posted a hand signed note from the Queen expressing gratitude.<sup>19</sup> Settlers publicly announced their admiration for the Queen in articles, social media posts, television appearances and in every possible way to ensure that it was known that the Queen was held in the highest regard. Giselle Bastin published, “almost certainly, Elizabeth II’s reign as the stalwart, loyal, dutiful, and most cherished and admired of ‘Glorianas’ is one we are unlikely ever to see again”.<sup>20</sup> Endless celebratory Tweets using the hashtag #PlatinumJubilee flooded Twitter. In one, @robertjones1mil tweeted “Happy Platty Jubes everyone! I love the Queen so, I think if anything was to happen to her I would kill myself and many others”<sup>21</sup> including 2 love heart smiley faces and the hashtag #PlatinumJubilee. Another, @MattThompson tweeted, “As I’ve said before I love the idea of an Australian head of state. But that doesn’t in anyway disrespect The Queen’s service. And wow, it’s so great to see soooo many people happy at the #PlatinumJubilee”.<sup>22</sup> The tweets of support are endless and unvarying in their pronouncements of love and adoration. However, there are also vehement cries of dissent. In the US a Nigerian university professor posted on Twitter their objection to everything the monarchy represents referring to it as a “thieving raping genocidal empire”,<sup>23</sup> adding, “if anyone expects me to express anything but distain for the monarch who supervised a government that sponsored the genocide that massacred and displaced half my family and the consequences of which those alive today are still trying to overcome, you can keep wishing upon a star”.<sup>24</sup> On the same day as the royals were tweeting photographs and posts in honour of the platinum jubilee the hashtag #AbolishTheMonarchy was trending on Twitter.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Then the Queen Died

Just a short few months after the hype of the platinum jubilee, in September 2022, the world was informed via Twitter that the longest ‘serving’ monarch had died at age 96 after reigning for 70 years.<sup>26</sup> There were a range of reactions from Indigenous peoples from sorrow to criticism of the monarchy and what it stood for. Federal politician and Warlpiri woman Jacinta Nampijinpa Price posted on Facebook, “Thank you your Majesty Queen Elizabeth 11 may you Rest in Peace” and actor Yamatji man Ernie Dingo also posted on Facebook, “A beautiful Lady passed this morning, leaving wonderful memories all over the world, and especially these Mullewa<sup>27</sup> mob...walk her our Paddington and keep her spirit safe”.<sup>28</sup> Others however, were more critical. Aboriginal rapper Adam Briggs who self identifies as ‘Senator Briggs’ tweeted, “it’s amazing; the amount of wealth you can

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<sup>19</sup> See “Queen Elizabeth’s Platinum Jubilee. Celebrating 70 years on the Throne”, *Vanity Fair* (2022), <https://www.vanityfair.com/live/queen-elizabeth-platinum-jubilee-live-blog>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Baskin, “16 Visits over 57 Years”.

<sup>21</sup> Tobert (Rom) Jones, @robertjones1mil, “Happy Platty Jubes everyone!...” (Twitter post, 3 June 2022), <https://twitter.com/robertjones1mil/status/1532671143764688899>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Matt Thompson, @MattThompson, “As I’ve said before...” (Twitter post 5 June, 2022), <https://twitter.com/MattThompson/status/1533345307257278464>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Sutcliffe, “Social Media Platforms Reconsider Content Moderation Following the Queen’s Death” (2022), <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/09/12/social-platforms-reconsider-content-moderation-following-the-queen-s-death>.

<sup>24</sup> Uju Anya, @UjuAnya, “If anyone expects me to...” (Twitter 9 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/UjuAnya/status/1567933661114429441>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Erin Keller, “#AbolishTheMonarchy Trends of Twitter during Queen’s Platinum Jubilee”, *New York Post* (2 June, 2022), <https://nypost.com/2022/06/02/abolishthemonarchy-trends-on-twitter-during-queens-platinum-jubilee/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Sutcliffe, “Social Media Platforms”.

<sup>27</sup> Mullewa is a small rural town in Western Australia.

<sup>28</sup> See Tom Zaubmayr, “Indigenous Reaction to Queen Elizabeth 11’s Death from Australia and around the World”, *NITV* (2022), <https://www.nitv.com.au/indigenous-reactions-to-queen-elizabeth-iis-death-from-australia-and-around-the-world/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

accumulate when your family steals and enslaves half the world”.<sup>29</sup> Gunai Gunditjmara writer and activist Meriiki Onus tweeted, “Wow Indigenous people across the globe gonna take this hard. How will we cope?”<sup>30</sup> and Kalkadoon (Kalkutungu) lawyer Peta MacGillivray tweeted, “We’re not being insensitive, we’re decolonising your grief”.<sup>31</sup> Many suggested that with the Queen’s passing it was a good time to reflect on the value of the monarchy and the harm the British empire has caused around the globe. Writer Karen Attiah tweeted, “Black and brown people around the world who were subject to horrendous cruelties and economic deprivation under British colonialism are allowed to have feelings about Queen Elizabeth. After all, they were her ‘subjects’ too”.<sup>32</sup> Attiah went on to publish an article ‘We must speak the ugly truths about Queen Elizabeth and Britain’s empire’ and stated “for many, the British – by extension the queen – remain guilty for the nation’s historical crimes”.<sup>33</sup>

The use of social media to speak directly to the public has been taken up by the monarchy in recent years arguably to appear in touch with the times and to attract a broader global audience. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September (UK time) the royal family tweeted that “the Queen died peacefully at Balmoral” and the post included a black and white photograph of the Queen.<sup>34</sup> The tweet has over 2.5 million likes, 703.5k retweets and 260.1k quote tweets<sup>35</sup> demonstrating the reach of social media. Social media is an effective tool providing a means for anyone who has access to the technology to engage in public and often global conversations. Worldwide there are 396.5 million users on Twitter alone.<sup>36</sup> In an article by *Sensis*<sup>37</sup> the royal family’s use of social media was declared as existing for three primary reasons: firstly, to stay connected, secondly, to control the narrative and thirdly, to show personality. In the case of the Queen’s death, information emanating from royal sources is carefully curated to ensure that the Queen is remembered as a hardworking monarch who has served the people for seven decades.

The majority of people have never met the Queen and could not say they know her personally, nor are they likely to be able to articulate what this service entails. In general, the average person’s knowledge of the Queen is not likely to be grounded in fact and more likely to be shaped by mainstream and social media as is the case for all celebrity worship. In the case of the Queen and the royal family, to some degree, this is a different from other celebrity hero worship in that the royals for many represent a stabilising force that is ‘above’ the common threads of popular culture heroism; the queen *is* an institution. She *is* the establishment. So, it would seem from many responses that a love for her represents a love for what she is rather than a love for what she does. In the case of Diana Spencer’s death, the outpourings for her were largely attributed to her media constructed pleasant

<sup>29</sup> Senator Briggs, @Briggs, “It’s Amazing; the Wealth...” (Twitter 9 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/Briggs/status/1567999931633508352?s=20&t=-AZbwrlcEXvmBg-nrSkOBg>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Mariiki Onus, @Meriiki, “Wow Indigenous people across the globe...” (Twitter 9 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/Meriiki/status/1567976752441589761?s=20&t=tm39uZ1tuDHSOFU5Eh3aLg>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Pete MacGillivray, @peta\_ivy, “We’re not Being Insensitive...” (Twitter 9 September, 2022), [https://twitter.com/peta\\_ivy/status/1568026420999503872?s=20&t=UjHKsYcJNv-qo9FvbeGvAw](https://twitter.com/peta_ivy/status/1568026420999503872?s=20&t=UjHKsYcJNv-qo9FvbeGvAw), accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Karen Attiah, @KarenAttiah, “Black and Brown People around the Globe...” (Twitter 9 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/KarenAttiah/status/1567889946765148171>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Attiah, “We Must Speak the Ugly Truths about Queen Elizabeth and Britain’s Empire” *Washington Post* (2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/09/10/britain-colonial-brutalities-queen-elizabeth-death-commentary/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>34</sup> The Royal Family, @RoyalFamily, “The Queen Died Peacefully...” (Twitter 6 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/RoyalFamily/status/1567928275913121792>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>35</sup> @RoyalFamily, “The Queen Died Peacefully” (Twitter 9 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/royalfamily/status/1567928275913121792>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Number of Twitter users worldwide. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/303681/twitter-users-worldwide/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>37</sup> “3 Ways the Royal Family Uses Social Media (And What You Can Learn From Them)” <https://www.sensis.com.au/learn/how-the-royal-family-uses-social-media>, accessed 2 November 2022.

personality, her humanity, mothering and her philanthropic work. The Queen, as stated, is the establishment and represents to many a kind of order that has its roots in Empire and control and thus, commands for so many an almost unquestionable loyalty. For many Indigenous peoples, however, the significations of royalty are vastly different as we can see. The Queen represents to vast numbers across the globe a belief system grounded in faith and hope, to many a benevolent ruler that has been reliably ‘there’ for decades. She is the edifice, and the paradox of colonial rule.

So much can be gleaned from social media commentary as my research demonstrates. The tricky nature of social media however, means that the public and their responses cannot always be accurately monitored and controlled. Individual users can post, repost and comment at their will. In such collective spaces you will always see a multitude of opinions, although in the case of the Queen’s passing, perhaps less variations and more polarised standpoints are evidenced even within the scope of some variability. Information disseminated about the Queen is generally positive and upholds the impression of a benevolent, hard-working monarch who ‘fits’ with the designated identity bestowed on her by royalists, monarchists and many of those whose lives have been lived under her reign. The strength of the dominant narrative has been significant. Even people who profess to be devout republicans have expressed grief and sorrow at her passing. Former prime minister and republican, Malcolm Turnbull, for example, fought back tears in his response<sup>38</sup> which leads me to think that some people actually did see her as a person rather than simply an establishment figurehead. Or that expressions of sadness are a display of protocol perhaps.

### 3.1 *Colonisers cried*

Following her death, colonisers across the globe used all social media platforms to express their overwhelming grief and also, despite her age, a disbelief that their monarch had died. For many, the Queen has been the head of the empire for their entire lives – a 70-year reign on the throne. Leaders of colonised nations along with beneficiaries of the empire were quick to publicly express their alignment with the monarchy and their sorrow at the loss of their ruler. The US President Joe Biden stated, the Queen “defined an era...an age of unprecedented human advancement and the forward march of human dignity”<sup>39</sup> and the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that, “her service to Canadians will forever remain an important part of our country’s history”<sup>40</sup> and Prime Minister of Aotearoa (New Zealand) Jacinda Arden referred to the Queen as “extraordinary” and noted that the Queen’s commitment to her role was “without question and unwavering”.<sup>41</sup> Our own Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese stated that the Queen “was a rare and reassuring constant amidst rapid change” and announced a day of commemoration in the form of a public holiday.<sup>42</sup> In each of these locations the Indigenous populations have been violently dispossessed from their homelands and subject to

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<sup>38</sup> Samantha Maiden, “Malcolm Turnbull Fights Back Tears Remembering Queen Elizabeth II”, *News.com.au* (2022), <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/royals/malcolm-turnbull-fights-back-tears-remembering-queen-elizabeth-ii/news-story/cf8fb91521327ea202bc9bdfe3237d95>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Bushard, “Biden to Elton. Celebrities and World Leaders Mourn the Death of Queen Elizabeth”, *Forbes* (2022), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2022/09/08/irreparable-loss-biden-macron-trudeau-zelensky-other-world-leaders-mourn-death-of-queen-elizabeth/?sh=7c7ae5536c60>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Graham-McLay, “New Zealand in a Period of Mourning as Jacinda Arden Pays Tribute to an ‘Extraordinary’ Queen”, *The Guardian* (2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/09/new-zealand-in-period-of-mourning-as-jacinda-arden-pays-tribute-to-extraordinary-queen>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Courtney Gould, “Prime Minister Anthony Albanese Responds to the Queen’s Death”, *News.com.au* (2022), <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/royals/prime-minister-anthony-albanese-responds-to-queens-death/news-story/ef35736cbaa11147c11f259fc5719cac>, accessed 2 November 2022.

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numerous massacres.<sup>43</sup> In each place, they have had their children stolen from them as part of a forced assimilation project, authorised by the state,<sup>44</sup> and despite treaties in some instances, remain overwhelmingly subjected to harmful policies and practices. For many Indigenous people, it is anathema to see and hear their elected leaders praise what to them is the primary source of the attempted destruction of their lands and cultures. It is also a notable fact that all four leaders mentioned hold politically ‘liberal’ values. However, we are well-trained and will understand that protocol demands a particular response despite its stinging bite to many Indigenous peoples. The dominant narrative must prevail!

In what has been referred to as “media madness”<sup>45</sup> and “media frenzy, rabid and ravenous”<sup>46</sup> the death of the Queen overtook all forms of media across the globe. It was planned and strategic – the idea being to promote a sense of global grief and to remind the world of the greatness of the empire and its continuity. As Knight has argued, “succession is part of the job”.<sup>47</sup> Collective grief for a person personally unknown to most is an interesting phenomenon that is common across social media. As Joshua Meyrowitz argues, “the evolution of communication media has fostered an increasingly intense sense of intimacy with those who would otherwise be strangers”.<sup>48</sup> Former premier of the state of Victoria (1992-1999) Jeff Kennett captured the dominant narrative when he tweeted “we wake up to news. The Queen has died. So sad, a life of service. For the vast majority of Australians she has reigned all their lives coming to the throne in 1952. She will always be remembered fondly. Thank you for the examples you set. Vale Queen Elizabeth”.<sup>49</sup> Many Indigenous and colonised peoples do not share the same grief nor love of the monarchy. Dreamtime Aroha @Dreamtime1 tweeted, “The only real Queen is your Mother don’t pretend to be upset for a stranger @AbolishTheMonarchy #Truth #Mumisqueen”.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4. Ungrateful Subjects

The ‘Abolish the Monarchy’ sentiment continued despite the death of the Queen. In fact, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have publicly expressed their support for abolishing the monarchy and asserting Indigenous sovereignty. For example, before the jubilee and death of the Queen, Greens Senator and DjabWurrung Gunnai Gunditjmarra woman Lidia Thorpe referred to the Queen as a “coloniser” during her oath of allegiance and pointed out that Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, “Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia, 1788-1930”, <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>44</sup> See Ian Austen, “How Thousands of Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada”, *The New York Times*, (2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/world/canada/mass-graves-residential-schools.html>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Charlie Lewis, “Media Madness. How Elizabeth 11’s Death Has Dominated Global News Coverage”, *Crikey*, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/09/12/queen-elizabeth-death-media-madness/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Euan Ritchie, “Why Did the Queen’s Death Receive Saturation Media Coverage While the Future of the Earth Goes Largely Ignored?”, *The Guardian* (2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/commentisfree/2022/sep/16/why-did-the-queens-death-receive-saturation-media-coverage-while-the-future-of-the-earth-goes-largely-ignored>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Sam Knight, “‘London Bridge Is Down’. The Secret Plan for the Days After the Queen’s Death”, *The Guardian* (2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/16/what-happens-when-queen-elizabeth-dies-london-bridge>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz, “The Life and Death of Media Friends. New Genres of Intimacy and Mourning”, in Robert Cathcart and Susan Drucker, eds., *American Heroes in the Media Age* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>49</sup> Jeff Kennett @jeff kennett, “We Wake Up to News...” (Twitter 9 September, 2022), [https://twitter.com/jeff\\_kennett/status/1567969481955352577](https://twitter.com/jeff_kennett/status/1567969481955352577), accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Dreamtime Aroha, @Dreamtime1, “The Only Real Queen...” (Twitter 11 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/Dreamtime1/status/1568883961874751488>, accessed 2 November 2022.

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Islander peoples have never ceded sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> Retribution was swift and Thorpe faced hostilities from settler politicians within parliament and from mainstream media. There are penalties for betraying dominant narratives. Others who expressed the same sentiment were also reprimanded. On hearing of the death of the Queen, Caitlin Moran, an Indigenous sportsperson posted on their own Instagram page a post that referenced the death of the Queen, “Today’s a good fkn day, uncle Luke announces his tour [Luke Combs country music singer], and this dumb dog dies Happy fkn Friday”.<sup>52</sup> Moran was quickly reprimanded in an unprecedented game ban and significant fine of 25% of their salary for the season. The mainstream media were quick to demand punishment with one settler radio broadcaster calling the post the “most reprehensible thing ever seen”.<sup>53</sup> One could argue how astonishing this is given the Queen’s so-called support for democracy, but ‘free speech’ comes at a price for some. In another instance, Indigenous newsreader Narelda Jacobs stated that she was not going to mourn the Queen and called for the monarchy to apologise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. She said, “the monarchy was a symbol of colonisation and nothing had been done to make up for that during the Queen’s 70-year reign”.<sup>54</sup> Jacobs was slammed in the mainstream media and by social media users and particularly those from the UK. In one post, @AngkorYok, tweeted “invading and taking possession of other people’s land is a fact of human history. Perhaps Narelda Jacobs should read the history of the world before she gobs off on a subject she obviously knows little of. Who was in Australia before the Aboriginals came? Conveniently forgotten”.<sup>55</sup> Peter Lynch @Peterly636565 tweeted in response, “Absolutely disgraceful, she should BE removed immediately, time to put these BLM [Black lives matter] infiltrated members where they should be, as one was advised NEVER employ them, trouble makers, all these token appointments should be stopped”.<sup>56</sup>

On the Australian version of ‘Gogglebox’, the reality television show depicting people watching television, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have joined the couch for the first-time providing commentary on what has featured across on the various television channels over the week.<sup>57</sup> After the absolute saturation of coverage of the Queen’s death and subsequent funeral, the topic was featured on the show. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people commented on social media about the absence of any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander commentary about the coverage. Then Kevin Yow Yeh, one of the cast members tweeted, “We’re obviously disappointed much of our commentary about the queen’s passing wasn’t used on last night’s episode (and you know there were lots lols) but given that the idea of this place is predicated on the erasure of Black people and Black voice, I’m not

<sup>51</sup> Josh Butler, “Australian Senator Calls the Queen a Coloniser While Being Sworn into Parliament”, *The Guardian* (2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/aug/01/australian-greens-senator-lidia-thorpe-calls-queen-coloniser-while-being-sworn-into-parliament>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Gamble, “Rugby League Player Banned after Calling the Queen a ‘Dumb Dog’ and Saying Death Was a ‘Good Day’”, *Mirror* (2022), <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/rugby-league/rugby-league-queen-elizabeth-ban-27986643>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>53</sup> See “NTLW Star Handed Ban After ‘Reprehensible’ Queen Post”, *News.com.au* (2022), <https://www.news.com.au/sport/nrl/nrlw-star-handed-ban-after-reprehensible-queen-post/news-story/1b2b5dace796852557ec749db24059af>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>54</sup> See “Don’t Ask Me to Mourn the Queen’s Death. Indigenous Television Presenter Hits Out at Critics”, *News.com.au* (2022), <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/royals/dont-ask-me-to-mourn-the-queens-death-indigenous-television-presenter-hits-out-at-critics/news-story/f48d3b0d9cb4b6d9b7897d371af3c5eb>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Cardano Cat, @AngkorYok, “Invading and Taking Possession...” (Twitter 12 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/AngkorYok/status/1569298457596424195>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Lynch @Peterly636565, “Absolutely Disgraceful, She Should BE Removed...” (Twitter 13 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/Peterly636565/status/1569414652202983424>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>57</sup> See, “Meanjin Mob Make Dazzling Debut on Gogglebox”, *SBS* (2022), <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/meanjin-mob-make-dazzling-debut-on-gogglebox/erkx9gyly>, accessed 2 November 2022.

surprised”.<sup>58</sup> Referencing the reaction to Caitlin Moran, Yow Yeh went on to tweet, “when she posted about the queens passing, we’re punished and reminded of our place here in the colony”. Demonstrations of responses to resistance to the dominant narrative are manifold and some, as indicated, exhibit the most blatant racism.

After being constantly informed by settler Twitter users about the Queen’s good character and the assertion that she had no political clout, Wiradjuri scholar Sandy O’Sullivan as host of the @IndigenousX<sup>59</sup> account tweeted that Indigenous people did not feel the same grief as white settlers and posted that “For those saying we should be magnanimous about the passing of the queen, a reminder that the queen inserted herself into the lives of Indigenous people here multiple times. She wasn’t a bystander to the effects of colonisation and colonialism, she was the architect of it”.<sup>60</sup> O’Sullivan again tweeted, “She had influence over the ‘commonwealth’. Her wealth is not just ceremonial, and it was not acquired passively. It was built on the pain and suffering of Indigenous peoples. That was the plan all along and that’s the plan that she was an agent of her whole career”.<sup>61</sup> In response from settlers, O’Sullivan received untold death threats and threats of physical violence including rape. Their home address and phone number was published along with where to find them in their workplace. Not one or two but thousands of posts. O’Sullivan spoke about the response at a recent conference and stated:

There were 26 million impressions on the first tweet. 86 people questioned how I could be a Professor, 235 people said I should lose my job. 15 people tweeted my home address and 1,892 people wrote something overtly transphobic or racist or—unsurprisingly both. 83 people suggested universities should be defunded and 4 people said I should be ‘put down’ (using those exact words). 6 said I should be assaulted. There were hundreds of slurs and many suggested that we were lucky we were colonised by the British because they were kind. Many suggested if we weren’t colonised we wouldn’t even have the wheel.<sup>62</sup>

O’Sullivan went on to say, “that was just the public tweets. I also received death threats, and other threats via email and phone”.<sup>63</sup> O’Sullivan, a colleague, shared some of the emails with me. I will not give space to them here in any detail, except to say that the content is perhaps the most racist, sexist and transphobic vitriol imaginable. In not citing them explicitly, I am deliberately minimising their power; suffice to say that the emails regurgitate every racist slur possible and demonstrate that in 2022, there still exists a deep-seated hatred for Aboriginal people. This loathing is writ large when we dare to express dissent.

O’Sullivan’s workplace also received a formal complaint from a Twitter user demanding consequences for their comments. Daring to critique the monarchy—the highest symbol of white supremacy for example, brings with it swift punishment for Indigenous peoples. Technology-facilitated abuse is inseparable from the context of settler colonialism.<sup>64</sup> This means that some

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<sup>58</sup> See Thread from Kevin Yow Yeh, @kevinyoweh, “We’re Obviously Disappointed...” (Twitter thread, 16 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/kevinyoweh/status/1570661789876236288>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>59</sup> @IndigenousX is a rotating Twitter account that is generally hosted by a different Indigenous person weekly.

<sup>60</sup> Sandy O’Sullivan as host of @IndigenousX, “For Those Saying We Should...” (Twitter thread 9 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/IndigenousX/status/1567990400736178176>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Sandy O’Sullivan, keynote at the Australian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (dassh) Conference, Griffith University, (2022) <https://dassh.edu.au/20th-anniversary/2022-conference-program/?fbclid=IwAR3wdhYpYNGohDahWPri5vZN1R8woIkFfZpDG14F2IHE6deT-vrcnLnU>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Madi Day, “Love, Hate and Sovereign Bodies. The Exigencies of Aboriginal Online Dating”, in Anastasia Powell et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Violence and Technology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 181-201.

experiences, particularly those of abuse and violence as they relate to the ongoing impacts and legacies of colonial violence are shared in common among Indigenous people. As these experiences are not only racialised but also gendered<sup>65</sup>, they disproportionately impact Indigenous women and LGBTQIA+ people. If we dare to dissent, we are scripted as ungrateful, treasonous and unworthy citizens. Even in discussions on mainstream television's current affairs programmes that did include responses from Indigenous commentators following the Queen's death, hosts and commentators themselves were often at pains to mention her 'good points' prior to stating any negative comments regarding what her death represented for them. It is likely that only acquiescing contributors to the topic were selected.

#### 4. The Walls Came Tumbling Down

I am comforted knowing that sooner or later, all destructive systems destroy themselves – history shows it cannot be any other way. Toxic empires either change or they collapse. I might not see it in my lifetime, but I know it will happen.<sup>66</sup>

The #AbolishTheMonarchy movement is gaining momentum. The dissent has been growing for some time. When Albanese announced a public holiday and a day of mourning for the Queen, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people expressed their outrage. Meerooni musician Kaylah Truth tweeted "So it appears that they do, in fact, understand what a Day of Mourning is and can action a national holiday for it with the click of a finger. Funny that".<sup>67</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been calling for a Day of Mourning since 1938 where Indigenous activists gathered on January 26<sup>th</sup> to protest against colonisation and the ongoing oppressive treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>68</sup> In response to Albanese's wilful disregard for our history and our suffering, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people instead publicly called for a 'Day of Protest' encouraging people to take to the streets in protest and demanding the monarchy be abolished. Wiradjuri Badu Island Yinaa scholar and activist Lynda-June Coe tweeted the below poster (Image 1) stating "Day of Protest, Gadigal Land" with an emoji pointing to the flyer.<sup>69</sup> On Albanese's 'day of mourning' thousands of people marched in the streets across most major cities calling for the end of the monarchy and drawing attention to the ongoing violence of settler colonialism including Aboriginal deaths in custody and demanding the return of stolen lands.<sup>70</sup> Coe has expressed disappointment that in the "suffocating coverage" of the Queen's death, the government and the broader public have missed the opportunity to engage in truth-telling and discussions about the on-going effects of colonisation. She stated that the Queen's death, "could have been an opportunity for not only the government but all Australians to reckon with our colonial past through a process of truth-telling".<sup>71</sup> Coe critiques the

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<sup>65</sup> Madi Day, "Indigenist Origins. Institutionalizing Indigenous Queer and Trans Studies in Australia", *Trans Studies Quarterly*, 7.3 (2020), 367-373.

<sup>66</sup> Mykaela Saunders, "Everywhen: Against 'The Power of Now'", *Griffith Review*, 76 (2022), 115-125.

<sup>67</sup> Kaylah Truth, @kaylahtruth, "So It Appears That They..." (Twitter 11 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/kaylahtruth/status/1568767828119146500>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Powell, "William Cooper's Legacies", *Teaching History*, 56.1 (2022), 39-44.

<sup>69</sup> Lynda-June Coe, @LyndaJune1, "Day of Protest..." (Twitter, 18 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/LyndaJune1/status/1571406932757585920>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>70</sup> "Protests Make Australia's 'Day of Mourning' for Queen", *Aljazeera* (2022), <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2022/9/22/protests-mark-australias-day-of-mourning-for-queen>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Lynda-June Coe cited in Aleksandra Bliszcyk, "Missed Opportunity". The Media Should Have Talked about Colonisation More after the Queen's Death", *Pedestrian* (2022), [https://www.pedestrian.tv/news/media-queens-death-colonisation/?utm\\_campaign=later-linkinbio-pedestriantv&utm\\_content=later-29762206&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=linkin.bio](https://www.pedestrian.tv/news/media-queens-death-colonisation/?utm_campaign=later-linkinbio-pedestriantv&utm_content=later-29762206&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkin.bio), accessed 2 November 2022.

coverage stating that from all mainstream sources, “there’s are real emphasis on the Queen as a person and not really talking about the Crown as an institution and the violence it’s inflicted on not just First Nations but other minority groups around the world”.<sup>72</sup>

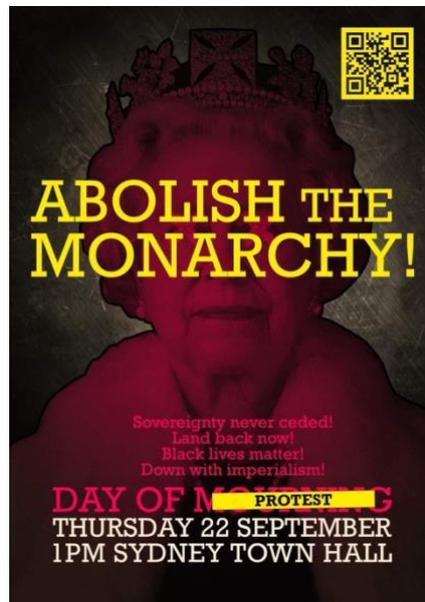


Fig. 1: Day of Protest poster shared on Twitter by @LyndaJune1

Across Twitter, Indigenous and other colonised peoples joined together in solidarity denouncing the monarchy and all it stands for. Drawn together by hashtags, #BlackfullaTwitter and #IrishTwitter rejoiced in the end of the Queen’s reign. Gunditjmara, Bindal, Yorta Yorta activist Tarneen Onus @tarneen tweeted, “#Blackfullatwitter and #Irishtwitter is pretty lit today” with a fire emoji.<sup>73</sup> The tweet includes an image of two arms flexing with hands joined. One arm dark in colour with ‘Blackfulla Twitter’ banner across it and the other fair in colour with ‘Irish Twitter’ banner across it. Another Aboriginal twitter user, Blacky J @BundjalungBud tweeted, “step up #BlackfullaTwitter, #IrishTwitter is coming in hot” with a fire emoji and reposted Dublin Bhoy @dublincelticfan’s post of Tallagat stadium in Dublin where fans at a football match were chanting “Lizzies in a box”.<sup>74</sup> The use of the hashtags such as #BlackfullaTwitter operates in a way to bring Indigenous sociality “to the surface of mainstream visibility”<sup>75</sup> but this is not the main objective for use. Instead, the hashtags enable Indigenous users to “intentionally signal their cultural affiliations to a like-minded audience”.<sup>76</sup> In this case two groups who have been colonised by the British have become affiliated.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Tarneen Onus, @tarneen, “#Blackfullatwitter and #Irishtwitter...” (9 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/tarneen/status/1568047446676361217>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Black J, @BundjalungBud, “Step up #BlackfullaTwitter, #IrishTwitter...” (Twitter 9 September, 2022), <https://twitter.com/BundjalungBud/status/1567996205334134784>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>75</sup> André Brock Jr., *Distributed Blackness* (New York: New York U.P., 2020), 81.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

The hashtag #AbolishTheMonarchy has been used along with #NotMyKing as thousands express their dissatisfaction with the monarchy and the impending coronation of Charles. Symon Hill tweeted, “Charles Windsor is due to be crowned king... We are expected to accept him as head of state because of who his ancestors were. This is absurd anachronistic #coronation with be an assault on democracy, equality and human dignity. He’s #NotMyKing”.<sup>77</sup> The public are drawing attention to the political and economic instability, the global pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost of supporting the British nobility. Boris Johnson was forced to step down as prime minister amid a rash of political scandals including supporting an ally accused of sexual misconduct to hosting parties at Downing Street in violation of COVID lockdown laws.<sup>78</sup> The cost of supporting the monarchy who the public are viewing as more and more irrelevant is the focus of many social media conversations. One social media user posted, “Imagine part of your wages going towards the coronation of a guy who told his mistress he wants to be her tampon... and also paying for said mistress to become queen. Oh & this guys brother is a pedophile [sic]. Stay classy, UK. #NotMyKing #AbolishTheMonarchy #RacistBritishMedia”.<sup>79</sup> Charles’ brother Andrew has drawn significant media attention since being associated with convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein<sup>80</sup> and the out-of-court settlement for the sexual assault lawsuit against him in which the Queen was said to have contributed a significant amount of money.<sup>81</sup> The monarchy have also been accused of racism and the way in which they have treated Meghan Markle who married Prince Harry in 2018. Meghan who identifies as “biracial” claimed she had experienced racism from within the royal family.<sup>82</sup> In the infamous interview with celebrity Oprah Winfrey, Harry and Meghan claimed it was primarily racism that drove their decision to distance themselves from the royal family.<sup>83</sup> While many were outraged at such an accusation it is clear that long before Meghan arrived in the royal family, members of the family were known for their racist comments. Charles’ father for example, the late Prince Phillip made many public racist comments,<sup>84</sup> sneakily passed off as ‘gaffes’ by the British press, always at pains to paint him as a bit doddering rather than racist.

There is growing attention to the opulence of the monarchy including the jewellery worn at official events. Across social media it has been pointed out that the riches have been stolen from South Africa and India and also former colonies including Australia. Many are posting a meme of a young Elizabeth posing during her coronation where she wears the imperial State Crown, Sovereign’s Sceptre with Cross and Sovereign’s Orb, all said to be priceless and stolen from colonised nations as part of the

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<sup>77</sup> Symon Hill, @symonHill, “Charles Windsor is Due to Be...” (Twitter 12 Oct 2022), <https://twitter.com/SymonHill/status/1579883708454440960>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Adela Suliman et al., “Boris Johnson Resigns as Party Leader”, *Washington Post* (2022) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/07/boris-johnson-resign-live-updates/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Laney, @laneymakesstuff, “Imagine Part of Your Wages...” (Twitter 13 October 2022), <https://twitter.com/laneymakesstuff/status/1580384546414940160>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Karen Rosenbaum et al., “Jeffrey Epstein. Filthy Rich. Sexual Assault Survivors and the Justice System”, *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 49.1 (2021), 144-145.

<sup>81</sup> Victoria Ward and Josie Ensor, “Queen to Help Pay for 12m Prince Andrew Settlement”, *The Telegraph* (2022), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/royal-family/2022/02/15/queen-help-pay-12m-prince-andrew-settlement/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Kimberley Ducey and Joe R. Feagin, *Revealing Britain’s Systemic Racism. The Case of Meghan Markle and the Royal Family* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Cady Lang, “The Core Message from Megan and Harry’s Oprah Interview. Racism Drove Us from the Royal Family”, *Times* (2021), <https://time.com/5944613/meghan-markle-oprah-racism/>, accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Sarah Al-Arshani, “Prince Phillip Had a Long History of Racist and Problematic Language Stretching Back 40 Years”, *Insider* (2021), <https://www.insider.com/prince-philip-long-history-racist-problematic-language-2021-4>, accessed 2 November 2022.

colonial expansion. Sadé @sadenochill tweeted, “That palace and crown jewels are monuments to genocide. Tear it all down & return the wealth immediately”.<sup>85</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This paper began as an exploration, in many ways, a thoughtful attempt to make sense of the nonsensical. In doing so, it has illuminated, through the excessive lamenting and public displays of grief, the anxiety that is tucked away regarding the ‘fall of Jericho’, the beginning of the end of the British monarchy. This may take decades. However, the visibility of social media responses suggests that the walls are indeed crumbling as scandal leaks into the royal façade and world events continue to challenge the power and authority of colonial rule. This may be a statement of optimism on my part, (albeit shared by many Indigenous peoples), and given the evidence supporting the Crown and the repercussions for those who don’t, it is still clear that the monarchy retains a stronghold on its so-called empire states. However, there is an increase in the ‘writing on the wall’ that suggests the outpouring is not simply about the monarchy but about what it continues to represent for those who have been brutally dispossessed by its might.

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<sup>85</sup> Sadé – John’s sister, Fundamentally Black, @sadenocill, “That Palace and Crown Jewels...” (Twitter 9 September 2022), <https://twitter.com/Sadenochill/status/1567936235246866432>, accessed 2 November 2022.



## Black Deaths in Custody. Digital Strategies of Indigenous Mobilisation

**Abstract:** Aboriginal Deaths in Custody has constituted a pressing issue for Indigenous communities in Australia since the 1980s. Yet, despite the constant demands for justice raised by Indigenous leaders and activists, this problem rose to public prominence in June 2020, as demonstrations against police brutality spread around the globe in response to the murder of George Floyd. The events of Minneapolis struck a chord with the many Australian Indigenous families and communities who had lost their loved ones to police violence, sparking a series of protests across Australia's major urban centres. Thus, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, like never before, came together both online and in person to demonstrate solidarity and stand with the Black Lives Matter movement while exposing the very local plight of Black Deaths in Custody. In particular, digital platforms have played a key role in the framing of alternative narratives. Hence, drawing from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Theory, with references to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonising methodologies, this paper examines the online rhetorical and visual strategies adopted by Indigenous activists to protest the loss of 'Blak' lives in police custody. Primarily, I have looked at the website and Facebook page Stop Black Deaths in Custody, along with the digital materials circulated on social media by Indigenous activist groups. Of particular interest is the media work of Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (W.A.R.), a collective of young Aboriginal men and women who have been at the forefront of the BLM protests in Australia. The findings reflect the transnational dimension of the communicative tactics employed to mobilise local and global publics. Indeed, the resources used by Indigenous activists aim to establish affective resonances, gathering national and international support to effect meaningful change.

Keywords: *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Black Lives Matter, protests, online activism, multimodality, transnationalism, affective publics*

### 1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) has become a well-known and consolidated chapter in the history of human rights and social justice, rising in prominence in the early summer of 2020 after the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis (USA). This event sparked global public dissent as the concerns raised by BLM activists in America struck a chord amongst several other communities in different parts of the world. In Australia, a place with a history of colonial violence and dispossession, the problems addressed by BLM were strongly felt by its First Nations and their allies, who mobilised almost immediately by organising a series of animated protests across the country. State neglect, police brutality, and discrimination against Aboriginal people were not new, but the emotional power of the international uprising invigorated the ongoing fight against Black Deaths in Custody<sup>1</sup> and generated public debate, welcoming new supporters but also critics. Thus, when the protests erupted again in June 2020, prominent Australian Indigenous activists responded to the Black Lives Matter campaigners' call for action by showing support both through social media platforms and by organising very successful offline demonstrations. Simultaneously, the

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<sup>1</sup> This work is informed by extensive conversations with *Gunai* Elder, leader and activist Robert Thorpe and the teachings of *Gooniyandi* activist and leader Vivian Podesser Malo, whose legacy will continue to inspire new generations of activists.

American events helped return similar issues to the fore, allowing Australian Indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup> to take advantage of the global unrest to restate that this is also a national problem. Indigenous Activists Tarneen Onus-Williams (*Gunditjmara*, *Bindal*, *Yorta Yorta* and Torres Strait Islander), Crystal McKinnon (*Amangu*) and Meriki Onus (Gunai and Gunditjmara) have explained that: “[a]s Black, Brown, Indigenous people and allies in the United States and across the world collectively rise up to end systemic racism and violent police practices, it was necessary for us here in Australia to also rise”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, thirty years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, almost 500 Indigenous peoples have lost their lives while in custody or incarcerated, as highlighted by two key reports, one from the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>4</sup> and one from *The Guardian*.<sup>5</sup>

With the protests reaching public attention in Australia, the language adopted by activist groups started to reflect the local vernacular in more specific and dynamic ways, making clever use of the attribute ‘Black’ through its modified form ‘Blak’. Tellingly, in order to shed light on the local aspects of what it means to be ‘Black’ in an increasingly diverse Australia, Indigenous peoples have historically adopted the term ‘Blak’ as a way to differentiate the racial from the political. Thus, hashtags such as #blaklivesmatter and #BlakDeathsInCustody, together with #aboriginallivesmatter, #stopblackdeathsincustody, and #indigenouslivesmatter provide local interconnected nodes within a global network of outrage and solidarity.<sup>6</sup>

With the hope to give more exposure to this issue across different scholarly avenues, this paper looks at the online multimodal strategies (mainly linguistic and visual) adopted by Indigenous activists Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR) and Stop Black Deaths In Custody (SBDIC) in their efforts to mobilise publics<sup>7</sup> across national boundaries and through affective resonances. In doing so they are also asserting their sovereignty and right to self-determination. Their social media pages constitute key sites for the organisation and mobilisation of resources and audiences through a plethora of multimodal communicative strategies. A focus on the textual, rather than a direct and sustained engagement with the vast body of work that looks at media activism and protest, has provided a more detailed narrative about the communicative strength, ingenuity, and creativity of the younger generations of Indigenous activists, who are now taking the lead in asserting their right to self-determine.

This work was also inspired by many online and telephonic conversations with long-time activist, *Gunai* Elder and leader Robert Thorpe, who commented on the use of social media for activism by sharing his personal experience:

For so many years our voice was not heard or it was manipulated by the colonizers, their propaganda about our identity history and culture had been their interpretation and opinion. First people’s media organizations are relatively new, many rely on “gov” funding not [the] true voice of the people, social media has changed

<sup>2</sup> I have used the term ‘peoples’ since the plural form has been accorded self-determination rights within an international legal framework (see Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999], *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Third Edition (London: Zed Books, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Tarneen Onus-Williams et al., “Why We Organised Melbourne’s Black Lives Matter Rally”, *Chain Reaction*, 139 (2021), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Doherty, “Statistical Report 37. Deaths in custody in Australia 2020-21”, *Australian Institute of Criminology* (2021), [www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/sr37\\_deaths\\_in\\_custody\\_in\\_australia\\_2020-21\\_v3.pdf](http://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/sr37_deaths_in_custody_in_australia_2020-21_v3.pdf), accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian Australia, “Deaths Inside: Indigenous Australian Deaths in Custody”, *The Guardian* (2021), [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), accessed 5 November 2022. This report is the most recent and updated source of information on the issue.

<sup>6</sup> See Chiara Ministrelli, “‘Black Lives Matter’ in Australia. The Perennial Question of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody”, *University of Kent. Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies* (2021), [www.research.kent.ac.uk/centreforindigenousandsettlercolonialstudies/2021/02/02/black-lives-matter-in-australia-the-perennial-question-of-aboriginal-deaths-in-custody/](http://www.research.kent.ac.uk/centreforindigenousandsettlercolonialstudies/2021/02/02/black-lives-matter-in-australia-the-perennial-question-of-aboriginal-deaths-in-custody/), accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>7</sup> In this paper I use the terms ‘public’ and ‘audience’ almost interchangeably, aware that the distinction between the two has been eroded by the convergence of media and (mobile) technologies within an increasingly networked media landscape.

all that now. The best is yet to come, the younger generations know how to use this media better than anyone, just hope they don't forget the knowledge of the Elders with them, Who have been cut out of the communication game once again.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, while I mainly focus on the positive aspects of social media technologies and their affordances, it is important to keep on identifying the challenges posed by the architecture of such platforms<sup>9</sup> and the real-life consequences of online exposure. Along with negative media representations, Indigenous activists have been strongly opposed by the government and attacked by the police.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, as Robert Thorpe poignantly affirms, the inability to access social media could also lead to forms of 'digital exclusion'. Yet, despite the shortcomings of these digital platforms, the analysed data show that the transnational and affective dimensions that underlie the great majority of the activists' multimodal strategies not only contributed to unprecedented support from national and international publics, but also helped put pressure on the government to address injustices.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1 *The transnational and affective dimensions*

In the rhetoric around Black Deaths in Custody and the strategies of mobilisation used by key social actors in Australia since May 2020, two patterns emerge with clarity. The first aspect to consider is the transnational dimension of the discursive and semiotic practices utilised by the protesters and, the second, is the role of affect and emotion in establishing solid networks across racial and ethnic lines. While these two theoretical frameworks are far from being novel ways of looking at social movements and protests,<sup>12</sup> they nevertheless add insight to the analysis of the multimodal texts employed by Indigenous activists in mobilising people and resources in more effective ways. I am here referring to transnationalism as "mode of cultural reproduction ... as site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of 'place' or locality".<sup>13</sup> The notion of 'Glocalisation', in terms of the co-presence of universal and particular aspects,<sup>14</sup> provides another layer for understanding the place of the local beyond national boundaries. Indeed, while the transnational dimension of the phenomenon represents an important tool for very local issues to traverse national borders, it has also enhanced the formation of a network of international recognition and support for the Aboriginal cause.

The transnational framework has also been discussed by Ravi da Costa in his analysis of the transnational dimension of Indigenous activism. As da Costa explains: "The 'Aboriginal predicament' cannot be understood if thought of as a strictly national matter".<sup>15</sup> But, while it has been ascertained that the language and examples of Black activism in the United States have been instrumental in

<sup>8</sup> Thorpe Robert, Online Conversation (3 October 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See Dencik Lina and Oliver Leistert, eds., *Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest. Between Control and Emancipation* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Activists Crystal McKinnon and Meriki Onus (co-founder of WAR) were unfairly charged over a BLM rally organised in Melbourne (Australia) on 06/06/20.

<sup>11</sup> Pressing demands to address inequalities led to the launch, in 2021, of the *Yoorrook* Justice Commission in the Australian state of Victoria. This is the first formal attempt to establish a Truth Commission that aims to investigate the ongoing inequalities experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Victoria).

<sup>12</sup> See Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund, eds., *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up. The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Rutgers U.P., 2021); Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Social Media Mob. Being Indigenous Online* (Sydney: Macquarie U.P., 2018); Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, "Yarning Circles and Social Media Activism", *Media International Australia*, 169.1 (October 2018), 43-53; Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?", *Journal of International Communication*, 1.1 (1994), 33-52.

<sup>15</sup> Ravi Da Costa, *A Higher Authority. Indigenous Transnationalism and Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 3.

inciting political action amongst Aboriginal peoples since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>16</sup> the BLM movement in Australia is unique as it expresses specific demands while raising the issue of a very domestic problem: Aboriginal deaths in custody. Yet, transnationalism also helps explain the momentum generated by the events in Minneapolis and the success of the protests in Australia, which were further aided by effective local communicative and organisational skills.

The use of ‘affect’, as that which precedes emotion,<sup>17</sup> and the constitution of affective publics<sup>18</sup> that are generated by a shared sense of frustration and empathy can be seen as the starting point for successful strategies of mobilisation. Looking at the affective economies of Indigenous media activism, Indigenous scholar Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund argue: “the activist potential and reach of social media to support Indigenous art, literature, music, and expressive arts generally, including comedy” provides “ways for Indigenous epistemologies and ideologies to entertain and move people, to trade in the affective economies of empathy and understanding that will lead to action and change”.<sup>19</sup> Personal narratives conveyed linguistically and visually have been pivotal in promoting displays of empathy and more active online and physical (in the streets) participation.<sup>20</sup> Affective content can in fact lead to increased mobilisation and possible institutional change, as I have argued above.<sup>21</sup> In this paper, the affective dimension has been explored mainly through the analytical lenses of Appraisal Theory<sup>22</sup> and the ways in which ‘affect’ and ‘judgement’ are expressed in the discursive formations around the issue of Black Deaths in Custody.

## 1.2 WAR and SBDIC

Stop Black Deaths in Custody is an Indigenous not-for-profit organisation devoted to raising awareness and campaigning for justice. They have a strong social media presence with popular Instagram and Facebook pages (21,864 followers) and a less known Twitter account. All of these platforms contain links to the SBDIC website<sup>23</sup> and vice versa. On all sites, merchandise and bank coordinates are placed in a prominent position to remind users to support the organisation through donations. On Facebook, the page administrators post several times a week, sometimes more than once a day and, while the website focuses on a few selected campaigns to support the families of people who died in custody, the Facebook page engages with several other cases.

Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance, also known by the clever acronym of WAR, is a collective of young Aboriginal activists from different parts of Australia who “are committed to the cause of decolonization”.<sup>24</sup> They also advocate for Aboriginal nationalism, resistance, and cultural revival. WAR have become a prominent social actor within the Indigenous and, increasingly, the Australian

<sup>16</sup> John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom. The Origins of Australia Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari [1980], *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P., 1987).

<sup>18</sup> See Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*; Margareth Lünenborg, “Affective Publics. Understanding the Dynamic Formation of Public Articulations Beyond the Public Sphere”, in Anne Fleig and Christian von Scheve, eds., *Public Spheres of Resonance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 29-48; Zizzi Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling. Sentiment, Events and Mediality”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 19.3 (2016), 307-324.

<sup>19</sup> Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Yell, “Natural Disaster News and Communities of Feeling. The Affective Interpellation of Local and Global Publics”, *Social Semiotics*, 22.4 (2012), 409-428.

<sup>21</sup> Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*; Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006); Simon Clarke et al., eds., *Emotion, Politics and Society* (London: Palgrave, 2006); Yell, “Natural Disaster News and Communities of Feeling”.

<sup>22</sup> Jim Martin and Peter White, *The Language of Evaluation. Appraisal in English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> See [www.sbdicaustralia.com.au](http://www.sbdicaustralia.com.au), accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>24</sup> See [www.facebook.com/WARcollective](https://www.facebook.com/WARcollective), accessed 5 November 2022.

public spheres over the past seven years, demonstrating strong organisational skills and managing to mobilise people from different backgrounds. Yet, despite their notoriety and influence within the activist sector, they have decided to concentrate their digital activism only on Facebook, where they have 61,000 followers. WAR use their Facebook page mainly as a container of information and a space for different users and organisations to benefit from their popularity. When the BLM protests erupted again in 2020, WAR took the lead and engaged in a series of actions aiming to inform the Australian public, condemning the actions of the police and mobilising resources to give the issue international breadth thanks to their global connections.

## 2. Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the rhetorical and visual strategies employed by WAR and SBDIC in their framing of Black Deaths in Custody and in their mobilisation efforts, I have adopted a hybrid qualitative methodology that draws from various approaches within the Systemic Functional Linguistic tradition.<sup>25</sup> This paper primarily focuses on the interplay between visual and linguistic elements from a social semiotic perspective framed around Multimodality, or Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA).<sup>26</sup> Images are understood as conveyors of representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. Representational meaning can either present events or processes as they unfold (narrative) or identify the participants' qualities (conceptual). Interactive meaning looks at the relationship between the encoder, the represented and the viewer through the semiotic categories of 'contact', 'modality', 'attitude', and 'distance'. Composition works through 'framing' techniques, 'information value' and 'salience'.<sup>27</sup>

From a linguistic perspective, I have analysed written text (as part of multi-layered multimodal social media posts and webpages) through elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which views linguistic structures as ideological tools of social constructions,<sup>28</sup> and Appraisal Theory,<sup>29</sup> which examines evaluations in language. Within the Appraisal system, I have drawn from the domain of 'Attitude' since it is concerned with the way we express feelings, how we react to events emotionally and how we evaluate situations. Attitude is further operationalised through the categories of 'Affect', 'Judgement' and 'Appreciation', which are used to understand how specific texts produce "communities of shared feelings and values".<sup>30</sup>

The reason for selecting the digital material produced and shared by WAR and SBDIC is their visibility, popularity and work as activists and advocates for the BLM/SBDIC movement. Both groups use social media platforms to communicate with different audiences. Social media have been a crucial asset for Indigenous peoples, who have productively integrated social media activities into their daily practices,<sup>31</sup> with Facebook as one of the most popular platforms.<sup>32</sup> Thus, focusing on a limited<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Michael A. K. Halliday and Christian M. Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2006); David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction* (Los Angeles, London and New Delhi: Sage, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*; Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Theo van Dijk, ed., *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage, 1997), 258-85.

<sup>29</sup> Martin and White, *The Language of Evaluation*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Bronwyn L. Carlson and Ryan Frazer, "A Global Response to #SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA", in Anthony McCosker at al., eds., *Negotiating Digital Citizenship. Control, Contest and Culture* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 115-130; Carlson and Frazer, *Social Media Mob*; Inge Kral, "Youth Media as Cultural Practice. Remote Indigenous Youth Speaking Out Loud", *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1 (2011), 4-16; Theresa L. Petray, "Protest 2.0. Online Interactions and Aboriginal Activists", *Media, Culture & Society*, 33.6 (2011), 923-940.

selection of online material created, posted, and shared by the two groups, I have examined the most prominent (as determined by online engagement and commonalities) posts published at the beginning of the revolts in 2020. These texts display key features about the ways in which Black Deaths are being communicated.

The notions of affective publics and transnationalism were not applied *a priori* but emerged from the examination of the data. This approach provides a critical angle for the analysis of how Indigenous activists in Australia have built on the communicative and narrative structures provided by broader global movements to establish strong connective and affective resonances with Indigenous and non-Indigenous publics. For example, I have looked at the ways in which the broader Black Lives Matter discourse has been adopted and adapted to fulfil local communicative needs through the SBDIC website and its connected Facebook page. Both SBDIC and WAR use complex texts combining still and moving images, sound, and linguistic features, as well as specific elements such as hashtags, here conceptualised in their interpersonal function<sup>34</sup> as commands (#justiceforAuntySherry; #StopBla(c)KDeathsinCustody; #SayHerName) or declaratives (#BLM; #Aboriginallivesmatter; #blaklivesmatter; #BlackLivesMatter; #ourwomenaresacred).

Overall, my analysis of the data followed a key principle that should support and sustain any academic endeavour that deals with questions of Indigenous relevance, especially if such enquiries are undertaken by White academics. Therefore, my reading of the data was further informed by the principles embedded in Decolonising methodologies.<sup>35</sup> Decolonising methodologies are not merely a method, but can be seen as a philosophy, a personal and academic stance that aims to empower Indigenous voices and viewpoints. For instance, while the article engages with the topic from a social semiotic perspective ‘designed’ to foreground the researcher’s standpoint, my views have been sustained by the guidance, knowledge and example set by activists like Vivian Malo, Robbie Thorpe and his family, as well as the people I have collaborated with over the years.<sup>36</sup> In addition, I hope to be able to ‘give back’ by discussing such an important issue across various academic avenues, and by paying homage to the Indigenous activists’ courage and resilience.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

#### 3.1 *Transnational solidarity for a national agenda*

At the start of the protests, transnational solidarity dominated the discourse around Black Deaths in Custody in Australia. Indeed, the theme of transnationalism is constantly invoked not only through visual choices (predominantly still images), but also through linguistic elements that anchor the meaning into a ‘glocal’ context.<sup>37</sup> Such debates are clearly reflected in the way online conversations are framed. For instance, most Australian Indigenous activists adopted the hashtag or slogan #BLM, together with more specific and local phrases such as ‘Aboriginal Lives Matter’, ‘BlakLivesMatter’ and/or ‘Black Deaths in Custody’. The use of such tags and their order of appearance in public posts are clear expressions of transnational solidarity, but they also reflect a broader question of the place of (Aboriginal) Australia within the international arena. On 3 June 2020, the website for the Centre of

<sup>32</sup> Bronwyn L. Carlson, “The ‘New Frontier’. Emergent Indigenous Identities and Social Media”, in Michelle Harris et al., eds., *The Politics of Identity. Emerging Indigeneity* (Sydney: UTS E-Press, 2013), 147-168; Bronwyn L. Lumby, “Cyber-Indigeneity. Urban Indigenous Identity on Facebook”, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 39 (2010), 68-75.

<sup>33</sup> Considering the length and scope of this article, I had to limit my analysis to very few texts.

<sup>34</sup> See Halliday and Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

<sup>36</sup> A special thanks goes to Patrick Mau, Fred Leone and all the people whose ideas have inspired me over the years.

<sup>37</sup> Robertson, Roland, “Globalisation or Glocalisation?”

Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention published a media release titled “Black Lives Matter. Aboriginal Lives Matter. Black Deaths in Custody Must Stop”.<sup>38</sup> This was linked to several posts that circulated on the WAR and SBDIC Facebook pages, confirming the discursive potential of hashtags as a way of “forging and contesting social bonds”,<sup>39</sup> promoting affiliation and enacting possible practices of inclusion/exclusion.

A close analysis of the language used on this web page shows a hierarchical order in the way the three short sentences, which are well-known slogans, are organised and appear in sequence. Placed in thematic position, “Black Lives Matter” works as the broader, global signifier that indexes the more popular and pressing issue of African American people being killed by the police. The slogan is followed by “Aboriginal Lives Matter”, which helps narrow down and localise the issue. With a change in only the first attribute (“Aboriginal” for “Black”), a closer connection to the first sentence is immediately established, showing the derivational, and yet distinct, nature of the slogan. In third position, in the role of ‘new’, readers are eventually introduced to the specific problem as it is known in Australia: Black Deaths in Custody. This is phrased as a command, “Must Stop”, and with the modal auxiliary used to invoke a sense of obligation. Deontic modality, namely a system “concerned with a speaker’s attitude to the degree of obligation attaching to the performance of certain actions”<sup>40</sup> appears with frequency in the rhetoric strategies adopted by Indigenous activists. In addition, the order of elements within a sentence, theme and rheme, or given and new, often bears important ideological and rhetorical implications as it represents a specific perspective<sup>41</sup> and, in this case, the idea that ‘Black deaths in custody’ is part of a broader movement. Thus, despite it being relegated to the (discursive) margins, there is a pressing need to give more emphasis to the Australian issue. By tapping into the broader rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter movement, Indigenous activists not only demonstrate their support for the cause, but also establish a connection with similar events, while creating awareness amongst international publics.<sup>42</sup> This is clearly visible in the words of WAR activists who assert that, “[t]his is a global movement, and this is an issue that Australia is a part of too. When the footage emerged of the murder of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers, as he desperately pleaded ‘I can’t breathe’, we were all horrified and outraged, but not surprised”.<sup>43</sup>

The activists’ testimony is further supported by a popular photo collage that circulated on the activists’ social media pages in 2020 (Figure 1). The image portrays George Floyd and David Dungay, the Aboriginal man who died in similar circumstances. The two men are framed in a central position and, despite being shot at different distances (a close-up for Floyd and a long-distance shot for Dungay), their eyes constitute the focal point in both pictures. Within a multimodal framework, this image can be considered a conceptual representation<sup>44</sup> as participants are depicted in their ‘essence’. In particular, a connection is established between the two men through a process of classification that puts them in the same category through a series of visual and textual (written) resources. Kress and van Leeuwen explain that classification processes have the power to connect participants through a “taxonomy” (79), in which participants stand in a relationship of ‘subordination’ and ‘superordination’. So, the two men, can be seen as ‘subordinates’ within the established taxonomy. This visual strategy enables a relationship of proximity with viewers through a direct gaze, in line with demand images.<sup>45</sup> A further framing device is constituted by the broader structure created by the

<sup>38</sup> See [www.cbpatisp.com.au](http://www.cbpatisp.com.au), last accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk. Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Simpson, *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 43.

<sup>41</sup> Halliday and Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*; Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

<sup>42</sup> See Da Costa, *A Higher Authority*.

<sup>43</sup> Onus-Williams, McKinnon and Onus. “Why We Organised”, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

heading “I can’t breathe” (in quotation marks), mirrored in the expression “BLACK LIVES MATTER” (in capital letters), placed symmetrically at the bottom of the image. Thus, “I can’t breathe” and “Black Lives Matter” function as the overarching superordinates that hold the two stories together. The symmetry of the composition is respected not only through the alignment of the photographs, but also through the text that frames the photographs. The expressions also work intertextually in that they reference other notorious cases of African American people who died in a similar way, as confirmed in the text under the two photographs. “I can’t breathe” thus becomes a connective discursive formation, as well as being a cry for help, that holds the local and the global in tension.



Fig. 1: Image collage of Floyd and Dungay circulated on WAR’s FB page, Facebook, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1195037700842024/?ref=newsfeed>.

A series of posts published at the start of the protests reflect a similar structure, with the clause “I can’t breathe” as the main connective discourse that bridges the local and the global. A Facebook post published by SBDIC on June 6, 2020, provides an effective example of how the transnational dimension of the issue is expressed in a multimodal manner so as to engage users in multiple (sensorial and practical) ways (see Figure 2). This is achieved mainly through the use of the clause “I can’t Breathe”, positioned at the centre of the image, in white, large and bold, capital letters against a black square which is inserted into a broader red square. The main clause is then followed by the hashtag “#StopBlackDeathsInCustody”, which anchors the meaning and localises the issue. Similar signifiers of locality are “@stopblackdeathsincustody” at the bottom of the image, within the red square, and the text in the post. The latter invites users/viewers to take action through a series of requests to share visual footage of the rallies. From a visual point of view, the meaning is once more organised in a hierarchical structure with the squares connoting the interpenetration of the local and global dimensions, indexed by the red/blood-stained human handprint against a black backdrop and the black writing against the red background.



Fig. 2: Post circulated on the SBDIC’s Facebook page, Facebook, 6 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/2Black2StrongTshirts/photos/3145533788859523>.

Similarly, a media statement released by WAR on June 5, 2020, builds its arguments around Floyd’s last words. This post’s only interactive element is given by the hashtag “BlakLivesMatter”, which performs a double function. On the one hand, it points to the African American slogan and, on the other, it localises the issue through substitution (“Blak” instead of Black). Once more, the hashtag functions interpersonally, as it helps strengthen social bonds while making the issue visible through circulation by connection (connected issues). From a macro perspective, the language used in the media statement provides a clear explanation of the transnational framework that is often invoked and evoked in support of African Americans and, at the same time, used to gain international attention for the Aboriginal cause. Linguistically, the media release aligns with a series of other texts, where the lament “I can’t breathe” is employed to establish transnational links through empathy.<sup>46</sup> Once more, George Floyd is compared to *Dunghutti* man David Dungay. Other parts of the media statement focus on the similarities between the two contexts through declarations such as: “[t]hese deaths are among the latest in a long line of Black deaths in custody in the United States and in Australia” and “Australia and the USA are both violent and racist colonial regimes”.

Another media statement released by WAR on July 27, 2020 and titled “WAR supports tomorrow’s Sydney Black Lives Matter protest”, overtly addresses the parallels between the two movements by stating that: “the Sydney demonstration is part of a global movement”. From a semiotic perspective, WAR’s posts about the organisation of protests range from plain text and images of their media statements to creative artwork that aims to incite people to mobilise through cross-platform support, serious appeals, and entertaining posts (memes, digital art, etc). Videos of rallies and media conferences provide a more realistic account (high modality) of what happens on the ground, showing commitment and organisational skills. The live function of Facebook is also used to keep various publics up to date with real-time events in various parts of Australia. Live videos of rallies fulfil this function of sharing local events as they happen, while encouraging people to keep the momentum alive by using the provided global and local hashtags: “#BlackLivesMatter” and “#StopBlackDeathsInCustody”. Links embedded in social media posts also provide interactive ways to

<sup>46</sup> See also Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*.

learn more about the issues at stake. Indeed, hyperlinks constitute a resource for promoting social relations and personal research<sup>47</sup>, especially on the activists’ social media sites, where related online texts are proposed, thus signalling support to other organisations fighting for the same cause.

### 3.2 Mobilising publics through affective resonances

So far, the paper has looked at the transnational dimension of the rhetoric adopted by Indigenous activists, with particular reference to WAR and SBDIC. But, while a distinction has been maintained between the transnational and the affective spheres, such a clear-cut demarcation is not always valid, as they often intertwine. Further, mobilisation achieves its best results when the two spheres collide, as we have seen so far. A detailed analysis of representative and popular posts also helps identify the ways in which different publics are interpellated to gain local and global support. Thus, looking at a media release published by WAR on June 5, 2020, it is possible to notice the interpenetration of these two discourses: the transnational and the affective. From an Appraisal point of view, the use of adverbs like “painfully”, attributes such as “racist”, “lethal”, “rabid (police)” and “violent”, together with a highly negative lexicon, namely “(systemic) racism”, “negligence”, “(colonial) regime”, “genocide”, “theft”, as well as “our own” and “so-called Australia”, point to the highly affective dimension of a very negative issue. They also convey judgements<sup>48</sup> about the state, the police, and justice. In the Appraisal system, judgements can be divided into ‘social esteem’ and ‘social sanctions’. These two categories can be further examined from the perspective of how normal or unusual things are (‘normality’), how capable (‘capacity’), and how resolute (‘tenacity’). On the other hand, social sanctions deal with truthfulness (‘veracity’) and ethical qualities (‘propriety’).<sup>49</sup> Most of the affective terms used here belong to the category of social sanction with links to the ethical dimension of the issue (“racist”, “lethal”, “violent”).

In addition, a series of material verbs follow the main clause: “he was being murdered”, “resonate”, “have died”. The use of the past continuous passive in “he was being murdered” conveys a sense of length and continuity while pointing to the intentionality of the killing. The action is represented as an event, with the ‘actor’ placed in the position of ‘given’ and the ‘goal’ as ‘new’.<sup>50</sup> Within the CDA tradition, passivisation (the use of passive rather than active forms), together with nominalisation (when a verb or clause is turned into a noun) are seen as processes that exclude participants from the action showing a lack of agency for ideological purposes.<sup>51</sup> Yet, in this particular instance, the agent/actor is expressed clearly, but it is not placed in thematic position. Instead, the goal of the action is placed in a prominent position to direct the attention on the victim, who thus acquires more value. Other expressions of overt judgement, such as: “[h]ad all these people been White, we have no doubt they would still be here” are constructed in a way to show “ideological squaring”,<sup>52</sup> a structural opposition between White and Black, privileged non-Indigenous people versus persecuted Indigenous peoples. This is flagged by the (hypothetical) structure of the sentence, the use of White that implies its opposite (Black) and the indexical “these” which presupposes a “those”. The use of “So-called Australia” also works to discredit the legitimate status of the nation, casting doubts about its foundations and current rule.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Kok, “Multisemiotic Mediation in Hypertext”, in Kay L. O’ Halloran, ed., *Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Systemic Functional Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Martin and White, *The Language of Evaluation*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

<sup>51</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*.

The media statement adopts another communicative strategy in building the case for wide participation in the protests. The use of personal stories is a key strategy when it comes to the mobilisation of emotions and, as a consequence, of heterogeneous publics who connect through empathy and resentment. This involves telling the personal stories of the deceased and, in many instances, how they have been killed by the police (for example: “shot to death”, “murdered in custody”, “negligence”). Similar affective responses are also elicited through the circulation of highly artistic representations of the deceased and, linguistically, through calls to take part in forms of activism to commemorate the dead (by posting digital art, sharing hashtags, supporting causes, etc). Many of the calls to commemoration shed light on specific stories and individuals through digitalised images that use popular phrases borrowed from the BLM movement, as well as the Missed and Murdered Indigenous Women movement (#sayhername), which reinstates the translocal nature of digital mobilisation predicated on community building and belonging.

The importance of single stories, which has been supported by *The Guardian*’s pivotal inquest, is visible in the content published on the website of SBDIC. Indeed, the website, which aims to guide and assist Indigenous peoples in their fight for justice, introduces personal stories through the different campaigns launched by the organisation. The website is designed in a way to convey a strong emotional reaction and inspire feelings that gravitate around pride in Aboriginality and empathy for the deceased. The hierarchical structure of the website presents users with a conceptual image, an artistic rendering of the organisation’s name (Stop Black Deaths in Custody), the acronym (SBDIC) with the logo placed on the top left and an introductory sentence at the very top that explains the aims and objectives of the website: “[w]holeheartedly offering Support & Assistance to First Nations Families in their fight 4 JUSTICE. Please, DONATE”. The use of the adverb “[w]holeheartedly” in thematic position and the salience of “Justice” and “Donate” show a high degree of positive affect.<sup>53</sup> The logo and the image are connected as the image inverts the colour scheme of the logo by using the colours of the Aboriginal Flag (red, yellow and black) in the background rather than inside the letters (see figure 3).



Fig. 3: Banner of the website StopBlackDeathsInCustody, [www.sbdicaustralia.com.au](http://www.sbdicaustralia.com.au).

Under the banner, the website proceeds to engage users through an introductory statement aiming to create a sense of community as evidenced by linguistic choices such as the repetitive use of the possessive “our” in the expressions “for our people”, “by our people”. In the next section of the site, as indexed by a short separation line under the capitalised heading “OUR CAMPAIGNS 4 JUSTICE”,

<sup>53</sup> Martin and White, *The Language of Evaluation*.

the organisation displays the various campaigns they are working on. The use of personal and highly emotive imagery to represent the deceased and the opportunity to learn more about their life by clicking the active link help convey a series of emotive meanings that presuppose affective responses. Specific features of the website (a whole section dedicated to merchandise and donations, links to the donations page, and links to social media sites) suggest different ways of engaging with these messages of support through a series of concrete and symbolic actions. In this case, a resource-based relationship with various audiences is created in the process of mobilisation.<sup>54</sup> Pleas to share the information, donate funds, subscribe to the newsletter, and purchase merchandise are all key strategies used by the organisation to help “Support a Worthy Cause” as the site states. While the language and imagery used across the website suggest the interpellation of mixed audiences, there are specific elements in the architecture of the text that openly address the Aboriginal community as evidenced in the section called “Let’s Connect Together” preceded and followed by three hearts bearing the colours of the Aboriginal flag.

The adoption of highly emotionally charged language and images presented through a multimodal approach is characteristic of the rhetorical strategies employed by SBDIC and WAR. In particular, insofar as affective representations of deaths in custody are concerned, both groups have been actively sharing digital artwork not only in the hope of gathering financial resources, but also with the aim to mobilise affective resonances across racial and ethnic divides. Using a social semiotic approach to examine popular imagery that circulated across various social network sites, it is possible to notice a pattern in the way in which ‘Black Deaths’ are represented. Most images are constructed as demand images because they ask viewers (either directly or indirectly) to engage with both the visual and written text. They convey an interactive meaning since images can create specific relations between viewers and what is represented inside the picture frame.<sup>55</sup> These strategies come to the fore in a digital illustration of Sherry Fisher-Tilberoo (Figure 4). In this image, the *Birri Gubba* woman, also known as ‘Aunty Sherry’, is depicted in a holy fashion, surrounded by a halo and gumtree leaves that symbolise connection to ‘Land’ and ‘Country’. The artwork, supposedly<sup>56</sup> created by *Wiradjuri* and *Ngiyampaa* artist Charlotte Allingham, has widely circulated across different social media platforms and the overlaid text has been slightly modified depending on specific communicative needs. The use of highly creative digital artwork is another way in which Indigenous activists mobilise transcultural affective publics. On the one hand, they address the global community through intertextuality and a series of visual strategies that draw from a repertoire of images, concepts and discourses highly recognisable within the global sphere (the Aboriginal Flag, natural elements, etc.); on the other, some signs acquire specific meanings if read by Indigenous audiences (the use of the affective kinship title “Aunty”, symbols of Aboriginal identity such as eucalyptus leaves and references to Indigenous struggles).

From an interpersonal perspective, the close-up of the face, neck and shoulders, together with the frontal angle, suggest an intimate relationship with viewers who are asked to empathise and, in some cases, even identify with the represented. Aunt Sherry’s post (Figure 4) also performs a perlocutionary function, for it can be read as a call to action thanks to the accompanying text and the hashtags embedded in the post. Indeed, even though there is no direct eye contact, audiences are asked to take action through linguistic and affective visual elements, thus turning this into an interactive and demand image. The overlaid white capitalised “JUSTICE” at the top of the artwork is mirrored by the text “FOR AUNTY SHERRY” in a smaller font. The low modality and highly abstract quality of the representation convey a sense of immateriality, which may contribute to enhancing feelings of

<sup>54</sup>Erich Sommerfeldt, “Activist Online Resource Mobilization: Relationship Building Features That Fulfill Resource Dependencies”, *Public Relations Review*, 37.4 (2011), 429-431.

<sup>55</sup> Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

<sup>56</sup> I was not able to verify the author, but the image is characteristic of the artist’s style.

empathy. The linguistic elements that accompany the post provide more information about the objectives that the image should help achieve. The verbal indicators of synthetic personalisation<sup>57</sup>, which are evident in the direct inclusive address to the audience, “[m]ake this your profile picture”, contain specific instructions on how to take part in the protest and pay homage to Aunt Sherry. A series of hashtags are then presented for users to share on their platforms (#Stopblackdeathsincustody, #blaklivesmatter #blacklivesmatter, #BLM, #Aboriginallivesmatter, #ourwomensacred). Undeniably, ‘hashtag activism’<sup>58</sup> has strengthened international connections, facilitating possibilities for networking and reaching out to new publics in a way that allows activists to profit from the resonances of the BLM movement, while explaining the peculiarities of its articulation in Australia, its differences and similarities.



Fig. 4 Popular post shared by WAR on their Facebook page.

The image represents Sherry Fisher-Tilbero, also known as Aunty Sherry,

[www.facebook.com/WARcollective/photos/pb.100051597023069.-2207520000../3264670793628457/?type=](https://www.facebook.com/WARcollective/photos/pb.100051597023069.-2207520000../3264670793628457/?type=)

#### 4. Conclusion

First Nations in Australia have long fought for justice, despite the challenges encountered along the way. Many are the avenues taken by Indigenous activists, scholars, and creatives to assert their agency and demand rights to self-determination. With the digital revolution, new technologies and, more recently, social media platforms have provided old and new generations with the tools to voice their views in direct and powerful ways. Activism has certainly benefitted from these new modalities, thus reconfirming the idea that online engagement has now moved away from being merely performative. Indeed, the recent Black Lives Matter protests have demonstrated the effectiveness of such endeavours at different levels. The success of online forms of communication is due to the high degree of

<sup>57</sup> The term synthetic personalisation refers to the process of addressing mass audiences as though they were individuals through inclusive language usage (see Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989)).

<sup>58</sup> See Sarah J. Jackson, et al., *#HashtagActivism. Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020) and Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk*.

interactivity, intertextuality, and the strong multimodal structure of digital platforms, as well as the activists' ability to communicate important issues 'affectively' and to heterogeneous publics.

The rhetorical and visual strategies employed by the two key social actors I have here considered aim to mobilise tangible resources (financial resources, spaces, etc.), especially in the case of SBDIC, intangible resources (the people who support the cause), as WAR have demonstrated, and coalition building strategies (referencing similar groups/organisations),<sup>59</sup> as far as both groups are concerned. This is rendered possible thanks to forms of symbolic power and the counter-cultural capital held by the activists who have managed to attract international attention through a wise use of discourses and imagery that appeal to a generation who are increasingly sensitive to issues of social justice.

While the paper does not do justice to all the creative efforts undertaken by Indigenous activists as I could only focus on a few selected examples, the great majority of the resources shared on the groups' online platforms suggest that mobilisation is mainly conveyed through a rhetoric that evokes and directly addresses affective connections while strengthening international advocacy. This is achieved through a series of creative demand images, moving images, and written texts that use highly emotive language or interpersonal address (imperative clauses) to establish affective translocal relations with diverse publics who are becoming increasingly aware of the Australian emergency.

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<sup>59</sup> Maureen Taylor and Shuktara Sen Das, "Public Relations and Advocacy. Stem Cell Research Organizations' Use of the Internet in Resource Mobilization", *Public Relations Journal*, 4.4 (2010); Sommerfeldt, "Activist Online Resources Mobilization", 429-431.

## TikToking the Black Box

**Abstract:** This article reports on the individual and collective digital strategies of two Indigenous sexuality diverse Australians as they navigate TikTok governing algorithms, looking at how algorithms drive political online activism. Through their online tactics, content, and collective moments of political digital mobilisation, popular TikTokers Tilly and Q reveal how they challenge racist discourses that are perpetuated through algorithmic bias and counter-code transphobic discourses found in mainstream media. They also expose how users strategise their online activism to force realignments of the TikTok algorithm by collectively resisting experiences of algorithmic oppression and machine moderation. Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews and the theory of the Cultural Interface, this article exposes the structural ways that racism is embedded within the TikTok platform and conversely, the ways that its algorithms promote queerness. It also demonstrates how, through user resistance and mobilisation, platforms, and their systems, can be alternatively coded, however concrete, or temporary.

Keywords: *Indigenous, gender, sexuality, TikTok, algorithm, digital activism*

## 1. Introduction

Digital spaces provide new possibilities, and an arena for unique engagements for Indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous peoples utilise technological affordances to challenge settler colonial hegemonies through individual and collective activism efforts,<sup>2</sup> and to create contemporary and dynamic forms of community and cultural expression.<sup>3</sup> Mikaela Jade, a Cabrogal Aboriginal woman, for instance, designed an augmented reality mobile application package that ethically digitises and translates knowledge and culture from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landscapes.<sup>4</sup> The *Indigital* storytelling app uses new media technologies, such as augmented and virtual realities, HoloLens, and four-dimensional mapping software and image recognition, blurring the boundaries between humans and non-humans.<sup>5</sup> Once installed, the app employs augmented reality to recognise traditional cultural sights. After scanning a landscape, a video of oral history plays; “elders come forth in holographic

<sup>1</sup> Bronwyn Carlson, et al., “Trauma, Shared Recognition and Indigenous Resistance on Social Media”, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 21 (2017), 1-32; Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “They Got Filters. Indigenous Social Media, the Settler Gaze, and a Politics of Hope”, *Social Media + Society*, 6.2 (2020), 1-11.

<sup>2</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “Indigenous Activism and Social Media. A Global Response to #SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA”, in Anthony McCosker, Sonja Vivienne and Amelia Johns, eds., *Negotiating Digital Citizenship. Control, Contest and Culture* (London, United Kingdom: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 115-130; Ryan Frazer and Bronwyn Carlson, “Indigenous Memes and the Invention of a People”. *Social Media + Society*, 3.4 (2017), 1-12.

<sup>3</sup> Bronwyn Carlson, “The ‘New Frontier’. Emergent Indigenous Identities and Social Media”, in Michelle Harris et al., eds., *The Politics of Identity. Emerging Indigeneity* (Sydney: University of Technology Sydney E-Press, 2011), 147-168; Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “Social Media Mob. Being Indigenous Online”, (2018), [https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/85013179/MQU\\_SocialMediaMob\\_report\\_Carlson\\_Frazer.pdf](https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/85013179/MQU_SocialMediaMob_report_Carlson_Frazer.pdf), accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Cooper and Nina Kruglikova, “Augmented Realities. The Digital Economy of Indigenous Knowledge”, in Ariell Ahearn et al., eds., *Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change. Emerging Research on Traditional Knowledge and Livelihoods* (United Nations: International Labour Organisation, 2019), 107-119.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

format and tell us their story”, Jade explains.<sup>6</sup> She asserts, “The concept is to allow Indigenous peoples to share our stories in the digital economy in the way we want to share them”.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, *Indigital* generates employment opportunities on Country, such as for Elders who contribute as traditional owners. As well, it has an educational component that is used in school environments.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, although distinctively, developing research also reveals the significance of digital platforms for Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people.<sup>9</sup> Andrew Farrell, who is Indigenous and queer, reveals that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gender/sexuality diverse peoples utilise social media to make themselves seen, heard, and understood by asserting their own standpoints and lived complexities online, for example.<sup>10</sup> However, social media engagements for Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people can be particularly complicated.<sup>11</sup> Positive outcomes are continuously negotiated alongside the adverse effects of online spaces such as experiences of racism, rejection, abuse, fetishization.<sup>12</sup>

Complex and potentially negative experiences online are not solely shaped by users’ appropriations of platform affordances. Social activity on platforms also depends powerfully on platform design and governance,<sup>13</sup> both of which are being increasingly scrutinised in academia for their implications, for example, their ability to entrench injustices.<sup>14</sup> Concerns over the operation of algorithmic systems and their consequences, particularly for those who already experience marginalisation, have become particularly pertinent in these discussions.<sup>15</sup> Across literature which is largely concerned with the social power of algorithms, is a lack of research that explores the algorithm-user relationship.<sup>16</sup> For example, how algorithms are experienced by individuals and collectives in the public domain or how algorithms shape, and provoke, user protest is largely left absent.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, informed by Farrell’s research,<sup>18</sup> this article draws on Nakata’s theory of the “Cultural Interface”,<sup>19</sup> on research which explores the non-neutrality of platform design and governance, and on qualitative interviews with Indigenous sexuality diverse TikTokers Tilly and Q, to explore their individual tactics and collective digital mobilisations enacted to resist and/or manipulate TikToks operating systems. In doing so, it contributes to the small but growing body of literature which articulates the online experiences of Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people, the body of literature

<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Breen, “Apple Rejection of Indigenous App Described as Symptom of Digital Colonisation”, *The ABC* (2016), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-17/apple-drops-indigenous-app-creator-warns-of-digital-colonisation/8032904>, accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cooper and Kruglikova, “Augmented Realities”.

<sup>9</sup> See Andrew Farrell, “Archiving the Aboriginal Rainbow. Building an Aboriginal LGBTIQ Portal”, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 21 (2017), 1-14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See Bronwyn Carlson “Love and Hate at the Cultural Interface. Indigenous Australians and Dating Apps”, *Journal of Sociology*, 56.2 (2020), 133-150; Andrew Farrell, “Feeling Seen. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ+ Peoples, (In)Visibility, and Social-Media Assemblages”, *Genealogy*, 5.2 (June 2021), 1-11.

<sup>13</sup> Adriana Matamoros-Fernández, “Platformed Racism. The Mediation and Circulation of an Australian Race-based Controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.6 (February 2017), 930-946.

<sup>14</sup> See Jessica McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies. Technologies, Environments and People* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1-267.

<sup>15</sup> See Sasha Costanza-Chock, “Design Justice. Towards an Intersectional Feminist Framework for Design Theory and Practice”, in Cristiano Storni et al., eds., *Design as a Catalyst for Change* (Design Research Society, 2018), 528-540.

<sup>16</sup> Martina Skrubbeltrang Mahnke, “Please Leave my News Feed Alone”, in Mette Mortensen et al., eds., *Social Media Materialities and Protest Critical Reflections* (London: Routledge, 2019), 1-29-141.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Tiana Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary. Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.1 (2017), 30-44.

<sup>18</sup> Farrell, “Archiving the Aboriginal Rainbow”.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Nakata, “The Cultural Interface”, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36 (2007), 7-14.

which explores algorithmic workings and their consequences. Additionally, this article expands recent work which discusses the rapid emergence of “Indigenous TikTok” which begun in 2020.<sup>20</sup>

TikTok is a short-form video-sharing platform which exploded onto the social networking service scene in 2019, becoming the world’s most downloaded app in the two years that followed.<sup>21</sup> TikTok is particularly popular among Indigenous youth globally,<sup>22</sup> who use the app to maintain connections with others. They produce content using cultural practices, humour,<sup>23</sup> and educational content that deliberately targets and informs non-Indigenous audiences about issues of importance to them.<sup>24</sup> Despite TikTok being popular amongst Indigenous users, the platform faces continual accusations of unjust and inequitable racialised platform design and governance.<sup>25</sup> This article explores how algorithmic inequalities are astutely and collectively negotiated and resisted by Tilly and Q and their online “communities”. Comparatively, this article also discusses the role the TikTok algorithm plays in the amplification of queer voices as expressed by Tilly and Q. In doing so, it reveals some of the disparities and freedoms of the TikTok platform. Namely, the algorithmic silencing of Indigenous standpoints and algorithmic promotion of queer voices, which has unique implications for Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people.

## 2. Positionality

It is important that I locate myself before continuing. I am a non-Indigenous White heterosexual researcher conducting research on sensitive and complex topics across community groups to which I do not belong: the “Indigenous communities” and the “gender/sexuality diverse communities”. Acknowledgement of my outsider status continually evokes questions over my capability to engage in this research. However, I hold strong belief in the possibilities of cross-cultural research partnerships to bring about reverence for broader ways of knowing, understanding, and doing, now and in the future. Integral to my partnerships and research processes are my own self-evaluations and self-transformations which change and deepen over time as I listen purposefully and respectfully to the expertise of Indigenous peoples. I acknowledge that having this choice to enter and exit this terrain is a privilege. My own critical reflections and the vital appointment of the wider projects Aboriginal Reference Group, that is comprised of three Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people are enacted in attempts to ensure Indigenous priorities are realised and to acknowledge, interrogate, and navigate my own problematic settler subjectivity.

## 3. Background

### 3.1 *Hybrid Arenas of Human and Machine*

Algorithms that are used to govern, gatekeep, guide, facilitate, distort, and delete social activity in online spaces are frequently understood to be calculation engines that make autocratic, neutral, or

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<sup>20</sup> See Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life. The Practice and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> John Koetsier, “Top 10 Most Downloaded Apps and Games of 2021. TikTok, Telegram Big Winners”, *Forbes* (2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2021/12/27/top-10-most-downloaded-apps-and-games-of-2021-tiktok-telegram-big-winners/?sh=4311694f3a1f>, accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Carlson and Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Jessie Loyers, “Indigenous TikTok is Transforming Indigenous Knowledge”, *Canadianart* (2020), <https://canadianart.ca/essays/indigenous-tiktok-is-transforming-cultural-knowledge/>, accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Todd Spangler, “TikTok Blames ‘Technical Glitch’”.

objective decisions.<sup>26</sup> However, algorithms are human values, prejudices, decisions and so on expressed in code.<sup>27</sup> Consequentially, those who program algorithms intentionally or unintentionally code their values and bias into the technological systems in which they help build.<sup>28</sup> Created herein is a symbiotic relationship between society and technology wherein social practices, ideologies, and norms play a constitutive part of technical design and the outcomes and impacts such designs reproduce.<sup>29</sup> Problematically, the role and accountability of humans in this relationship is often minimised or forgotten because their presence is perceived as passive, and is obfuscated by the technology<sup>30</sup> and, often hidden under laws in relation to IP design and contracting.

Noble, for example, illustrates how algorithmically crafted search engines can represent marginalised groups in stereotypical, erroneous and even pornographic ways.<sup>31</sup> In 2015, Google’s auto-tagging and facial recognition software automatically tagged African Americans as apes and animals. Noble argues that this is a form of “algorithmic oppression” that is not just a one-off glitch in a near-perfect system, that it is fundamental to the creation and operation of the web.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Ruha refers to these “glitches” as a type of “default discrimination” wherein programmers who are designing databases can both protect and reinforce their world views through coding them within technical systems.<sup>33</sup> Ruha poignantly states that “robots learn to speak the coded language of their parents” which includes both programmers and all other contributors to online datasets from which Artificial Intelligence learn.<sup>34</sup> In this way, technology in not objective or neutral, it can amplify and (re)produce existing prejudices, often without public accountability.<sup>35</sup> Further, it is multi-agential - there is a complex interweaving of human and machine agency that are always acting in relation to each other.<sup>36</sup>

Algorithms that are used to make decisions, are also often deployed as “gate-keepers” that shape the contours of public discourse online.<sup>37</sup> Tufekci uses the term “algorithmic gatekeeping” to refer to the ways in which algorithms dynamically filter, highlight, suppress, “or otherwise play an editorial role—fully or partially—in determining information flows through online platforms”.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Crawford, describes algorithms as being “governing agents” that are selecting between competing, and occasionally conflicting data objects.<sup>39</sup> One consequence of this gatekeeping or governance is that information is organised through strategic algorithmic sorting and assembling to privilege, or algorithmically promote, some people, content, and publics over others.<sup>40</sup> “Trending” algorithms found on Twitter, for instance, start with a measure of popularity,<sup>41</sup> friending and following functions also

<sup>26</sup> Jordan Crandall, “The Geospatialization of Calculative Operations. Tracking, Sensing and Megacities”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27.6 (2010), 68-90

<sup>27</sup> Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression. How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York U.P., 2018), 1-256.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Ruha, *Race After Technology. Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Oxford: Polity, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jordan Crandall, “The Geospatialization of Calculative Operations”.

<sup>31</sup> Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ruha, *Race After Technology*.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> David Beer, “The Social Power of Algorithms”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.1 (2017), 1-13.

<sup>37</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “Algorithmic Harms Beyond Facebook and Google. Emergent Challenges of Computational Agency”, *Colorado Technology Law Journal*, 13.2 (2015), 208.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kate Crawford, “Can an Algorithm be Agonistic? Ten Scenes from Life in Calculated Publics”, *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 41.1 (2016), 85.

<sup>40</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “Regulation of and by Platforms”, in Jean Burgess et al., eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (London: SAGE Publications, 2017), 254-278; José van Dijck, “Twitter and the Paradox of Following and Trending”, in José van Dijck, eds., *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2013), 1-26.

<sup>41</sup> Crawford, “Can an Algorithm be Agonistic?”.

derive from the same popularity principle that underpins the online economy of social media.<sup>42</sup> The algorithmic work of evaluating and determining who or what information “wins” and why, is invisible to us.<sup>43</sup> While trending algorithms promise insight into what may be popular and of interest, they are also engaged in calculated deliberations and the enactment of moral evaluative judgements “about appropriate and legitimate knowledge”.<sup>44</sup>

For instance, Gillespie notes how particularly tricky discussions have erupted around the (in)visibility of race, and “a subpopulation of Twitter users commonly referred to as *Black Twitter*”.<sup>45</sup> Topics of importance to this online public will only occasionally be deemed “popular” enough to be recognised by Twitter’s algorithm; when acknowledged, negative reactions have been elicited such as xenophobia and racism.<sup>46</sup> Not dissimilarly, Tufekci found that in 2014, Facebook’s News Feed algorithm suppressed content of the Ferguson protests, which were triggered by a police officer murdering an African American teenager.<sup>47</sup> The demonstrations, that later sparked nation-wide protests about racial inequalities, Tufekci argues, were deemed by Facebook’s algorithmic “agent” to lack the criteria for “relevance” resulting in an information black out on Facebook.<sup>48</sup> Thus, despite claiming to facilitate all voices equally, and despite algorithms that inform these practices being propagated as “neutral”, social media platforms apply filtering mechanisms to weigh, select and promote certain users and content over others.<sup>49</sup> Herein, algorithms create and sustain a hierarchical structure of users whereby some select opinions are automatically assigned value, while others are deemed less important or irrelevant.<sup>50</sup>

These examples illustrate how algorithms can restrict, curate, or amplify certain public discourse. This has “implications for the way in which diverse content can be seen and shared”.<sup>51</sup> It also detrimentally impacts on “our opportunities to access content which prioritises communities who are already on the periphery”.<sup>52</sup> Further, they demonstrate how algorithms operate in contested human spaces, wherein their decision making is always a contest, one that is frequently deciding between counter-posed perspectives.<sup>53</sup> In this information contest, alternative standpoints can be further marginalised by algorithms, that devalue them due to lack of engagement from users.<sup>54</sup> Remembering too, behind most algorithms there are human and institutional choices that structure the speech and human activity they host, and which decipher who and what deserves representation.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, platform owners and their developers/architects are producing agents that hold great social and political power - they can deploy their technologies to change or sustain existing hierarchies, for example.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>45</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “#trendingistrending. When Algorithms Become Culture”, in Robert Seyfert and Jonathan Roberge, eds., *Algorithmic Cultures. Essays on Meaning, Performance and New Technologies* (London: Routledge, 2016), 54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Tufekci, “Algorithmic harms”, 208.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> van Dijck, “Twitter and the Paradox of Following”.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Farrell, “Archiving the Aboriginal Rainbow”, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Crawford, “Can an Algorithm be Agonistic?”.

<sup>54</sup> Farrell, “Feeling Seen”.

<sup>55</sup> Crawford, “Can an Algorithm be Agonistic?”.

<sup>56</sup> José van Dijck, “Engineering Sociality in a Culture of Connectivity”, in van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 1-23.

### 3.2 *Platformed Racism*

Matamoros-Fernández coined the concept “platformed racism” to describe how the modes of platform governance can reproduce (but also address) social inequalities.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the concept is used to describe the way that online platforms can act as amplifiers and manufacturers of racist discourses through platform design and algorithmic shaping of sociability and how user’s appropriate platform affordances. Matamoros-Fernández analyses how Adam Goodes, an Adnyamathanha and Narungga Football League star, was harassed, ridiculed, and vilified online, for example, being represented through images of chimpanzees on social media. Relevantly, platform metrics were found to give relevance to racist discourses – the more engagement racist content received, the more Facebook’s and YouTube’s recommendation algorithms produced like content. Additionally, racially prejudicial content was cloaked in “humour” which is protected as a form of speech on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>58</sup> Akin occurrences of ‘platformed racism’ have recently been recognised by scholars who document the racial vilification, threats of violence and hate speech Indigenous peoples can experience when engaging online.<sup>59</sup>

Algorithmically driven socio-technological systems impact almost everyone, although unevenly through a racialised lens. As evidenced, they can have particularly negative implications for marginalised persons who can experience attacks and constraints on their agency as a direct result of engaging with these systematically biased systems. For instance, the harassment campaign on social media targeting Goodes forced him to take time away from the Football League, until he covertly retired in September 2015. Less than a year later, Goodes deleted his Twitter account.<sup>60</sup>

The following section provides three brief examples of the ways in which users interact with socio-technological systems in attempts to alter them to their benefit.

### 3.3 *Forcing Algorithmic Revision*

While dominant values are typically enmeshed in technological systems, they can be modified to encode alternative value systems.<sup>61</sup> Costanza-Chock, for example, documents how members of the LGBTQ+ community on Facebook successfully mobilised to force the platform to modify its real name policy.<sup>62</sup> Many gender/sexuality diverse people use divergent usernames across different platforms, for various reasons, including to maintain distinctive identities, safety, and privacy.<sup>63</sup> Facebook systematically flagged and suspended accounts of people it presumed were going by a false name, which significantly affected drag performers whose names are tied to their careers and artistic practices.<sup>64</sup> In response, those affected abandoned Facebook for competitor platform Ello. This abandonment, which was also enacted by several prominent drag performers, compelled Facebook to modify its “real name” policy. Facebook revised its real name flagging and dispute process, instituted new options for displaying gender identity and pronouns, and enabled users to control who is (and is not) privy to these changes.<sup>65</sup> Dijck, while noting that most user protests are “highly individual”, foresees that collective, communal, and systematic protest, like the Facebook boycott described above,

<sup>57</sup> Matamoros-Fernández, “Platformed Racism”.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> See Carlson and Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life*.

<sup>60</sup> Matamoros-Fernández, “Platformed Racism”.

<sup>61</sup> Costanza-Chock, “Design Justice”.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Hanckel et al., “‘That’s Not Necessarily for Them’. LGBTQ Young People, Social Media Platform Affordances and Identity Curation”. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41.8 (2019), 1261-1278.

<sup>64</sup> Costanza-Chock, “Design Justice”.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

has the likely potential to force platform operators to alter their ways. Dijck asserts that this is because “consumer metrics are one of the biggest currencies in the platform economy”.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.3.2 ‘Gaming’ the System

Users who wish to overcome algorithmic power asymmetries online can attempt to “game” the algorithm.<sup>67</sup> Gillespie, for example, uses the term “algorithmically recognisable” to describe how some users are engaged in strategies of visibility to make themselves recognisable to information algorithms, who have the job of discerning between the relevant and irrelevant, amid shifting bids to appear so.<sup>68</sup> This requires users to orient themselves toward these algorithmic systems in the hopes that they will be amplified by them.<sup>69</sup> Orientation towards algorithms often requires experimentation with a systems workings to grasp an understanding of how to potentially manipulate them in one’s favour. These tactics can be performed individually or collectively, with differing goals and outcomes.<sup>70</sup> Bucher, for illustration, examines user’s personal stories about the Facebook algorithm.<sup>71</sup> Some of Bucher’s respondents reported being engaged in activities of data obfuscation. Participant Lena reported attempting to manipulate content she engages with to control her Facebook “suggestions”, while participant Jessa endeavours to confuse the algorithm by liking conflicting content.<sup>72</sup>

### 3.3.3 Formulating Subversive Counter Codes

Lastly, erroneous and offensive representations engineered through algorithmic code and their human programmers such as Google’s racist Gorilla tags of African Americans can offer an “occasion for the creation of subversive countercodings”.<sup>73</sup> The hashtag phenomenon utilised on social media platforms, for instance, allows people to astutely and collectively decode and recode misrepresentations.<sup>74</sup> Indigenous peoples globally have frequently utilised hashtags as a tool of activism,<sup>75</sup> including as a mechanism to protest and counter-code racist narratives.

In Australia, the hashtag #IndigenousDads for example, was employed by Indigenous peoples to campaign against a racist and vile cartoon published in the newspaper *The Australian*. The cartoon depicted a police officer returning an Aboriginal boy to his father “who is holding a beer can, and asks the police officer, *yeah, righto, what’s his name then?*”<sup>76</sup> To counter the cartoon, hundreds of Indigenous users shared content that documented “tender moments of love, intimacy, and joy with their fathers, all linked through the #IndigenousDads”.<sup>77</sup> This is one example, among many, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have taken advantage of platform affordances to

<sup>66</sup> José van Dijck, “Governing a Responsible Platform Society”, in José van Dijck et al., eds., *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (New York Oxford U.P., 2018), 15.

<sup>67</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “Algorithmically Recognizable: Santorum’s Google Problem, and Google’s Santorum Problem”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.1 (June 2017), 63-80.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary”.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ruha, *Race After Technology*, 81.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See Nicholet Parkhurst, “Protecting Oak Flat. Narratives of Survivance as Observed Through Digital Activism”, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 21 (July 2017), 1-18; Sheelah McLean et al., “The Whiteness of Redmen. Indigenous Mascots, Social Media and an Antiracist Intervention”, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 21 (July 2017), 1-19.

<sup>76</sup> Carlson and Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life*.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 181.

effectively counter-code racist narratives and negative characterisations offered in dominant public discourse.

In consideration of the presence and consequences of powerful and prejudicial governing algorithms online, and users' efforts to modify, game, and counter-code them, this article explores the individual and collective digital strategies of Tilly and Q as they navigate algorithmic workings and machine moderation on TikTok.

#### 4. Methods

This article is part of a larger doctoral study that explores the lived experiences and online engagements of Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people, looking also, at how these interrelate with experiences of Social, Cultural and Emotional Wellbeing.<sup>78</sup> The participants in the larger study are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and identify as gender and/or sexuality diverse.

Participants were purposively identified through trawling the social networking sites Instagram and TikTok. Purposeful selection was applied to fulfil the research objectives and to ensure that those selected contribute content relevant to areas being addressed in this research project.<sup>79</sup> All identified and invited potential participants self-identified publicly and proudly with their Indigeneity and gender/sexuality diverse identities on their social media profile/s.

I individually contacted the selected social media creators through the direct messaging affordance on their social media account/s through my own personal social media account and/or through contact email addresses which are publicly available through their social media account/s and invited them to collaborate with me in the project.

Drawing from two separate semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative “elicitation interviews”,<sup>80</sup> which were conducted through the online meeting platform ‘Zoom’ with bisexual participant Tilly Langford (TikTok handle: @Tilly.gov.au) whose ancestral home is Gumbaynggir nation on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, and pansexual/bisexual participant ‘Q’ whose ancestral home is concealed for anonymity purposes. The pseudonym – Q for Queer – was self-selected by the participant to protect her identity. She will be referred to throughout the article as Q. Additionally, I will use her chosen pronouns she and/or her. Tilly and Q were the only participants within the larger study who are “TikTokers”.

“Elicitation interviews” are conversations wherein participants are shown pre-existing “documents” or are required to create a document of their own which directs, supports, or acts as a stimulus to the discussion.<sup>81</sup> Ahead of the interviews, Tilly and Q self-selected up to ten of their own social media posts which they then used to lead the discussion while we explored their interpretation of their elected documents. This method made the interpretive process more equal by enabling Tilly and Q to exercise their own expertise and agency, and to take an increasingly active role in the research.<sup>82</sup> <sup>83</sup> Q’s interview went for a duration of 3 hours, 26 minutes, and Tilly’s, 1 hour, 48 minutes. A letter of informed consent was sent during recruitment processes. The consent letter was verbally restated and agreed at the beginning of each interview. Interviews were audio and video recorded. Audio files

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<sup>78</sup> See Karen Soldatic, “Social Exclusion/Inclusion and Australian First Nations LGBTIQ+ Young People’s Wellbeing”, *Social Inclusion*, 9.2 (April 2021), 42-51.

<sup>79</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2008).

<sup>80</sup> Aimee Grant, *Doing Excellent Social Research with Documents* (London: Routledge, 2018), 144-164.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Keith Barton, “Elicitation Techniques. Getting People to Talk About Ideas They Don’t Usually Talk About”, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 43.2 (2015), 179-205.

<sup>83</sup> Helen Pain, “A Literature Review to Evaluate the Choice and Use of Visual Methods”, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11.4 (2012), 303-319.

(only) were sent to an online transcription service where they were processed by human transcriptionists.

I conducted a contemporary qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts. Qualitative content analysis is a research technique employed to analyse the content, contextual meaning and embedded or inferred message/s of text data<sup>84</sup> through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying patterns and themes.<sup>85</sup> The particular approach I used is a “conventional content analysis” as conceptualised by Hsieh and Shannon<sup>86</sup> to analyse the interview transcripts of Tilly and Q. This is a distinct “inductive” approach, meaning that I did not start the analysis using preconceived ideas. Instead, I derived ideas inductively throughout data analysis. The advantage of this is that knowledge generated from the content analysis is based on the unique communications and perspectives of participants without the imposition of potentially presumptuous researcher categorisations.<sup>87</sup>

In the first stage of content analysis, I read through the transcripts to open up the text, identifying similar (and unique) online and offline realities, and broad themes that lead to more in-depth examination. Individual transcripts were read line by line to identify and classify individual experiences as well as recurring themes and common conceptual groupings. I then thematically coded the findings where possible through a qualitative coding process using the software program NVivo – initially each participant had a separate code book so that their individual content and distinct lived experiences could be acknowledged, understood, and respected. In the final stage of the analysis, I drew together the findings from participants through the NVivo program. I used the triangulated findings and the theory of the Cultural Interface<sup>88</sup> (detailed below) to conceptualise and understand the online engagements of participants, including to examine how platform design and governance influences some of these engagements.

Most importantly, this approach to analysis is enacted to ensure I accurately and respectfully maintain the integrity of the original interviews with Tilly and Q, both in interpretation and presentation of findings. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that I have undoubtedly played a role in shaping the data. My capacity to hold, produce, and share knowledge is informed and shaped by my social, political, and cultural position as a white, straight, cis-gendered female on the colonised lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. My subjectivity requires me to be dedicated to ongoing self-reflexivity (on my social position, power, and oppression),<sup>89</sup> as well as accountable to this project’s collaborators and committed to honouring their communications. Nothing has been included in this article that was not clearly consented to by Tilly and Q. Tilly and Q’s data (interview transcripts, individual ‘code books’, this publication and quotes used within) was returned to them digitally giving them multiple opportunities to revise their stories, give, retract, or remove their consent, and to disagree or agree with my framing of their experiences. This was done in acknowledgement of their ownership and control of their own stories

Lastly, Nakata’s theory of the “Cultural Interface”<sup>90</sup> is used as a framework to conceptualise and understand the data produced by Tilly and Q. Nakata’s Cultural Interface Theory posits that there is a:

<sup>84</sup> Shanyang Zhao, “Content Analysis of Facebook Pages. Decoding Expressions Given Off”, in *SAGE Research Methods Cases Part 1* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis”, *Qualitative Health Research*, 15.9 (November 2005), 1277-1288.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Nakata, “The Cultural Interface”.

<sup>89</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “Allies”, in Carlson and Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life*, 213-236; Ruth Nichols, “Research and Indigenous Participation. Critical Reflexive Methods”, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 12.2 (March 2009), 117-126.

<sup>90</sup> Nakata, “The Cultural Interface”.

“multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations ... that inform, constrain, or enable what can be seen or not seen, what can be brought to the surface or sutured over, what can be said or not said, heard or not heard, understood, or misunderstood, what knowledge can be accepted, rejected, legitimised or marginalised”.<sup>91</sup>

Farrell argues, Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people operating through online spaces are “decolonising agents” at the Cultural Interface.<sup>92</sup> This is largely because Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people are utilising the affordances of digital spaces to respond to erasure, exclusion and silencing by articulating, reclaiming, and asserting ancient gender/sexuality diversities as self-defined and contemporary. In doing so, they are agents of change and provocation “though making themselves visible, known, heard, understood, and legitimised”.<sup>93</sup>

Thus, Nakata’s theory of the Cultural Interface, informed in part by the work of Farrell, presented as an appropriate framework. It can describe the ways that Indigenous gender/sexuality ideas “filter through complex terrains of knowing and unknowing – influencing how we see and know ourselves and others”. And it enables acknowledgement and understanding of how Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse standpoints are conditioned by the complex relations that exist at the Interface, as well as the positive and negative potentials of these sites.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, it is also chosen because I am cognisant of my own positionality and of the importance of valuing Indigenous research paradigms, knowledges, and standpoints.

Prior to submission, this article was reviewed by the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council’s Human Research Ethics Committee who approved the project (Ref. 1825/21) on 21 September 2021. All quotes used were verified and cleared for publication with Tilly and Q in acknowledgement of their ownership and control of their own stories.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 *Promoting Queerness*

Both Tilly and Q perceive TikTok to be a relatively safe platform to express gender/sexuality diversities, as well as being an arena that fosters sociality and solidarity, and produces ‘relationality’ between other black and gender/sexuality diverse people. The concept of Indigenous ‘relationality’ posits an intricate web of relatedness and connection that envelopes all human and more-than-human (animal, plant, spirit) kin.<sup>95</sup> This relational reality is configured around, and balanced and bound by, responsibility and reciprocity with all interrelated entities.<sup>96</sup> Tilly, for example, voices that, “on TikTok, the black community is so queer ... everyone’s really open and accepting”, while Q describes the platform as being “a weird safe space for people to explore their gender identity”. Tilly believes that positive queer navigations are possible because TikTok “promotes queerness more” than other platforms through its algorithmic workings. Tilly explains that when she discusses her queer experiences through TikTok videos she knows “it’s going to hit the algorithm better” which increases her “reach and support”. While Tilly acknowledges that “there’s always going to be arseholes”, such

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>92</sup> Farrell, “Archiving the Aboriginal Rainbow”.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>95</sup> Lauren Tynan, “What Is Relationality? Indigenous Knowledges, Practices and Responsibilities with Kin”, *Cultural Geographies*, 28.4 (2021), 597-610; Patricia Dudgeon and Abigail Bray, “Indigenous Relationality. Women, Kinship and the law”, *Genealogy (Basel)*, 3.2 (April 2019), 2-11.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

as homophobes, she describes this algorithmic promotion<sup>97</sup> of queer content as “more validating [because] it’s easier to reach that broader audience and have that positive experience”.

Differently, Q claims “I never know which video is going to do well when I post it”. However, during the peak of the J.K. Rowling transphobia controversy in 2020, which was caused by Rowling using her famed platform to push her dangerous transphobic rhetoric, Q decided to upload a video “to counteract this [Rowling’s transphobic discourse] with radical, aggressive support”. Q’s video featured her “aggressively and humorously yelling” at Rowling. Q further explains what prompted her to counter-code Rowling’s discourse: “As a queer person and as a cis queer person, I’m very aware that trans people are the part of our community we need to be looking after the most currently.... At least for the 30 seconds or whatever that they saw my video, they know that there’s at least one person out there in their corner”. Q’s comment illustrates how she uses the affordances of TikTok and her interpersonal ties to the queer community to engage in relational practices of care<sup>98</sup> in efforts to ‘look after’, protect and support trans community members. She describes this practice as a ‘need’ signifying an ethic of responsibility and obligation to act in support and defence of the trans (and queer) collective.<sup>99</sup>

Q continues by describing the response the video received, “[there were] so many trans people in my comments being like, *Thank you. I really needed this and I love you. Adopt me. This is hilarious*”. Q perceives the success of this video to be due partly to J.K. Rowling “trending” at the time, causing the algorithm to recognise the video as being relevant, popular, and “worthy” of visibility.<sup>100</sup> Q also believes that the video never “reached people on the other side of TikTok who might have had a problem with it”. Q continue, “For some reason that video just happened to get put in the right algorithm on TikTok, and everybody who saw it was also like, gay and against J.K. Rowling”. While acknowledging the potential for queer content to draw attention from homophobes or to reach the “other side of TikTok”, both Tilly and Q describe experiences wherein their diverse sexualities and associated content is prioritised and amplified by TikToks governing algorithms.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, however, the same is not always true for content which outwardly expresses their Indigeneity.

## 5.2 The #july31stwalkout

In 2020, Nich Richie, an Indigenous non-binary creator, invited their followers to mobilise with them in a unifying digital protest which threatened to boycott the TikTok app for one day, and rate it one star in the App Store “to basically start forcing TikTok to start looking at the way that they moderate things”, says Q. Through a TikTok video, Richie instructed their audience to collectively post a video containing the following information: “Stop Silencing Indigenous Voices” and “Bring Back Human Moderators”, including the caption “#july31stwalkout”. The threat: if TikTok does not replace machine moderators with human moderators, protesters will “walk out” on the app on 31st of July 2020 and negatively influence its App Store rating. Richie urged their audience to re-share their original post which detailed the instructions or to make a post of their own that communicated the same. Q opted for the latter. While it is unclear how many users enacted the boycott through App deletion and rating manipulation, the #july31stwalkout has been viewed over 5500 times.

Q details why digital protesters were appealing for human moderation: “The main problem is, say an Indigenous creator gets a racist comment on a video, if they report that comment, it will not go against community guidelines. If they [Indigenous creators] reply to that comment with a video, that

<sup>97</sup> Gillespie, “Algorithmically Recognizable”.

<sup>98</sup> Tynan, “What Is Relationality?”.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Gillespie, “#trendingistrending”.

<sup>101</sup> Crawford, “Can an Algorithm be Agonistic?”.

video will get taken down for [breaching] community guidelines because the slur is now sitting in the video”. Q goes on to explain the consequences that follow. “Then those videos won’t get [successfully] appealed, they’ll just be deleted and then the [Indigenous creators] account gets shadow banned” which evidences the algorithms lack of ability to ascertain contextual differences due to the rigidity of its mode of processing the data.<sup>102</sup> Further, Q’s explanation illustrates how Indigenous peoples’ attempts to resist and counter-code racism on TikTok,<sup>103</sup> are being undermined by the uneven application of community guidelines and the governing algorithms that implement them. The deployment of platform “guidelines” in this way illustrates how they do important discursive work beyond simply guiding enforcement – they can make visible or invisible some issues and can be deployed when helpful or sidestepped when constraining.<sup>104</sup>

### 5.3 *Shadow Banning Black Voices*

Shadow banning on social media platforms is the act of hiding or restricting the publicity of select content resulting in noticeable declines in engagement without explicitly informing the creators of that content of the suppression. Due to the nature of the concept, however, it is hard to substantiate its occurrence. For Q, the most impactful instance of alleged shadow banning she has experienced online, “is when the Black Lives Matter (BLM) hashtag got shadow banned on TikTok. And people lost their minds internationally, and that prompted them to change it”. The BLM content suppression came amid ongoing protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd while in police custody. Although many TikTok users assumed the “ban” was an intentional act of censorship, TikTok executives claimed it was a “technical glitch” resulting in a “display issue”.<sup>105</sup> While impossible to discern the truth, it is conceivable that this “glitch” is an example of “algorithmic oppression”<sup>106</sup> whereby algorithms or human moderators chose to censor public discourses surrounding the BLM movement for whichever determining reasons to which we can only infer.

There is evidence, however, that this may not be an isolated incident, that it is instead a systemic problem with TikTok’s algorithmic moderation system – as Q’s commentary on the #july31stwalkout might suggest. Tilly provides further impetus to this thought when she expresses that “if you #Aboriginal or #Indigenous, or anything like that, I think TikTok picks up that a lot of those videos get hate comments or inappropriate comments so they [moderators] shadow ban a lot of those videos”. Thus, instead of effectively removing racist content and shadow banning or deleting accounts driven by racists, TikTok seemingly elects to hide or block accounts and hashtags where racist attacks occur, and where racism and dominant discourses are being resisted and counter-coded as explored in this article through individual videos and Indigenous specific hashtags.<sup>107</sup> Inevitably then, these decisions impact Indigenous users’ opportunities to distribute and access content which prioritises their communities.<sup>108</sup> The evidence provided by Tilly and Q points to how Indigenous standpoints can be further marginalised by algorithms,<sup>109</sup> even if Indigenous content suppression is operationalised in apparent attempts to “protect” against racism.

<sup>102</sup> Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary”.

<sup>103</sup> Ruha, *Race After Technology*.

<sup>104</sup> Gillespie, “Algorithmically Recognizable”.

<sup>105</sup> Todd Spangler, “TikTok Blames ‘Technical Glitch’ for Suppressing View Counts on #BlackLivesMatter, #GeorgeFloyd Videos”, *Variety* (2020), <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/tiktok-suppressed-view-counts-blacklivesmatter-georgefloyd-videos-1234622975/>, accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.

<sup>107</sup> Ruha, *Race After Technology*.

<sup>108</sup> Farrell, “Feeling Seen”.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

Q echoes the thoughts of Tilly above, saying that her content associated with the #july31stwalkout, received very little engagement (0 comments, 91 likes) considering her large following (30,000 at the time of the protest), which according to her is “proof it was not going anywhere”. Q believes this is because of the hashtags she selected to use such as #IndigenousAustralian. She explains, “I think what happens sometimes, if there are enough reports or community guidelines violations to do with videos under certain hashtags, those hashtags start to get shadow banned as well”. Q suggests that this technique of platform governance, which algorithmically demotes the individual and collective discourses and activist efforts of certain people, could have played a role in the BLM content ban as well.

Q does not believe that the #july31stwalkout “achieved anything concrete”. Perhaps it might have if the hashtags that were used in attempts to create solidarity were not reportedly hidden. However, Q feels empowered by that fact that “there was a community that was very ready to sacrifice their source of entertainment to make a statement and stand up for something. It’s one of those instances of being validated in your feelings that this is wrong, and it is something that you should stand up for, and that other people on the internet also see that and agree with you”. Through this comment, Q gives primacy to her collective and relational reality,<sup>110</sup> which is fostered through the TikTok platform, comprised of other marginalised users. The relationality between these users is harnessed as a source of unity and resistance against practices of inequitable racialised control on the platform.<sup>111</sup>

Evidently, algorithmic oppression/suppression of Indigenous content is being enacted on TikTok. While under the guise of ‘protection’, its deployment effectively reproduces settler colonial power relations that continue to devalue, silence, erase, and further marginalise Indigenous standpoints. Moreover, through its platformed racism, TikTok reinforces inequitable and oppressive social relationships by penalising Indigenous users, for example, through shadow banning them, as opposed to acting against users involved in racist attacks.

#### 5.4 *The ‘Black Out’*

In a fight against the alleged suppression of the BLM content, and assertions from black and Indigenous TikTokers that their videos are being censored, international users mobilised digitally to bring awareness to the issue and to amplify the voices of those being silenced. “There was a big movement called *The Black Out*”, Q explains, “where basically people agreed not to post for a whole day, unless you were a black creator. And it was just to try to collectively realign the algorithm. And it worked for like, a month. Half of the content that I saw was from black creators. And then suddenly it slowly declined again”. Q’s brief recount of *The Black Out* is evidence of the pervasive ways in which algorithms can control public discourse, determining who and what deserves representation and when.<sup>112</sup> *The Black Out* is also illustrative of how users refuse to stand silently or singularly during the recurrence of injustice in an enduring fight against racism and inequality. Instead, practicing their relationality to one another, they stood in solidarity through digital protest, and forced the platform to modify its algorithm. As Q states though, “the problem is them [the humans and machines operating TikTok] committing to it being fixed”.

<sup>110</sup> Tynan, “What Is Relationality?”; Dudgeon and Bray, “Indigenous Relationality”.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Crawford, “Can an Algorithm be Agonistic?”

### 5.5 'Being on a Tightrope'

Both Tilly and Q express the difficulties and joys of navigating the TikTok space, particularly its algorithmic workings. Tilly discloses that she has learnt a few agential “hacks” along the way. ‘Agential *hacks*’ refers to Tilly’s orchestrated tactics she enacts in an attempt to manipulate the algorithm and in turn, her audience, often to circumvent experiences of racism. For instance, “one of the things that I have learnt to stifle racism in my comments - because you know, it does get pretty full on; is to not say straight away, *I’m Aboriginal*”. If Tilly does choose to mention her Indigenous identity directly, she does so at the end of her videos or she “leaves it in the language”, for example, saying “we” when talking about Indigenous peoples. Tilly does this because “racists don’t care about being educated, so they just keep scrolling”. This way, “those who actually want to learn, who actually care, are going to engage with it” she says.

However, Tilly does not always enact this language tactic and she explains why. “This is the thing though, the racist comments do boost your video, cos’ if you’re getting comments, it means people want to engage with it. The algorithm will be like, *Oh, awesome. Let’s go for it*”. By the algorithm “going for it”, Tilly is referring to way that increased engagement is noticed by the algorithm leading to that video being algorithmically promoted.<sup>113</sup> Problematically, Tilly says that this type of promotion can cause the video to get on “the wrong side of TikTok [because] if the first few comments are from racist people, it might get pushed [by the algorithm] onto the “For You” pages that they have”. The “For you” page is a customised collection of videos that TikTok algorithmically curates to meet individual user’s interests. Unsurprisingly then, Tilly describes her engagements on TikTok as “balancing on a tightrope because getting a couple of racist comments are actually good for the video. Getting a bunch is dreadful for yourself”.

Thus, Tilly must make the difficult decision. Does she suppress her Indigeneity to lessen the likelihood of encountering racism costing her visibility? Or does she orient herself towards the algorithm by posting content that she knows will incite racists, but that will be made “algorithmically recognisable”<sup>114</sup> due to engagement being prioritised regardless of its harmfulness.

## 6. Conclusion

The #July31stwalkout and *The Black Out* are each relational, collective, and unifying digital activism movements of resistance enacted in response to the algorithmic injustices Indigenous and black TikTok users have experienced when engaging with the platform. The #july31stwalkout was a movement of resistance against the inequitable application of platform governance resulting in the algorithmic suppression of Indigenous standpoints as opposed to the elevation of racist rhetoric in the comments. This suppression, which often affects Indigenous TikTokers attempting to counter racist online abuse, is enacted through techniques such as video deletion and the shadow banning of users and culturally specific hashtags. Similarly, *The Black Out* was a global political digital mobilisation responding to the suppression of the BLM content which successfully, albeit temporarily, forced a realignment of the TikTok algorithm wherein the voices and content of black and Indigenous users were privileged for a duration of time.

Therefore, both the #july31stwalkout and *The Black Out* are fuelled by the demands of marginalised groups for alternative standpoints, which challenge and resist dominant settler colonial discourses, to be seen, shared, and valued as opposed to being algorithmically silenced, devalued, and/or erased entirely by TikTok. While these moments of political digital mobilisation are certainly

<sup>113</sup> Gillespie, “#trendingistrending”.

<sup>114</sup> Gillespie, “Algorithmically Recognizable”.

worth celebrating for their collective resistances, for their fostering of new relational ties and practices of care therein,<sup>115</sup> for their countering of dominant discourses, for their holding of TikTok accountable, and for their provisional successes, the experiences of platformed racism that prompted these mobilisations are concerning. They illustrate how Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse people, and other marginalised peoples' knowledges can be subjugated, and routinely silenced through the engineering and governance of digital platforms. This is a new technology of structural racism<sup>116</sup> hidden within the "black box" of algorithmic workings<sup>117</sup> which requires further interrogation.

In some small recompense, Tilly tells me that mid 2021 TikTok appointed an Indigenous Liaison who she contacts anytime something "serious" happens such as "really racist videos or death threats to Aboriginal people or doxing". Through the appointment of the liaison, Tilly feels that "life [on TikTok] has got a lot easier". Evidently though, there remains the need to address the regimes of racial control occurring through the infostructure and governance of TikTok because these processes are (re)producing and amplifying aspects of settler colonisation. Namely, platform metrics are giving relevance to racist discourses, and they are contributing, at least at times, to the ongoing suppression, silencing, and devaluing of Indigenous standpoints.

Contrarily, TikTok is providing and promoting a digitised space for queer visibility through its governing algorithms. Herein, people who identify as gender/sexuality diverse or questioning can explore and consume relatable queer content through their "For You" pages, foster queer connection and solidarity, assert their own standpoints and diversities,<sup>118</sup> and have their own experiences validated. It would be remiss, however, not to acknowledge the potential of being algorithmically sorted onto "the wrong side of TikTok" and the negative consequences of this, such as being exposed to transphobic content and abuse. Moreover, Indigenous gender/sexuality diverse TikTokers may not always enjoy the same queer content promotion as non-Indigenous or White queer users given TikTok's technologically embedded racism. Nonetheless, as Tilly and Q reveal, they equip themselves with agential "hacks" and engage in moments of political digital mobilisation and resistance to try to ensure that their standpoints are seen, heard, and ultimately, valued by TikTok at large.

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<sup>115</sup> Tynan, "What Is Relationality?"

<sup>116</sup> Ruha, *Race After Technology*.

<sup>117</sup> Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2015), 19-58.

<sup>118</sup> Farrell, "Archiving the Aboriginal Rainbow".



#alleyesonwetsuweten.

## An Analysis of the Wet'suwet'en protest on Twitter

**Abstract:** The present study aims at analyzing Indigenous online activism in Canada by focusing on how the Wet'suwet'en people have recently remediated on Twitter their protest against the 2019 Coastal GasLink pipeline project. The project implied the construction of a 670-kilometre-long natural gas pipeline crossing their ancestral and unceded territories. An investigation of the discursive strategies underpinning the usage of microblogging by the Wet'suwet'en people as part of their online protest is provided through a combination of methodological and theoretical frameworks, that is Corpus Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Media Studies starting from the quantitative analysis of the GTEN Corpus. The research findings show that discourses of solidarity, mobilization and sovereignty intersect in the corpus and that the discourse of Indigenous protests on social media is a decolonizing social practice leading to empowerment, self-determination, and legitimation of Indigenous protests.

Keywords: *Wet'suwet'en, activism, corpus, discourse, hashtags, Twitter*

### 1. Introduction

On January 7, 2019, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) entered the Wet'suwet'en First Nation territory in British Columbia in a military-style raid to confront and arrest some of the Wet'suwet'en and ally protesters who were opposing the Coastal GasLink pipeline project onto unceded Wet'suwet'en territory. The project would see the construction of a 670-kilometre-long natural gas pipeline, spanning from east, near Dawson Creek, to Kitimat in the west, for export to global markets. In 2018 and 2019 the company obtained injunctions to prevent Indigenous protesters from blocking the access to the site as a response to the creation of the Gidimt'en checkpoint. The latter included cabins, canvas, tents, and cooking facilities, and soon became a symbol of the resistance of the Wet'suwet'en people to the project. According to the Wet'suwet'en Nation, Coastal GasLink did not receive informed consent for the construction of the pipeline, which stands in violation to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, in 1997, the Canadian Supreme Court recognized that the hereditary chiefs are the title holders over the Wet'suwet'en Nation's ancestral lands, *de facto* stating that the land is unceded and that they have the authority to make decisions about their territories<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of the Supreme Court decision, the UN Declaration and the harsh opposition of the Wet'suwet'en Nation, Coastal GasLink has advanced construction towards the sacred river Wedzin Kwa. Sacred archeological sites were also destroyed. The company was in fact backed up by the RCMP, the provincial and federal government of Canada.

In 2019, the RCMP burst into the Gidimt'en checkpoint. Gidimt'en is one of five clans of the Wet'suwet'en Nation. The Gidimt'en checkpoint is a Wet'suwet'en group which is controlling access to the territory. At that point, the Gidimt'en checkpoint decided to open an official Twitter account, i.e., @Gidimten (<https://twitter.com/Gidimten>), in order to share information about the protest and the

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson, "Unsettling Canada". In *Truth, and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Canada's Residential Schools. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2015).

violent acts enacted by the RCMP against the Wet'suwet'en people. Through the Twitter account, the protest was re-mediated online, thus allowing the circulation of news from the point of view of the protesters. Concurrently, the digital mobilization gave rise to solidarity and support coming from other First Nations in Canada as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples from across the world. The present research seeks to investigate the online discourse of the Wet'suwet'en people and the discursive strategies underpinning their usage of microblogging. The Gidim'ten checkpoint Twitter account, the main official Twitter account of the protest, was monitored for the purpose of the study. A corpus of 2588 tweets posted between January 2019 and November 2021, retrieved in December 2021, was built and named The Gidimten Corpus (GTEN). Given the discursive focus of this research, a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics and Social Media Studies<sup>2</sup> was chosen as a methodology and a theoretical framework for conducting a corpus-based analysis.

## 2. Literature Review: Indigenous Digital Activism

Starting with the 2011 Arab Spring in the Middle East, the role that social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can play, has become central in political struggles against oppression and power abuse, and is now widely acknowledged and investigated. Social media platforms are nowadays seen as networked communication spaces turning into avenues for social mobilization and protest.<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the unidirectionality of traditional media such as press and broadcast, social media are intrinsically characterized by multimodality and user-centrism, which erode the distance between producers and consumers of information and decentralize the production and circulation of discourse. On Twitter, for example, given the horizontal structure of its organization, non-hierarchical communication is possible, which is particularly useful to social movements.<sup>4</sup> In fact, online activism implies that the power to produce and share information is re-distributed, taken away from traditional news providers and scattered across networks of users who tweet about events.<sup>5</sup> Social media networks also offer an alternative platform, opposed to the mainstream ones, where marginalized groups can engage in political processes. Within the virtual space of social media, people can express their ideas and join networks of individuals who promote activities and actions related to those ideas. As Zappavigna remarks, “microblogging services such as Twitter and Weibo are a form of social media allowing users to publish streams of length-delimited posts to internet-mediated audiences”.<sup>6</sup> Activists can expand their reach through live-tweeting, retweeting, marking conversations through hashtags etc. The easy and rapid circulation of political opinions, or even dissent, through social media facilitates the formation of communities of actions as social media endorse the identification and connection with likeminded others. These can quickly lead to mediated grassroots mobilization and people empowerment. Therefore, while ideas are disseminated through social media in what may be mistakenly dismissed as a mere virtual dimension (as opposed to the real one), new social movements are established that in some occasions may even blur the boundaries between cyberspace and social

<sup>2</sup> Paul Baker, *American and British English. Divided by a Common Language?* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2017); Michele Zappavigna, “Searchable Talk. The Linguistic Functions of Hashtags”, *Social Semiotics*, 25.3 (2015), 274-291.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvester Senyo Ofori-Parku and Derek Moscato, “Hashtag Activism as a Form of Political Action. A Qualitative Analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign in Nigerian, UK, and U.S. Press”, *International Journal of Communication*, 12 (2018), 2480–2502.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Penney and Caroline Dadas, “(Re)Tweeting in the Service of Protest. Digital Composition and Circulation in the Occupy Wall Street Movement”, *New Media Society*, 16.1 (2013), 74-90.

<sup>5</sup> Eugenia Siapera, “Tweeting #Palestine. Twitter and the mediation of Palestine”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17.6 (2014), 539–555.

<sup>6</sup> Michele Zappavigna, “CoffeeTweets. Bonding around the Bean on Twitter”, in Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, eds., *The Language of Social Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 139.

reality. In this sense, the digital sphere is not separate from the offline sphere. On the contrary, the two work in relation to one another.<sup>7</sup>

A related aspect which has been explored in Social Media Research is how social media may affect a given social process. Social media platforms may have the power to expand the reach of offline activism. According to McEwan and Fox<sup>8</sup>, who propose a framework for considering the influence of social media on social processes, social media can accommodate, amplify/attenuate, or alter social process. When accommodating a process, social media serve as a channel for that process to occur, without affecting its nature or direction. Social media can also amplify social phenomena, by expediting and enhancing them or, on the contrary, they can attenuate the effects of social interaction. One last effect that social media can have on social processes is altering. Altering implies that social processes are not simply amplified and enhanced through social media platforms, but that social media affordances may affect social behaviors.

As Nau *et al.* maintain, “social media needs to be studied as an expansion of daily life, an amplifier, and a catalyst”.<sup>9</sup> Campaigns like #idlenomore or #blacklivesmatter, are two examples of movements that were established through and across social media, which enhanced the mechanisms of participation thanks to the much greater dissemination of counter-hegemonic ideas compared to more *traditional* offline movements. They are proof to the fact that a small group of digital activists using information technology can lead to the foundation of widely popular movements crossing the virtual frontiers of the digital realm.

The widening use of new media by Indigenous peoples has become “a creative and empowering tool to combat language death, raise political awareness, and ingeniously create Indigenous networks across various geographies”.<sup>10</sup> As Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, founder of *Drumbeats to Drumbytes*, highlighted, “the digital realm provides Indigenous communities with an autonomous platform to assert an online presence in the face of colonial catastrophe”.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the use of social media technologies by Indigenous subjects can be seen as a decolonization strategy in response to social and political injustices, as well as to the circulation of racist and colonial stereotypes which affect the way Indigenous peoples are still seen today by non-Indigenous peoples.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, online Indigenous self-representations demonstrate that Indigenous social media users can gain control over their own identities and the way these are presented to the public so as to “challenge forces that define them in terms of what they lack, and to make possible other futures”.<sup>13</sup>

Digital media have significantly impacted the way Indigenous peoples interact with each other and create networks of action crossing regional, national and international boundaries, thus broadening their audiences. As Carlson and Berglund explain in their introduction to *Indigenous People Rise Up*,

<sup>7</sup> Barry Wellman et al., “Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, or Supplement Social Capital? Social Networks, Participation, and Community Commitment”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45.3 (2001), 436-455.

<sup>8</sup> Bree McEwan and Lesse Fox, “Before Methods, Social Media Research Considerations”, in Anabel Quan-Haase and Luke Sloan, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (London: SAGE, 2022), 27-39.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Nau, Anabel Quan-Haase and Lori McCay-Peet, “Defining Social Media and Asking Social Media Research Questions. How Well Does the Swiss Army Knife Metaphor Apply?”, in Quan-Haase and Sloan, *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Menjívar Jennifer Carolina Gómez and Gloria Elizabeth Chacón, *Indigenous Interfaces. Spaces, Technology, and Social Networks in Mexico and Central America* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes Origins”, <http://drumbytes.org/about/origins-1994.php>, accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Mongibello, *Indigenous Peoples in Canadian TV News. A Corpus-based Analysis of Mainstream and Indigenous News Discourses* (Napoli: Paolo Loffredo Iniziative Editoriali, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, “‘It’s Like Going to a Cemetery and Lighting a Candle’: Aboriginal Australians, Sorry Business and Social Media”, *Alternative. An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 11 (2015), 211-224; see also Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life. The Practices and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

“social media – Twitter and Facebook in particular – has also served as a platform for fostering health, well-being and resilience, recognizing Indigenous strength and talent, and sustaining and transforming cultural practices when great distances divide members of the same community”.<sup>14</sup> When appropriated by Indigenous communities,<sup>15</sup> social media platforms can subvert colonizing systems and generate political mobilization. Against the marginalization and discrimination of Indigenous peoples, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, can be successfully used as counter-discursive spaces of resistance where political and cultural struggles against neocolonial symbolic and political power are enacted. In this sense, social media practices can be understood as forms of counter-discourse since through and on social media traditionally accepted, normative, even commonsensical discourses can be questioned and subverted. However, as Majid KhosraviNik explains, while social media may give the impression that the discursive power of traditional media has been eroded, “the macro/political/industrial and local communicative notions of power are still at play”.<sup>16</sup>

Hashtags and hashtagging can be helpful in enacting counter-discursive practices. This is the case of counter-hashtags i.e. when trending hashtags are addressed by means of similar but opposite hashtags that contrast them. An example is the #Resistance150 campaign by Anishinaabe traditional storyteller and teacher Isaac Murdoch, Michif visual artist Christi Belcourt, Cree activist Tanya Kappo and Métis author Maria Campbell while they were discussing the government’s planned festivities for Canada 150. The hashtag was created in response to #Canada150, launched for the celebration of “a history that ignores the tumultuous relationship between indigenous peoples and the rest of Canada”.<sup>17</sup> Hashtags have great subversive, transgressive and counter-hegemonic potential when they are used to contrast settler hegemonic power. Twitter hashtags, for instance, were used in campaigns such as #NoDAPL or #StandWithStandingRock, which substantially increased the size and length of the anti-pipeline movement in North America.

Little critical attention has been devoted to the analysis of social media and political protests in Indigenous contexts in a discourse-analytical perspective. Existing literature on the analysis of Indigenous digital activism is mainly qualitative and falls within two research streams. One stream investigates how Indigenous peoples use social media platforms in their political campaigns. For instance, a study conducted by Callison and Hermida<sup>18</sup> focused on the Idle No More movement and uncovered the presence of non-elite actors among the 500 most influential voices of the online campaign. Another study by Raynauld, Richez and Morris<sup>19</sup> employed qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate a sample of 1650 tweets. The research showed that Idle No More tweets included different digital material in their posts and that references to Indigenous cultures played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the movement. Another stream in the research on Indigenous digital activism encompasses research work that analyzes the way Indigenous peoples’ social

<sup>14</sup> Carlson Bronwyn and Jeff Berglund, eds., *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up. The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism* (Ithaca: Rutgers U.P., 2021), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Laurel Dyson, “Indigenous Peoples on the Internet”, in Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess, eds., *The Handbook of Internet Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 251-269.

<sup>16</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, “Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)”, in John Flowerdew and John Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2017), 582-96.

<sup>17</sup> Jackie Dunham, “PM Trudeau lured with selfie, caught on question of indigenous rights”, *CTVNews.ca* (2017), [www.ctvnews.ca/politics/pm-trudeau-lured-withselfie-caught-on-question-of-indigenous-rights-l-3245966](http://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/pm-trudeau-lured-withselfie-caught-on-question-of-indigenous-rights-l-3245966), accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Candis Callison and Alfred Hermida, “Dissent and Resonance. #IdleNoMore as an Emergent Middle Ground”, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 40 (2015), 695-716.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent Raynauld et al., “Canada is #IdleNoMore. Exploring Dynamics of Indigenous Political and Civic Protest in the Twitterverse”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 21.4 (2018), 626-642.

movements are represented online. This is the perspective taken by Popham and Brantford,<sup>20</sup> for instance, who focused on the representations of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock on Twitter through an ethnographic content analysis of the social media commentary that accompanied an image taken from the protest. The analysis uncovered colonial undertones that diverted public discussion away from the justice issues catalyzing the protest, thus directing the narrative elsewhere. Overall, although there has been a substantial increase in social media usage by Indigenous activists, little critical attention has been devoted to the analysis of social media and political protests in Indigenous contexts in a discursive analytical perspective. To our knowledge, none of the above mentioned studies, combines Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis with elements of Social Media research to investigate the discourse of Indigenous protests on Twitter.

### 3. Corpus Design and Methodology

In order to undertake the analysis, a corpus of 2588 tweets posted between January 2019 and November 2021 was created and renamed The Gidimt'en Corpus (GTEN\_Corpus). All tweets were posted by Wet'suwet'en protesters on the official Twitter account of the protest (@Gidimten). The account was activated in January 2019. By September 2022 it reached 30,7K followers. The tweets were collected in December 2021 through an R script in combination with Search Tweets API (Applications Programming Interface). Content was reviewed in a plain text editor and duplicate posts and embedded encoding was removed. The file was saved in UTF-8-encoded plain text format. The final dataset, the GTEN\_Corpus, encompasses 59,191 and 76,795 tokens. It is a small, specialized corpus because it comprises fewer than a million words.<sup>21</sup> The GTEN\_Corpus follows Flowerdew's list of parameters<sup>22</sup> according to which a corpus is said to be specialized: it has been compiled for a specific purpose, that is the investigation of the online discourse of the Wet'suwet'en people; it is contextualized, as collected items all come from the Gidimt'en account and have specific participants (the Wet'suwet'en protesters); its genre is well identifiable, i.e., the genre of microblogging.

The study conducted herein draws from quantitative and qualitative techniques, using corpus tools to complement Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA). The combination with a CDA-informed approach is particularly fruitful to interpret the ideological implications in patterns of language. Such an integrated approach, which combines qualitative readings with a corpus-linguistics approach, creates a methodological synergy<sup>23</sup> that has proven to be a reliable method to track down discursive patterns. The synergy between qualitative and quantitative methodologies addresses the limitations of both. In other words, "by using computer software, analysts can deal with much larger quantities of data, and so put forward more convincing evidence in support of their claims".<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in embracing this methodological perspective to conduct our analysis, we agree with KhosraviNik<sup>25</sup> that we cannot see social media merely as a data source. On the contrary, as Bouvier maintains, social media data are not about a virtual realm, but they tell us about actual people and what they do with

<sup>20</sup> James Popham and Latasha VanEvery, "Representing Indigenous Protest on Twitter. Examining the Social Media Dialogue that Accompanied a Single Image of the DAPL Protests at Standing Rock", *Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Research*, 149 (2018).

<sup>21</sup> Svenja Adolphs and Dawn Knight, "Building a Spoken Corpus", in Anna O'Keeffe and Michael McCarthy, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 38-52.

<sup>22</sup> Lynne Flowerdew, "The Argument for Using English Specialized Corpora to Understand Academic and Professional Settings", in Ulla Connor and Thomas Upton, eds., *Discourse in the Professions. Perspectives from Corpus Linguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 11-33.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Baker et al., eds., "A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the United Kingdom Press", *Discourse & Society*, 19 (2008), 273-306.

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panović, *Working with Written Discourse* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), 81.

<sup>25</sup> KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies", 593.

their online writing.<sup>26</sup> This is why understanding and acknowledging the context of production is essential so as to also understand the kind of discourses and the sociopolitical interests connected to those texts.

For the quantitative informed analysis, the online software program *Sketch Engine*<sup>27</sup> was employed as a corpus manager and text analysis software. Our first stage of analysis focused on keyness and collocations. Keyness refers to the level of significance of higher or lower frequencies (keywords). Keyness values were generated automatically based on log-likelihood calculations. Keyword analysis was therefore employed to find out which words were significantly most frequent, by comparing the GTEN\_Corpus to the English Web Corpus (enTenTen) a corpus made of texts collected from the internet, consisting of 36 billion words. Given the difference in size between the focus corpus and the reference corpus, the Canadian subcorpus of the enTenTen, which comprises 701,319,389 words, was chosen for our investigation. The analysis of collocates in corpus linguistics is often used to identify discourses, through the investigation of words co-occurring within a pre-set span. Collocational analysis served as a gateway to Critical Discourse Analysis as it provided indications of discourse prosody,<sup>28</sup> i.e. the associations of a given word or phrase with other words or phrases which are positive or negative in their evaluative orientation. Discourse prosody indexes the topics and issues associated with a given key word.

Since the language of microblogging often relies on hashtags and mentions, the analysis herein proposed draws from Social Media Research methodologies. In doing so, we aimed at investigating how semiotic resources like hashtags and mentions are used by the Wet'uwet'en protesters on the Gidim't'en account. Hashtags have recently attracted much critical attention as new communicative affordances or, more specifically, as a special form of user-generated metadata<sup>29</sup> or conversational tagging. Hashtags used for activism position different instances of marginalization “not simply as isolated contemporary phenomena but as long-standing and systematic”.<sup>30</sup> The use of the # symbol marks conversations on social media, by saying what a statement is really about.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, hashtags work as social practice in that they aggregate and enable the circulation of discourses around certain topics which may also inscribe evaluative positions of the user, expressing attitudes and emotions. At the same time, hashtags create ‘ambient affiliation’<sup>32</sup> and categorize tweets into similar topics.<sup>33</sup> In the Twittersphere, mentions are also very common. The sign @ is used by tweeters mainly to direct messages to other users. Mentions have been theorized in terms of ‘addressivity’. According to Werry,<sup>34</sup> ‘addressivity’ consists in users indicating an intended addressee by typing the persons’ name. Addressed messages may be followed by responses directed back to the initiator. Mentions can also indicate a reference, so as to attribute the original text to its author.

Another feature of microblogging is its multimodal dimension in that links, videos and other visual material like photos and memes, can also be attached to the tweet and are complementary to its semiotic agenda. While we do recognize that Twitter discourse is multimodal in nature, however the

<sup>26</sup> Gwen Bouvier, “What Is a Discourse Approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Other Social Media. Connecting with Other Academic Fields?”, *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 10.2 (2015), 149-162.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Kilgariff et al., “The Sketch Engine. Ten Years on”, *Lexicography*, 1 (2014), 7-36.

<sup>28</sup> Baker et al., eds., “A Useful Methodological Synergy”.

<sup>29</sup> Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk. Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, “#Ferguson. Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States”, *American Ethnologist*, 42.1 (2015), 10.

<sup>31</sup> Bonilla and Rosa, “#Ferguson. Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography”.

<sup>32</sup> Michele Zappavigna, “Ambient Affiliation. A Linguistic Perspective on Twitter”, *New Media & Society*, 13.5 (2011), 788-806.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Page, “The Linguistics of Self-branding and Micro-celebrity in Twitter. The Role of Hashtags”, *Discourse & Communication*, 6.2 (2012), 181-201.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher C. Werry, “Linguistic and Interactional Features of Internet Relay Chat”, in Susan C. Herring, ed., *Computer-mediated Communication. Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), 47-63.

analysis of the visual repertoire employed by the Wet'suwet'en protesters on Twitter would require a whole other paper to be discussed, which would go beyond the scope of the present research.

The ultimate aim of this work is to analyze a) the remediation of the Wet'suwet'en protest on Twitter, b) the discursive strategies employed by the Indigenous activists on Twitter, including hashtags and mentions, and c) the social actors included in the narratives. The following research questions will be addressed:

R1: How do the Wet'suwet'en people articulate their protest online?

R2: What key discourses can be detected in the analysis of the Wet'suwet'en digital activism on Twitter?

In addressing the research question, an analysis of self- and other-representation, and therefore of how the Wet'suwet'en people articulate their digital presence is provided. In general, what we are interested in foregrounding are the discursive features and strategies of Indigenous resistance discourse on Twitter, i.e. how an empowered stance is construed. In targeting our goal, we hypothesize that the Wet'suwet'en protesters make use of specific forms of online activism which characterize Indigenous online discourse of resistance as a medium of positive self-representation, negative other-representation, Indigenous sovereignty affirmation, and resistance to neo-colonial practices in Canada.

#### 4. Results

The first stage of analysis is informed with quantitative methodologies. A list of keywords was automatically retrieved from *SketchEngine* using the Canadian subcorpus of enTenTen as a reference corpus. Non words and strings of symbols were deleted, since they were not relevant to the analysis. This step was necessary in order to reveal broad trends in the focus corpus. The top 93 keywords, their frequency in the focus corpus and keyness scores were retrieved. In order to detect discourse patterns in the corpus, the keywords were then coded so as to identify thematic patterns and the prominence of certain themes over others. As a result, we obtained six categories based on the semantic similarities between keywords: 1) hashtags; 2) mentions; 3) social actors; 4) conflict words; 5) place-names; 6) Witsuwit'en words.<sup>35</sup>

Item	Category
#wetsuwetenstrong; #wetsuweten; #shutdowncanada; #alloutforwedzinkwa; #unistoten; #alleyesonwetsuweten; #landback; #reconciliationisdead; #alleyesonunistoten; #thetimeisnow; #notresspass; #wedzinkwa: #bcpoli; #rcmp; #wouldyoushootmetoo; #cdnpoli;	<b>HASHTAGS</b>

<sup>35</sup> Wet'suwet'en represents four communities: Hagwilget, Witsset (formerly Moricetown), Skin Tyee, and Nee Tahi Buhn. Wet'suwet'en traditional territory is in the Bulkley River area in northwest BC. There are approximately 3,195 Wet'suwet'en members. The Wet'suwet'en people speak Witsuwit'en, a dialect of the Babine-Witsuwit'en language which, like its sister language Carrier, is a member of the Athabaskan family, <http://www.wetsuweten.com/culture/language/>, accessed 7 November 2022.

#coastalgaslink; #defendtheyintah; #wetsuwetensolidarity; #cglofftheyintah; #freesleydo; #sovereignty; #solidarity; #indigenousoverignty; #traditionalgovernance; #nopipelines #weareallone; #shutdownkk; #gidimten; #standupfightback; #rcmpofftheyintah; #rematriatetheland; #riseup; #repost; #undrip; #climateaction; #covid19; #manrights	
@gidimten; @unistotencamp; @justintrudeau; @jjhorgan; @kk; @yintah; @coastalgaslink; @rusdiabo; @thetyee; @gitxsanjt; @photobracken; @bcrcmp; @likhtsamisyu; @wetsuwetenstrong; @georgiastraight @rcmpgrcpolice	<b>MENTIONS</b>
wet"suwet"en; gaslink; cgi; sleydo; woos; wickham; matriarchs; defenders; arrestees; dini; huson; freda	<b>SOCIAL ACTORS</b>
checkpoint; blockades; unceded; injunction; militarized; checkpoint; sniper	<b>CONFLICT WORDS</b>
Morice; haudenosaunee; tyendinaga	<b>PLACE-NAMES</b>
Masih; misiyh; snecalyegh; cyoh; gidimt"en; yintah; gitxsan; unist'ot'en; wedzin; kwa; yikh; tabi misiyh	<b>WITSUWIT'EN WORDS.</b>

Tab. 1: Keyword categories

Expectedly, most of the keywords in our corpus are hashtags and mentions, suggesting that both hashtagging and mentioning are common practices in the discourse of the Wet'suwet'en protest, being also two main features of the genre of microblogging. For space constraints, our analysis will now focus on the keywords pertaining to three main categories in Tab 1., i.e. hashtags, mentions and social actors.

#### 4.1 Hashtags analysis

The hashtag category encompasses hashtags that are representative of the discourse of the Wet'suwet'en protest. In fact, they encompass themes like **solidarity**, es. #alleyesonwetsuweten (135); #alleyesonunistoten (83); #wetsuwetensolidarity (27); #solidarity (20); #manrights (12); **mobilization**, es. #shutdowncanada (206); #alloutforwedzinkwa (162); #defendtheyintah (33); #weareallone (18); #shutdownkr (18); #standupfightback (16); #repost (14); #riseup (14); #climateaction (12); **land claim and Indigenous sovereignty**, es. #wetsuwetenstrong (601); #unistoten (145); #landback (128); #reconciliationisdead (96); #notrespass (70); #wedzinkwa (60); #cglofftheyintah (25); #sovereignty (20); #indigenousoverignty (19); #traditionalgovernance (18); #nopipelines (18); #gidimten (17); #rcmpofftheyintah (15); #rematriatetheland (14); **corporation and government**, es. #bcpoli (55); #rcmp (44); #cdnpoli (44); #coastalgaslink (34); #cgl (13); **freedom**, es. #freesleydo (23); **urgency**, es. #thetimeisnow (81). The prominence of each theme was established by calculating the frequency of each category as a percentage of the number of hashtag occurrences in each hashtag set, as Tab. 2 shows.

Theme	Frequency	Prominence
Land claim and Indigenous Sovereignty	1246	53,93%
Mobilization	493	21,34%
Solidarity	277	11,99%
Corporation and government	190	8,22%
Urgency	81	3,50%
Freedom	23	0,99%

Table 2: Most frequent hashtag themes and prominence rate

Based on the results in Tab. 2, hashtags vehiculating meanings related to land claim and Indigenous sovereignty account for the 53,93% of the total number of tweets containing hashtags in the GTEN\_Corpus. These hashtags, besides functioning as aggregation tools for certain themes, also serve as political slogans, as examples 1 and 2 show:

**Example 1:** We stand in solidarity with the Wilp Luutkudziiwus! #IndigenousSovereignty #TraditionalGovernance #LandBack

**Example 2:** As Indigenous grassroots people, on the frontlines, we call on you to join us in solidarity from Nov 23-29 as a national call to action to support and respect our sovereignty.

We are one, we are united, and we will fight, together.  
#LandBack #WeAreOne <https://t.co/7kLSfwysL>

Mobilization hashtags have lower prominence in the focus corpus, which contradicts our initial hypothesis that hashtags in protests on social media serve primarily a mobilization function. Corporation and government hashtags occupy lower ranks in this chart, which suggests that the Wet'suwet'en protesters are more interested in granting space to their claims and the call for sovereignty, rather than initiating a discussion over the RCMP and other federal agencies. Urgency and freedom hashtags were not very frequent in this corpus, which may be due to the fact that other hashtags associated with the campaign gained more popularity across Twitter also through re-tweets and mentions, and therefore less space was left to less popular ones.

Overall, the hashtags aim at creating a virtual community that engages in collaborative tagging. As "searchable talk", hashtags allow "online conversation where people actively render their talk more

findable”.<sup>36</sup> Based on their clause/content type, the hashtags in the focus corpus can be further classified into declarative and imperative.<sup>37</sup> The hashtags conveying meanings related to the categories of mobilization, solidarity and freedom feature imperatives that are used to persuade the audience to engage in the protest activity. This is the case of #shutdowncanada, #alloutforwedzinkwa, #defendtheyintah, that ask users to enact specific actions as examples 3 and 4 show:

**Example 3:** In 1990, we (Wet’suwet’en community members) held a solidarity blockade, during #Oka. Our youth passed out pamphlets & read them to vehicle occupants. In February 2020, people #ShutDownCanada

**Example 4:** Round up of actions so far. Keep up the pressure! #AllEyesonWetsuweten #WetsuwetenStrong #NoTrespass #WedzinKwa #DefendTheYintah #RiseUp #StandUpFightBack <https://t.co/tXzUIorLUH>

These hashtags have a specific ‘reach-out’ aim, as they seek to expand the circle of people already involved in the protest by extending the call for support and mobilization outside the Gidimt’en checkpoint, right into the Twittersphere. Interestingly, some imperative hashtags pertaining to the mobilization category include conflict-related words (like *defend*, *stand up and fight back*). The occurrence of these words in imperative hashtags of mobilization suggest that the call for participation is one that aims at attracting people into joining a fight taking the Wet’suwet’en side. They also inevitably create a dialogical tension between the Wet’suwet’en people, the protesters and their supporters on the one hand, and GasLink, RCMP, BC government, investment companies like KKR etc, on the other. Consequently, an opposition is created between an in-group and an out-group, as visible in Example 5:

**Example 5:** AIMco is one of the new owners of Coastal GasLink - activists went to their Toronto office asking them to drop their investment on Wet’suwet’en lands! Join us today at noon for the rally

#unistoten #wetsuweten #wetsuwetenstrong #landback #nopipelines #defendtheyintah <https://t.co/lslpiBJKsX>

Here AIMco, an investment company supporting Coastal GasLink stands in opposition to the activists, creating an us/Wet’suwet’en *versus* them/Coastal GasLink divide. A string of hashtags ends the tweet calling the attention onto crucial issues of the protest, i.e. land defense. Hashtags conveying meanings related specifically to land claim and Indigenous sovereignty are declarative, in that they are more informational and summarize the Wet’suwet’en ideas in regard to their land rights (es. #traditionalgovernance; #landback). Declarative hashtags promote searchability and signal important topics in a tweet; this is the case of #sovereignty and #unistoten, the latter being the Witsuwit’en word for sacred land. In tweets where these hashtags occur, they serve the function of indicating that the content of the tweet falls into the wider conversation on sovereignty and the land:

<sup>36</sup> Michele Zappavigna, “Ambient Affiliation”, 804

<sup>37</sup> The classification comes from Ruth Page, “The Linguistics of Self-branding”.

**Example 6:** CGL and RCMP don't care about our ceremonies or our laws. Genocide requires them to turn a blind eye to our authority #Sovereignty #WetsuwetenStrong #CGLofftheYintah <https://t.co/GYzcMT6bmK>

In Example 6 the opposition us versus them, in-group versus outgroup is repeated (our ceremonies/our laws/ our authority vs. them). Declarative hashtags also contain evaluative meanings, such as #wetsuwetenstrong or #reconciliationisdead. While the former expresses an evaluative assessment which contains a positive endorsement, the latter negatively evaluates the reconciliation attempts promoted by the Canadian government and the provincial government of British Columbia. Declarative hashtags like these tend to occur more frequently in tweets reporting on particularly violent actions by the RCMP, Coastal GasLink and its investment companies, as example 7 shows. Overall, they aim at amplifying the social process to affiliate potential supporters with the values expressed in the tweet (solidarity vs. injunction).

**Example 7:** BREAKING: Police serve injunction to Toronto/Vaughn Rail blockade. Injunction is almost immediately burned in solidarity with @UnistotenCamp, @Gidimten, Gitxan and Tyendinaga.

#ShutDownCanada #ReconciliationIsDead #NationtoNation #NoCGL #NoMeansNo #WETSUWETEN #UNISTOTEN <https://t.co/QyCfCzVOub>

Contexts of usage were further investigated through collocational analysis. The most frequent hashtags of each topic were chosen to retrieve collocates. The analysis of collocates can provide a helpful sketch of the meaning/function of the node within the particular discourse. In analyzing collocates, the word span was set to 3L/3R in the collocate window. The minimum frequency of a collocate to co-occur with the node was set to 5 (Tab. 3).

Hashtag	Collocates
#alleyesonwetsuweten	#wetsuwetenstrong (105) #reconciliationisdead (84) #shutdowncanada (82) #unistoten (39) #thetimeisnow (21) #sovereignty (20)
#shutdowncanada	#wetsuwetenstrong (134) #reconciliationisdead (85) #alleyesonwetsuweten (84) #unistoten (81) #landback (76) #thetimeisnow (69)
#wetsuwetenstrong	#unistoten (94) #shutdowncanada (92) #reconciliationisdead (89) #alleyesonunistoten (83) #alloutforwedzinkwa (69) #ShutDownCanada (60)
#bcpoli	#rcmp (22) #cdnpoli (19)
#freesleydo	#freethemall (12)

	#shutdowncanada (8)
#thetimeisnow	#landback (69) #unistoten (69) #shutdowncanada (69)

Table 3: Hashtags and collocates

Tab. 3 shows that, regardless of the category they fall in and of their communicative purpose, hashtags in the focus corpus tend to co-occur in longer or shorter strings, as the analysis of collocates reveals. Solidarity, mobilization and land claim and Indigenous sovereignty hashtags co-occur in longer strings, whereas urgency, freedom and corporation and governmental institution hashtags tend to occur in shorter strings as Example 8 shows:

**Example 8:** Update: @landbackskyler @LoganStaats and others arrested yesterday have been released. We will not be removing barricades on highway #6 bypass #FreeSleydo

Some of the themes conveyed by the hashtags were also discourses constructed by the hashtags themselves. More specifically, discourses of solidarity, sovereignty and mobilization were leading discourses in the corpus, based on number of occurrences of the related hashtags and their prominence. Discourses of solidarity and mobilization legitimize calls for urgent action justified by RCMP violent intrusions, while discourses of sovereignty legitimize the perspective of the Wet'suwet'en in regard to the protest, since subthemes related to land claims, reconciliation, traditional governance and the necessity to 'rematriate' the land are foregrounded. This last subtheme, enforced by the hashtag #rematriatetheland is particularly significant since it entails a substitution of the common verb *repatriate* with the alternative neologism *rematriate*. The hashtag condenses Indigenous understandings of the land as belonging to the matriarchs of the Wet'suwet'en nation.

**Example 9:** FROM COAST TO COAST INDIGENOUS NATIONS ARE UNDER ATTACK IT'S TIME TO STOP TALKING AND START TAKING ACTION IT'S TIME TO SHUT IT DOWN #SHUTDOWNCANADA2020 #SDC2020 #MikmaqRights #WetsuwetenStrong #1492LandBackLane <https://t.co/RdBr6Zzkz1>

**Example 10:** The RCMP are back on site right now! We are asking if you can't come to the yintah to organize wherever you are and tell your government officials, the investors, CGL contractors that we will not accept genocide anymore. #StandUpFightBack #RematriatetheLand <https://t.co/0zfTm1pXSE>

In the examples above, discourses of solidarity and mobilization legitimize the Wet'suwet'en call for action due to Indigenous nations being "under attack" and RCMP being "back on site", arresting people showing solidarity. The hashtags in these examples do not just mark the discourses but aim at creating affiliations so that people in the Twittersphere may either show solidarity or mobilize by standing up and fighting back.

Although not being key in the list of top 100 keywords, solidarity is a recurring theme throughout the corpus. With 164 raw frequencies, *solidarity* accounts for 0.21% of the entire corpus. A closer analysis of its concordances shows the recurring pattern *in solidarity with* followed by #wetsuwet'en (16) or *Wet'suwet'en* (22) and preceded by nouns or verbs related to actions and taking action, like *action*, *marched*, *join*, *stand*, *block*. This is to confirm that even when *solidarity* does not occur as a hashtag, a discourse of solidarity is still detectable that aims at creating community across the Twittersphere

**Example 11:** Feet in the streets in downtown #yyj right now stand in solidarity with #Wetsuweten land defenders who are fighting off @CoastalGasLink on their territory as we speak. All eyes on the Yintah, all solidarity with @Gidimten and @UnistotenCamp ☹️

#WetsuwetenStrong #NoConsentNoPipeline <https://t.co/vxThduEdyJ>

Themes concerning Indigenous territory, unceded land and Indigenous consent co-occur in combination with discourses of solidarity as the list of collocates in Tab. 3 shows. These discourses intersect, as solidarity is called for in support of Indigenous land rights and the fight for Indigenous sovereignty.

#### 4.2 Analysis of mentions

Moving on to the second category of keywords, that of mentions, the data show that mentions are less used than hashtags in the focus corpus. Mentions may show the level of cohesion in digital communities, including the sense of solidarity that is built among Twitter users. Overall, they provide an insight into the interactions between Twitter users. The mentions retrieved from the keyword list can be divided into the following categories, depending on the reference/addressee, as summarized in Tab. 4:

Mention	Category
@justintrudeau (42); @bcrcmp (13); @rcmpgrcpolice (11); @kkr (23); @coastalgaslink (18); @jjhorgan (30)	Corporation and government
@gidimten (209); @unistotencamp (49); @likhtsamisyu (12)	Indigenous place-names and resistance outposts
@georgiastraight (11); @photobracken (14); @thetyee (17); @rusodiabo (18); @gitxsanjt (15); @yintah (21); @wetsuwetenstrong (11);	News and information source

Table 4: Mentions divided into categories

The prominence of each category was then established by calculating the frequency of each category as a percentage of the number of mention occurrences in each mention set, as Tab. 5 shows.

Category	Prominence
Indigenous place-names and resistance outposts	50,19%
Corporation and government	26,65%
News and information source	20,81%
Indigenous clans	2,33%

Table 5. Mentions categories and prominence rate

Mentions in the focus corpus are used in different ways, with addressivity, reference or locational functions.<sup>38</sup> Reading the results in Tab. 5, mentions in the GTEN\_Corpus are more prominent when they refer to Indigenous place-names and resistance outposts. These mentions are mainly locational in that they serve to anchor tweets to geographical spaces. This is the case of @gidimten and @unistotencamp. However, since both mentions also refer to the related Twitter accounts, their occurrences in the GTEN\_Corpus may also be referential. In other words, they either promote the Twitter account of the Wet'suwet'en protest, in which case they are referential; or they locate the message/the action where it was physically located. This is the case of tweets like the following:

**Example 12:** Bulldozers moving in @Gidimten #44forever #wetsuwetenstrong #ClimateAction  
<https://t.co/DFby3hXQch>

Corporations and government tend to be included in the tweets more frequently through mentions rather than through hashtags. Through interactive mentions, the Wet'suwet'en protesters try to address the Canadian PM Justin Trudeau, BC premier John Horgan, Coastal GasLink, RCMP both at the national and local level, KKR & Co. Inc.,<sup>39</sup> an investment company backing the Coastal GasLink pipeline project, as Example 12 shows:

**Example 13:** Carrier Sekani land defender Sabina Dennis was arrested Thursday in Wet'suwet'en lands has a msg for @JustinTrudeau "Trudeau I know you're powerless...Your face does not trick us. Your pretty lies do not deceive us. We know we are the power & we will never surrender" <https://t.co/gzSPR7q7FW>

This is an example of mention with an addressivity function, since Justin Trudeau is directly addressed as the recipient of the message, which also brings an embedded request for an answer/an action to be taken.

News and information sources are mentioned when re-posting extracts from or links to news reports. The news and information source mentions refer to activists working as reporters, independent reporters and photographers, Indigenous peoples involved in the production and circulation of information, and account of blogs/Indigenous information platforms. These mentions are referential in that the tweet is not directed to anybody but makes reference to him/her. Through reference mentions, news and information sources aligning with the Wet'suwet'en positions are endorsed as noteworthy. The absence of mainstream news sources as key mentions suggests that the Wet'suwet'en protesters do not trust traditional news media channels. On the contrary, Indigenous-related news and information sources are preferred:

**Example 14:** Punishment for Pipeline Protesters, but Not for Pipeline Firm's Violations? via @TheTyee <https://t.co/AcBf5GZ970> #WetsuwetenStrong #Wetsuweten #AllOutForWedzinKwa

Following the same research steps used for retrieving hashtag data, the most frequent mention in each category was selected and further investigated for collocates, again setting the word span to 3L/3R in the collocate window (Tab. 6)

<sup>38</sup> The functions of mentions were elaborated drawing from Courtney Honeycutt and Susan C. Herring, "Beyond Microblogging: Conversation and Collaboration via Twitter", (2009). *Proceedings of the Forty-Second Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-42)*. Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Press.

<sup>39</sup> The KKR account has been suspended for violation of Twitter rules as of October 2022.

Mention	Collocates
@justintrudeau (42)	@jjhorgan (13) “(11) #wouldyoushootmetoo (6)
@gidimten (209)	“(59) .(56) #wetsuwetenstrong (34)
@yintah (21)	IG (18) :(11) <a href="https://t.co/JWol9q7cH9">https://t.co/JWol9q7cH9</a> (10)

Table 6: Most frequent mentions and collocate candidates

Political mentions tend to co-occur in the GTEN\_Corpus. As a matter of fact, the strongest collocate of @justintrudeau is @jjhorgan, the official Twitter account of BC premier John Horgan. As already showed in Example 13, mentions of politicians have an addressivity function as they are used for addressing federal and provincial leaders directly. The addressivity function of these mentions is further increased by the occurrences of a hashtag (#wouldyoushootmetoo) that was not key in our keyword analysis. The use of direct address also through personal pronouns (would *you* shoot *me* too) creates engagement and makes the conversation sound more personal. The reference to the action of shooting leads back to our initial list of keywords (Tab. 2) where occurrences of conflict-related words were spotted in the identification of keyword categories. Conflict-related words bring a negative discourse prosody since they are associated with war actions. However, the list of collocates does not include any adjective, which makes the identification of discourses surrounding corporation and government keywords harder to spot through mentions.

Turning now to the Gidimt'en mentions, the strongest collocate are inverted commas. This means that @gidimten is statistically more likely to occur in its referential function, rather than as a locational mention. In fact, the co-occurrence of @gidimten with inverted commas means that direct speech is very likely to occur whenever mentions of Gidimt'en appear in the corpus, thus making the reference to the author of the statement clear. Inverted commas signaling direct speech occur one span right of the node (i.e. @Gidimten “) indicating that official statements are shared by the protesters via Twitter through the Gidimt'en account. The key hashtag #wetsuwetenstrong, containing a positive evaluative attribution, seems to stand symbolically in opposition to #wouldyoushootmetoo, as both hashtags are the third most frequent collocates in the collocate list of @gidimten and @justintrudeau. Also collocates of @yintah seem to indicate that the mention is used with a referential function, since they all lead back to either the Instagram account of Yintha or to the official website through a direct link.

### 4.3 Analysis of social actors

The last category of keywords under investigation is that of the social actors. This category encompasses people who are included in the tweets and are either active or passive participants in the narrative. Here we found keywords referring to **Indigenous peoples**, es. wet"suwet"en (483); sleydo (74), defenders (73), woos (54), wickham (36), matriarchs (31), freda (26), dini (18), arrestees (14), huson (22); and **corporation and government**, es. gaslink (138), cgl (137). The opposition that was already visible in the examples discussed so far is confirmed. Again, we established the prominence of each category by calculating the frequency of each as a percentage of the number of occurrences in each set. The results are showed in Tab. 8:

Category	Prominence
Indigenous peoples	74,14%
Corporation and government	25,85%

Table 8. Social actor categories and prominence rate

The results in Tab. 8 show that much prominence is given, expectedly, to Indigenous peoples as social actors in the GTEN\_Corpus. The category includes Indigenous activists' names like Molly Wickham (Sleydo) Freda Huson, Chief Woos, Chief Dinī ze', references to their function in the narrative (defenders, arrestees) or social function in the community (matriarchs). The representational strategy of nomination is the most frequent in the corpus. As a matter of fact, the most active Wet'suwet'en activists are called by name. In so doing, the narrative is personalized, whereas functionalization is less common.

The most frequent key social actor in each category was further investigated for collocates. Interestingly, these are also the two sides of the polarization Wet'suwet'en vs. Coastal GasLink. The top five collocates were included in the list of collocates. Words co-occurring with social actors are useful for determining self- and other-representations along with discursive patterns and evaluative attributions.

Social actor	Collocates
wet'suwet'en (483)	people (44) with (38) territory (36) land (33) solidarity (32)
gaslink (138)	coastal (144) pipeline (30) RCMP (26) destroy (23) be (17) – (+ material process)

Table 9: Selected key social actors and collocates

Expectedly, the Wet'suwet'en primarily identify themselves as people. Much emphasis is given to their identification in relation to their land, which is unceded, within a discourse of solidarity and mobilization that has already emerged from the analysis of hashtags.

**Example 15:** Wet'suwet'en people have never given up our rights to our lands. This video shows how Wet'suwet'en clans continue to govern and protect our lands according to our laws. <https://t.co/FJmOaPKAmX>

#wetsuwetenstrong #Unistoten

A closer analysis of the concordances retrieved for *wet'suwet'en people* shows that within the discourse of solidarity, the Wet'suwet'en are asking tweeters to support them because their actions have been criminalized by the RCMP:

**Example 16:** During a State of Emergency we are seeing another 21 @BCRCMP landing in Smithers BC to criminalize Wet'suwet'en people on their own lands. #AllOutForWedzinKwa #AllEyesOnWetsuweten <https://t.co/T4Iqlc6brd> 12:48pm

Similarly, violent acts against the Wet'suwet'en people are exposed via social media, so that a request for immediate action is justified:

**Example 17:** It is a human rights violation and a war crime against Wet'suwet'en people. This is just mind blowing. Let your representatives know how you feel about the treatment of Indigenous peoples.

The justification and the legitimation of the Wet'suwet'en protest intersects with the discourse of solidarity and that of Indigenous sovereignty and land claim, as already discussed in the analysis of hashtags. While it is true that to legitimate and justify their actions/their call for solidarity, the Wet'suwet'en refer to themselves passively as being criminalized, being pushed around, harassed, and removed from their land, the concordance strings where *wet'suwet'en* is in object position are 23 (Fig.2), as opposed to 45 line where the key word is subject. This is the case of concordance strings where verbs like defend, block, ask, argue, choose and say occur (Fig. 1):

1	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	eir point of view, speak to each other with Wiggus (respect).</s><s>For <b>Wet'suwet'en wishing</b> to share your solitary please post your videos with the hashtag #
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	ze' who made a formal declaration in our bahlats multiple times.</s><s>" <b>Wet'suwet'en say</b> no pipelines!</s><s>Wet'suwet'en individuals collaborated on making
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	georgiastraight "Using Coastal GasLink workers as a wedge against the <b>Wet'suwet'en is</b> audacious but not surprising, according to one historian" #Wetsuweten:
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	ting an injunction to Coastal GasLink, Justice Church recognized that the <b>Wet'suwet'en are</b> "posing significant constitutional questions" but said that "this is not th
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	https://t.co/Tqz44IQ7Q via @lp_lapresse" "Between 1870 and 1905 the <b>Wet'suwet'en had</b> 3 National meetings in the community of Hagwilget.</s><s>The mee
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	lonial greed and corruption.</s><s>The Six Nations Confederacy and the <b>Wet'suwet'en have</b> familial ties and children who's futures we are fighting for together.<
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	"From October 9th-15th 2021 Go #AllOutForWedzinKwa For years, the <b>Wet'suwet'en have</b> defended their territory against repeated incursions from industry an
8	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	"From October 9th-15th 2021 Go #AllOutForWedzinKwa For years, the <b>Wet'suwet'en have defended</b> their territory against repeated incursions from industry ar
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	yote to speak with Cas Yikh house members and supporters.</s><s>The <b>Wet'suwet'en have defended</b> these territories for thousands of years and we don't plan
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	yote to speak with Cas Yikh house members and supporters.</s><s>The <b>Wet'suwet'en have</b> defended these territories for thousands of years and we don't plan
11	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	pipeline, but under 'Anuc niwh't'en (Wet'suwet'en law) all five clans of the <b>Wet'suwet'en have</b> unanimously opposed all pipeline proposals and have not provided i
12	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	pipeline, but under 'Anuc niwh't'en (Wet'suwet'en law) all five clans of the <b>Wet'suwet'en have</b> unanimously <b>opposed</b> all pipeline proposals and have not provided
13	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	il is now threatening: (10/22)" "For example, files sent to the Office of the <b>Wet'suwet'en were</b> password protected and unable to be opened.</s><s>Thus the info
14	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	ritage values for ongoing rights and title negotiations.</s><s>(6/22)" "The <b>Wet'suwet'en have argued</b> for years that the pipeline route endangers critical species, c
15	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	ritage values for ongoing rights and title negotiations.</s><s>(6/22)" "The <b>Wet'suwet'en have</b> argued for years that the pipeline route endangers critical species, c
16	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	atch RCMP stand down for racist mobs to terrorize Mikmaq people, while <b>Wet'suwet'en are</b> still harassed daily for hunting and holding ceremonies on their own la
17	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	nit were on scene prior to any action https://t.co/BihKRtjwz0 Gitxsan and <b>Wet'suwet'en are</b> blocking Highway 16 in solidarity with Six Nations and Mikmaq people
18	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	nit were on scene prior to any action https://t.co/BihKRtjwz0 Gitxsan and <b>Wet'suwet'en are</b> blocking Highway 16 in solidarity with Six Nations and Mikmaq peopl
19	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	nirS_H @NazilaB1 https://t.co/bvYgYgFFTx RELEASE: The Office of the <b>Wet'suwet'en is</b> asking the B.C. Supreme Court to set aside B.C.'s decision to extend th
20	<input type="checkbox"/>	① doc#0	nirS_H @NazilaB1 https://t.co/bvYgYgFFTx RELEASE: The Office of the <b>Wet'suwet'en is</b> asking the B.C. Supreme Court to set aside B.C.'s decision to extend th

Fig. 1: First 20 concordance lines of *wet'suwet'en* as subject

Fig. 2: First 20 concordance lines of *wet'suwet'en* as object

On the other hand, Coastal GasLink is represented in terms of the pipeline project and in association with the RCMP backing up the occupation of traditional land. In Tab. 9, *destroy* features as the third strongest collocate co-occurring with the key word. *Destroy* embeds a negative evaluative orientation and therefore it is further investigated in concordance lines.

Fig. 3: Concordance lines of *gaslink* and *destroy*\*

As the concordance lines in Fig. 3 show, Coastal GasLink is accused of destroying roads, lands, waters, archeological sites and the red dresses symbolizing Missing and Murdered women. Occurrences of *destroy* in the corpus are always associated with words related to the actions of social actors like *gaslink*, *@coastalgaslinkæ*, *contractor*, *pipeline* and *industry*. The negative discourse prosody brought about by the verb *destroy* is further exacerbated by verbs like *steal*, *invade* and *block* (#1, #5 and #3 in Fig.3). In #4 Coastal GasLink is framed within a war-like scenario activated by the word *conflict*. Interestingly, in three concordance lines traditional place-names (*Wedzin Kwa*, *Cas Yikh territory* and *yintah*) are also included, so as to boost the opposition Coastal GasLink vs *Wet'suwet'en*. A closer analysis of the concordances showed that a discourse of solidarity and mobilization (*share widely*) occurs when references to the destructive actions of Coastal GasLink are made:

**Example 17:** SHARE WIDELY - RCMP refuses to uphold colonial law while Coastal GasLink contractors destroy and steal our private property with impunity.

Over the weekend Coastal GasLink willfully, illegally, and violently...  
<https://t.co/mUFSDrOI49>

Further investigations into verbs co-occurring with *gaslink* revealed that the key word is used as subject of verbs like *bulldoze*, *profit*, *order*, *harm*, *pay*, *push* and *burn*. Material processes like *pay* and *profit off* seem to construct a discourse of finances, which in example 19 occurs in the surrounding of *colonial occupation*:

**Example 19:** BREAKING: We are inside @KKR\_Co in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en - your investment in Coastal GasLink is profiting off of colonial occupation #WetsuwetenStong @unistotencamp @Gidimten <https://t.co/vbXAFt9UF5>

## 5. Concluding remarks

In January 2019, after the RCMP entered the Wet'suwet'en First Nation territory in BC to enforce an injunction obtained by Coastal GasLink for the construction of a pipeline on unceded land, a Twitter account (@Gidimten) was opened by the Wet'suwet'en people, thus remediating the protest online. A corpus collecting the tweets posted by protesters through the @Gidimten account was created for the purpose of the analysis, in order to investigate how the Wet'suwet'en articulate their digital presence. The analysis of the GTEN\_Corpus was informed by quantitative and qualitative methodologies with the aim of identifying key discourses in the Wet'suwet'en digital activism on Twitter. The study provided analytical insights into the uses of hashtags, mentions and how the social actors were represented in the corpus, so as to identify discourses.

The hashtag analysis revealed that hashtags containing reference to land claim and sovereignty were the most prominent and were also used as political slogans, whereas mobilization hashtags, contrary to the expectations, were less prominent. Mobilization, solidarity and freedom hashtags were also found to contain imperatives meant to persuade the audience to engage with the protest. Some of these hashtags included conflict-related words, thus suggesting that mobilization through hashtags in this corpus consists in a call to join the fight either symbolically or physically. The reference to a war-like scenario also serves the creation of an in-group and an out-group opposition. Other hashtags, like those regarding Indigenous sovereignty and land issues were declarative and evaluative, occurring when a polarization is created opposing us/Wet'suwet'en vs. them/Coastal GasLink. Overall, mobilization, land claim and Indigenous sovereignty and solidarity hashtags co-occurred in longer strings. Through hashtags, discourses of solidarity, sovereignty and mobilization were created to legitimize calls for action and foreground the perspective of the Wet'suwet'en, with the ultimate aim of creating affiliations.

Mentions were not as common as hashtags in the corpus. However, the analysis showed that mentions related to Indigenous place-names and resistance outposts were more prominent and were used in different ways, with addressivity, reference or locational functions, the latter being the most employed.

Two categories of social actors were identified in the GTEN\_Corpus: Indigenous peoples and corporation and government, the former being the most predominant group. Indigenous social actors were represented by means of nomination. The analysis of collocates also showed that the Wet'suwet'en people represent themselves as active participants in the narrative, while a positive self-representation is provided through evaluative hashtags (es. #wetsuwetenstrong). However, occurrences of *wet'suwet'en* as object of verbs like *criminalize*, *push*, *take out*, *remove* and *shoot* were also found

in tweets where the discourse of solidarity intersected with that of Indigenous sovereignty and land claim to justify the Wet'suwet'en actions as well as their call for solidarity.

Overall, the analysis confirmed our initial hypothesis, i.e. that the Wet'suwet'en make use of specific forms of online activism which characterize Indigenous online discourse of resistance as a medium of positive self-representation, negative other-representation, Indigenous sovereignty affirmation, and digital resistance to neo-colonial practices in Canada through discourses of solidarity, mobilization, land claim and Indigenous sovereignty.

## Practices of Resistance in Social Media Discourse. The Case of Grassy Narrows First Nation

**Abstract:** Grassy Narrows is sadly known for one of the worst community health crises in Canada. It came to public attention in 1970 when it was revealed that an alarming number of the community members were displaying symptoms of the Minamata disease, a form of mercury poisoning, due to the huge amount of mercury dumped into the Wabigoon river from 1962 to 1970 by a chemical plant. Despite the fact that Grassy Narrows' leaders and activists have struggled, over the years, to bring the issue to the fore, the community has not received the help they needed to face the devastating consequences of the poisoning – which are still going on nowadays. This paper takes into account the narratives emerging from one of the main micro-blogging and social networking services, namely Twitter, to attract public attention and engage wider audience. Analysis of the tweets collected by extrapolating three hashtag streams – specifically #grassynarrows, #freegrassy, #FreeGrassyNarrows – is meant to reveal forms of counter-discourse which continue the struggle for justice. The texts included in the corpus are analysed in search for the most recurrent themes through which issues relating to Grassy Narrows are framed and awareness on vital questions is created in the online and offline world.

Keywords: *Grassy Narrows First Nation, social media discourse, digital activism, hashtag campaigning, environmental racism*

### 1. The Case of Grassy Narrows First Nation

In 2017, the Graphic History Collective launched a collaborative project called “Remember, Resist, Redraw. A Radical History Poster Project”, featuring works by artists and writers aiming at promoting art, activism, and history in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The posters included in the project were meant to offer alternative perspectives on well-known historical events, shedding light on the role of Indigenous peoples, women, oppressed workers, and marginalised people. All the posters advocated for social change, counting on activist art to remember, resist and redraw history. One of the posters in particular, ‘Justice for Grassy Narrows’ (by Iruwa Da Silva), celebrated the people of Grassy Narrows First Nation, who have led an intergenerational movement to assert their sovereignty, protecting their land and water.<sup>2</sup> This movement of resistance and resilience, which in some forms flows in social media discourse, is the specific focus of this paper.

Grassy Narrows (located on the English-Wabigoon river system, in north-western Ontario, Canada), came to public attention in 1970 when an alarming number of residents were found to display symptoms of the Minamata disease, a neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning.<sup>3</sup> According to experts, the natural resources on which the community depended contained excessively high mercury levels. It then emerged that the source of the pollution was Reed Paper Ltd chemical

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<sup>1</sup> <https://graphichistorycollective.com/projects/remember-resist-redraw>, accessed 7 November 2022. Unless otherwise specified, all websites were last accessed in June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://graphichistorycollective.com/projects/remember-resist-redraw>, accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Symptoms included sensory disturbances, such as narrowing of the visual field, impaired hearing, abnormal eye movements, tremor, ataxia (impaired balance), dysarthria (poor articulation of speech). The history of mercury poisoning among First Nations in Canada is entangled with the 20<sup>th</sup> century incident in the fishing village of Minamata, Japan, which also gave the name to the disease (before this disaster, the scientific community was unaware of the effects of mercury on humans). At the time, doctors established a link between methylmercury contaminated fish and human neurologic symptoms. As investigations proceeded in Japan from the late 1950s, a similar story began to unfold a few years later in Northern Canada – where, however, problems persisted for more than 50 years.

plant operating upstream from the reserve as part of the Dryden Chemical Company's pulp and paper mill. Further inquiry revealed that from 1962 to 1970, between 4 and 9 kg of untreated mercury per day were dumped into the English and Wabigoon rivers, poisoning waters that had been vital for local people for centuries. As a result, food became contaminated, commercial activities were closed and people were cut off from their main sources of income.<sup>4</sup> Although Reed Paper Ltd ceased using mercury in 1975 following provincial government orders, the economic and social impact of mercury pollution was devastating. Tourism declined, while the loss of traditional ways of life caused a number of social problems like alcohol addiction, drug abuse, family violence, suicides and depression. Residents had worryingly elevated levels of mercury in their bodies, and despite the fact that compensation was offered – more than a decade later, (falsely) assuming that the effects of contamination would soon go away – community members currently continue to suffer from disproportionate rates of serious health problems. Indeed, recent surveys provide clear evidence that the physical and mental health of people in Grassy Narrows is poorer than that of other First Nation communities in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

The case of Grassy Narrows is sadly known as one of the worst environmental disasters and community health crises in Canadian history. Any discussion of the issue cannot leave the relationship of Indigenous peoples to their lands and territories out of consideration. In fact, strong ties exist between a spiritual, emotional, and mental dimension and a physical, material one, drawing on the concept that land is not merely the biological environment, it is the ashes of ancestors and, as such, it must be preserved for future generations.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous communities consider their own history and culture to be closely and integrally connected to a specific ethno-habitat, their oral histories, cultural and linguistic heritage being strictly connected to the territory. It is through this land-culture connection and the ties to natural resources that historical continuity with ancestors can be maintained. Such a view strongly contrasts with existing legal and political frameworks, which usually diverge and clash with Indigenous sovereignty and land rights, making the community's concerns increasingly weaker and neglected.

In this respect, the concept of environmental justice, which has attracted enormous attention in the last decades, can be said to play a central role. According to Bullard, environmental justice “embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations”.<sup>7</sup> Based on the assumption that all individuals have the right to be protected from pollution and to live and enjoy a clean and healthful environment, environmental justice links a number of social movements (anti-racism, Aboriginal rights, the environmental movement). Most importantly, it brings together key dimensions relating not only to sustainable development but also to social inclusion. Within the American context, for example, a landmark study, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*,<sup>8</sup> showed that some ethnic communities were at

<sup>4</sup> In 1970, the Ontario government banned commercial fishing in the English-Wabigoon rivers – which had been a central source of income and employment for local people – posting ‘Fish for Fun’ signs throughout the region to discourage consumption. See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5289874/#b3-189e213>, accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/health-in-grassy-narrows-significantly-worse-than-other-first-nations-report-1.3942967>, accessed 7 November 2022. It appears extremely significant that Grassy Narrows has fewer elders than other First Nations, which demonstrates both the extent of the individual harm experienced by residents over the last decades and the extent to which this crisis threatens the ability to pass on their culture and traditions to future generations (see also <https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-in-canada/grassy-narrows-its-time-to-act-on-one-of-the-worst-health-crises-in-canada/>, accessed 7 November 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Lori A. Colomeda and Eberhard Wenzel, “Medicine Keepers. Issues of Indigenous Health”, *Critical Public Health*, 10.2 (2000), 243-256.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bullard, “Environmental Justice. More than Waste Facility Siting”, *Social Science Quarterly*, 77 (1996), 493.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Chavis and Charles Lee, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (New York: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987) available at <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/archives/pdfs/toxwrace87.pdf>, accessed 7 November 2022.

disproportionate risk from commercial toxic waste, something which was confirmed by later research<sup>9</sup> on environmental hazards and ecological inequalities, and then led to the term ‘environmental racism’.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of racism in relation to natural resources has been of pivotal importance in the development of environmental justice studies in the USA, which demonstrated that racism is embedded in multiple social structures, discourses, and dominant value systems operating within society.<sup>11</sup> Social scientists and environmental activists concerned about pollution began to use the term ‘environmental racism’ in the late 1980s, specifically referring to “the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and polluting industries in areas inhabited mainly by Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous peoples, Asians, migrant farm workers and low-income peoples”.<sup>12</sup> This was regarded as an extension of institutional racism, causing racist discrimination in environmental policymaking.<sup>13</sup> Through a series of acts of resistance, mostly by poor people and ethnic communities in the USA, the movement aimed to expose covert forms of racism negatively impacting some communities or groups in particular. As such, environmental racism evolved from a community-based movement struggling to raise public awareness of unequal environmental policies affecting low-income, ethnic communities, to a scholarly paradigm focusing on racism as a structural process involving communities that lack the resources or social status to partake in decisions that affect their territories.

While most of the studies first appeared in the US, a growing body of scientific literature is shedding light on a series of cases of environmental injustice in Canada too.<sup>14</sup> The country is sadly filled with examples of environmental racism, with toxic waste plants, chemical treatment plants, and dumpsites placed near Indigenous communities, with increasing negative effects on physical health, environmental health, and the socio-economic context. In particular, for instance, evidence-based research has proved that Canada has the world’s third largest per-capita freshwater reserve, but a lot of Indigenous communities depend on contaminated water and difficult access to reservoirs.<sup>15</sup> So water

<sup>9</sup> Robert Bullard, “Ecological Inequalities and the New South. Black Communities Under Siege”, *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 17 (1990), 105-115; Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant, “Environmental Injustice. Weighing Race and Class as Factors in the Distribution of Environmental Hazards”, *University of Colorado Law Review*, 63 (1992), 921-932; Francis Adeola, “Environmental Hazards, Health and Racial Inequity in Hazardous Waste Distribution”, *Environment and Behavior*, 26 (1994), 99-126.

<sup>10</sup> Chavis and Lee, *Toxic Waste*. After opposing a proposed toxic-waste site slated for a poor, largely African-American, community in North Carolina, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice launched a study that revealed a disturbing pattern. Hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and coal-fired plants were often placed in areas largely inhabited by African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and poor people in general. Such marginalized groups were perceived as weak, vulnerable citizens unable to rally against the poisoning of their neighbourhoods. According to the study, such targeting was often deliberate.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bullard, *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> James Hamilton, “Testing for Environmental Racism. Prejudice, Profits, Political Power?”, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 14.1 (1995), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Andil Gosine and Cheryl Teelucksingh, *Environmental Justice and Racism. An Introduction* (Toronto, ON: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited, 2008), 4.

<sup>14</sup> See, among others, Michael Jerrett et al., “Environmental Equity in Canada. An Empirical Investigation into the Income Distribution of Pollution in Ontario”, *Environmental and Planning A* 29.10 (1997): 1777-1800; Randolph Haluza-Delay, “Environmental Justice in Canada”, *Local Environment*, 12.6 (2007), 557-564; Leith Deacon and Jamie Baxter, “Framing Environmental Inequity in Canada. A Content Analysis of Daily Print News Media”, in Julian Agyeman et al., eds., *Speaking for Ourselves. Environmental Justice in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 181-202; Leith Deacon and Jamie Baxter, “No Opportunity to Say No. A Case Study of Procedural Environmental Justice in Canada”, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 56.5 (2013), 607-623. These studies posit that socially vulnerable groups – be they ethnic minorities or low-income groups – are usually disproportionately exposed to pollution. Most importantly, they stress that environmental justice is tied to broader issues of social and political justice endorsing the marginalization of some specific groups.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44961490>, accessed 7 November 2022. In Canada, it is the federal government’s responsibility to ensure that First Nations peoples living on reserve lands have safe and clean drinking water and proper wastewater systems. Under the Canadian Environment Protection Act, Environment Canada – the Department that

pollution broadly appears a very controversial issue for First Nations communities, who tend to be disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. While, over the years, the United Nations have declared water and sanitation to be human rights and Canada federal government has promised to secure clean drinking water to First Nations communities by 2021, significant progress on this issue has yet to happen.

Since the federal government was aware of the water quality and the severe health problems suffered by the community of Grassy Narrows, it can be argued that the institutional refusal – or delay – to take responsibility for ensuring clean drinking water and a safe environment for food sources (mostly deriving from fish) can be deemed as a case of environmental racism. The federal government's lack of action was a practice that, intentionally or unintentionally, affected community members, treating them as second-class citizens. The case of Grassy Narrows would have urged the government to apply the highest standards of protection to their rights. Instead, the community was left unheard for decades, seeking justice while paying the price of systemic racism in state legislation and sovereignty with their health.

Overall, the complex weave of people, nature, geography and politics (that is often viewed in terms of environmental justice) has been approached rather ambivalently, especially when some social groups or individuals are denied access to representation due to their geographical location and political status.<sup>16</sup> Injustices can be (un)recognised as such in relation to the status of people, which is directly connected to politics as much as the media.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Digital activism and hashtag campaigning

Digital media are increasingly advocated as a tool to engage with society's most pressing and tricky issues, reaching a more inclusive public discourse which can empower minority or stigmatised groups by granting them access to online communication and, potentially, to public, political, and institutional dynamics.<sup>18</sup> By providing the unrepresented or underrepresented members of society with a voice, social media – in particular some well-known social networking platforms, among them Twitter – have democratized communication, granting all users some degree of visibility. Indeed, a growing part of social media usage comprises individuals and activists advocating for political debates, humanitarian causes, environmental issues, and so forth,<sup>19</sup> thus challenging the traditional role of mainstream mass media. The main, and probably most significant, result of the rise of social networking platforms is that “they have transformed the ways in which people can interact. They do not simply offer an alternative way of engaging in the same forms of communicative interaction that were available prior to their emergence; they also provide a number of notably different communicative dynamics and

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coordinates environmental policies and programmes – is responsible for ensuring the clean-up of hazardous waste, developing standards, guidelines and protocols for wastewater systems, while the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs is responsible for providing funding for the construction, operation and maintenance of wastewater treatment facilities (Gosine and Teelucksingh, *Environmental Justice and Racism*: 39).

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice. Reimagining Political Space in Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2008), 114.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of considering the intricate connections between news media and Indigenous people – in cases of environmental justice – is often underscored. According to some scholars, environmental disasters receive increasing attention when they impact white, higher-income communities or neighbourhoods. News media tend to treat members of Indigenous communities as ‘un-people’, unimportant and, therefore, unworthy of coverage. See also Alia Valerie, “Un/Covering the North”, *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33-34 (2006), 179-198.

<sup>18</sup> See Seo Hyunjin, Kim Ji Young, and Yang Sung-Un, “Global Activism and New Media”, *Public Relations Review*, 35.2 (2009); Derek Moscato, “Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism. A Framing Analysis of Canada’s #IdleNoMore movement”, *Media and Communication*, 4.2 (2016); Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate. Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Napoli: Loffredo Editore, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, eds., *The Language of Social Media. Identity and Community on the Internet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

structures”.<sup>20</sup> Among such social networking platforms, Twitter has become an extremely popular object of study for social scientists in a variety of contexts due to its open nature: any user can interact with anyone else, the content created on the platform is public by default and can be easily downloaded.<sup>21</sup> While not being representative of the general public, Twitter does provide a public arena for discussion, opinion sharing and persuasion.<sup>22</sup>

With its 330 million monthly active users,<sup>23</sup> Twitter is one of the most widely used micro-blogging and social networking services. It is based on the concept of expressing ideas and opinions in less than 280 characters, which makes posts extremely condensed messages that are presented in reverse chronological order as a flux of content.<sup>24</sup> Such narratives are not necessarily interactive since, on Twitter, connections between users “are not bidirectional, but they reflect an individual’s attention to others, who may or may not reciprocate connection or attention”.<sup>25</sup> Tweets allow users to show their interest in specific topics, express their opinions, spread information and news, engage in discussions, and seek alliances. The other distinctive feature of the platform is that it allows users to create the so-called hashtags by using the # symbol followed by a word or phrase. Hashtags can be employed to follow any topic, in fact they can be seen as “an emergent convention for labelling the topic of a micro-post and a form of metadata incorporated into posts”.<sup>26</sup> Over time, the digital linguistic practice of hashtagging has gained not only public awareness but also an official status, and hashtags have become conversation markers and indexing tools to store, search for, and collect information on Twitter.<sup>27</sup> Since hashtags can be seen as “topical markers, an indication to the context of the tweet or as the core idea expressed in the tweet”,<sup>28</sup> they are regularly used to contribute to a topic by adding similar or related content. Trending topics are also added to the homepage to monitor the mechanisms of hashtag popularity in real time. Interestingly, hashtags have recently spread to other platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth, which signals the degree of popularity reached by such a practice.

Hashtags are also widely employed to create campaigns. Through hashtags, Twitter users are allowed to cluster their tweets around a single issue or focus, which is an extremely useful function for activists. In fact, the term ‘hashtag activism’ (that was first used by *New York Times* media columnist David Carr in 2012) – refers to the users’ ability to streamline their messages on the platform, thus launching campaigns. Hashtag campaigning can be viewed as the act of fighting for or supporting a cause that is advocated through social media, “to create awareness around vital issues in the offline world or the online world via social media. Therefore, it has changed the way people can have their

<sup>20</sup> Seargeant and Tagg, *The Language of Social Media*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Felix Gaisbauer et al., “Ideological Differences in Engagement in Public Debate on Twitter”, *PLoS ONE*, 16.3 (2021), e0249241, available at <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0249241>, accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, public debate has been described as a series of “communication processes through which publics are constituted and within which opinions on public affairs are formed” (Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* (New York: Sage, 1992), largely invoking the analogy of a big town meeting. Modern communication technologies and the advent of social media have, indeed, enabled the enlargement of public consciousness and engagement, making the above-mentioned analogy become a digital reality.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://zephoria.com/twitter-statistics-top-ten/>, accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Following Zappavigna’s definition, Twitter is “a form of length limited service (hence ‘micro’) communication using a social networking service”. Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media. How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 27.

<sup>25</sup> Stine Lomborg, *Social Media, Social Genres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 101.

<sup>26</sup> Michele Zappavigna, “Ambient Affiliation. A Linguistic Perspective on Twitter”, *Journal of New Media and Society*, 13.5 (2011), 790.

<sup>27</sup> Amira Hanafi El Zohiery, “Hashtag Campaigning as an Act of Resistance”, *Hermes Journals*, 10.1 (2021), 9-46.

<sup>28</sup> Oren Tsur and Ari Rappoport, “What’s in a Hashtag? Content-based Prediction of the Spread of Ideas in Microblogging Communities”, *Conference Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Web Search and Web Data Mining* (Seattle, 2012), 644.

voice expressed”.<sup>29</sup> Users employ hashtags to achieve and propagate two concepts that seem central in digital communication: empowerment and freedom.<sup>30</sup> Although several researchers have termed hashtag campaigning as ‘armchair activism done by the residents of the keyboards’ or ‘slacktivism’,<sup>31</sup> as a sort of void online effort, a growing body of scientific literature notes that hashtag campaigning is increasingly used and regarded as complementary to offline efforts.<sup>32</sup> In fact, according to some views, in order to affect society, social movements need to bridge the gap between online and offline contexts, while further facilitating (both online and offline) forms of citizen participation.<sup>33</sup> In other words, social media can be said to support and empower individuals and activists (rather than centralised organisations), making online communication pivotal for contemporary movements.<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, “[t]hrough online social media, social movement actors have a new means to disseminate self-representations that are not subjected to mass media filters. Activists are able to break through preconceived notions or agendas that might provide greater resistance in traditional media spaces”.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, social media allow activists to reach out wider audience who appears more engaged in political activity thus creating a shared social movement identity which is defined by collaboration and co-creation.<sup>36</sup>

A number of studies concentrating on web-genres<sup>37</sup> have specifically discussed hashtag activism on Twitter,<sup>38</sup> shedding light on how Twitter has become a public space for protest rather than a mere channel to circulate news and data. In this context, for example, hashtags can be seen as a powerful tool for fighting gender inequalities and gender-based violence,<sup>39</sup> or even responding to rape culture.<sup>40</sup> Communication on Twitter allows users to cluster, rebroadcast, modify or reply to messages, fostering ongoing dialogue and conversation, which makes it perfectly appropriate for digital activism.

In the Canadian context, a case of hashtag activism that gained great public relevance was the #IdleNoMore movement, launched in 2012 by an Indigenous activist and law student who wanted to make known how a bill passed by the Canadian government would negatively affect First Nations

<sup>29</sup> Hanafi El Zohiery, “Hashtag Campaigning”, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Massimiliano Demata, Dermot Heaney, and Susan C. Herring, eds., *Language and Discourse in Social Media. New Challenges, New Approaches (Altre Modernità 2018)*.

<sup>31</sup> Marco Bastos, Dan Mercea, and Andrea Baronchelli, “The Geographic Embedding of Online Echo Chambers”, *PLoS ONE*, 13.11 (2018), available at <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0206841>, accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Sylvester Ofori-parku and Derek Moscato, “Hashtag Activism as a Form of Political Action. A Qualitative Analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign in Nigerian, UK, and U.S. Press”, *International Journal of Communication*, 12 (2018), 2480-2502.

<sup>33</sup> This convergence of online and offline activism is regarded as a key aspect determining the success of the 2010 Tunisian uprisings (see Merlyna Lim, “Framing Bouazizi. ‘White lies’, hybrid network, and collective/connective action in the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising”, *Journalism*, 14.7 (2013), 921-941).

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Kessler, “Amplifying Individual Impact. Social Media’s Emerging Role in Activism”, in Tristan Anne Borer, ed., *Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights. Mediating Suffering* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 205-215.

<sup>35</sup> Moscato, “Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism”, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Sasha Costanza-Chock, “Transmedia Mobilization in the Popular Association of the Oaxacan Peoples, Los Angeles”, in Bart Cammaerts, Mattoni Alice and Patrick McCurdy, eds., *Mediation and Protest Movements* (Chicago IL: Intellect Books, 2013), 95-113.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Dillon and Barbara Gushrowski, “Genres and the Web. Is the Home Page the First Digital Genre?”, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 51.2 (2000), 202-205. Saeed Mehrpour and Mohaddeseh Mehrzad, “A Comparative Genre Analysis of English Business E-mails Written by Iranians and Native English Speakers”, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 3.12 (2013): 2250-2261.

<sup>38</sup> Among them Tracey J. Hayes, “#MyNYPD. Transforming Twitter into a Public Place for Protest”, *Computers and Composition*, 43 (2017), 118-134.

<sup>39</sup> Sherri Williams, “Digital Defense. Black Feminists Resist Violence with Hashtag Activism”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 15.2 (2015), 341-344. Rosemary Clark, “Hope in a Hashtag. The Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed”, *Feminist Media Studies* (2016), 1471-5902.

<sup>40</sup> Carrie Rentschler, “#Safetytipsforladies. Feminist Twitter Takedowns of Victim Blaming”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 15.2 (2015), 353-356.

peoples. Through hashtags, Twitter users linked media stories about the same topic, fostered commentary, invited people to flash mobs, seminars, and protest events, while supporting activists and community leaders. Twitter has, since then, increasingly become a prominent venue for online activism, which makes it a privileged focus of interest for scientific investigation.

### 3. Methodology and corpus design

In order to analyse the online communication concerning Grassy Narrows as emerging from Twitter, a hybrid methodology integrating tools pertaining to quantitative analysis with frameworks for qualitative analysis was adopted. Both approaches are meant to uncover relationships between language and social context, paying attention to the discursive strategies employed, as they are “systematic ways of using language [...] at different levels of linguistic organization and complexity to achieve a certain social, political, psychological or linguistic aim”.<sup>41</sup> All texts and discourses bear the mark of power, defining and maximising or minimising issues.<sup>42</sup> In fact, in any society, “there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse”.<sup>43</sup> While discourse practices constitute society and culture (which are, of course, constituted by them in return),<sup>44</sup> every instance of language use makes its contribution to reproducing and/or transforming society and culture. If then discourse does ideological work, providing specific representations of events, realities, identities, especially collective identities of groups and communities, as in the case of Grassy Narrows, quantitative and qualitative analysis of social media discourse – in the form of tweets – can shed light on how collective opinions are shaped and wider support for social causes is gained.

With their ability to represent experience, express and amplify ideas and opinions, while negotiating interpersonal relationships and alignments, tweets and hashtags can be viewed as a form of social practice, attracting increasingly more activists or ordinary people who wish to engage in public debate through social media.<sup>45</sup> The platform provides, indeed, an opportunity for a new wave of social and environmental activism, to boost visible action on critical issues.

In this context, framing – as a broad communication theory – appears crucial. Apart from how cases are approached, construed or silenced, the amount of attention given to them, the perspective included in mainstream media discourse, social media and hashtag campaigns can set the boundaries for public debate, by determining salience and directing attention to some specific issues. In other words, events are framed, selecting some aspects and making them more salient.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, public debate has been traditionally framed by mainstream media: the way news is framed “represents an

<sup>41</sup> Michael Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination. Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 386. See also Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis”, in T. A. van Dijk, ed., *Discourse Studies. A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (London: Sage, 1997), 258-284.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, micro-blogging, in itself, can be thought of as a form of social practice, adopting the lens offered by Systemic Functional Linguistics (M.A.K. Halliday and Christian Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold, 2004). In terms of meta-functions, hashtags can be said to always fulfil the textual function by organizing a tweet as a communicative unit of meaning or discourse; the ideational function indicates the topic or ‘aboutness’ of the tag; the interpersonal function is realised through the # symbol construing and enacting relationships, affiliations and alignments, while allowing the user to adopt a stance. Far from being mere discourse markers, hashtags allow Twitter users to engage in a more vigorous debate, serving as ideological tools to facilitate group inclusion or exclusion and to emphasize a polarization of point of views, thus contributing to public debate and policy.

<sup>46</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing. Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm”, *Journal of Communication*, 43 (1993), 51-58.

imprint of power, calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others”.<sup>47</sup> According to many views,<sup>48</sup> frames have the tremendous power to shape the way in which we interpret certain issues and events, thus ‘priming’ values differentially: “[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”.<sup>49</sup>

This paper examines how Twitter users may be framing issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows First Nation, possibly changing the portrayal conveyed by mainstream media,<sup>50</sup> investigating what aspects are made most salient through hashtag campaigning, to get insight into how they influence broader debates about Indigenous rights and living conditions in Canada. Drawing on the assumption that Indigenous communities may suffer from un/under-representation – the media acting as a filter, sometimes silencing environmental disputes and inequities – microblogging is meant to be an online response, a means of self-determination and self-management, which allows users to autonomously frame events related to the community.

Frames can be described as powerful rhetorical tools that induce us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways.<sup>51</sup> They appear as a rhetorical process whereby communicators construct a point of view that encourages specific interpretations of a given fact or event by other actors involved in communication.<sup>52</sup> Due to its very nature, framing analysis has been often used to investigate mediated communication and social movements,<sup>53</sup> which tend to construe meanings and beliefs aligning them with the frames of the expected/desired participants. In fact, by highlighting some aspects of reality and/or events, frames define problems, ‘diagnose’ causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies.<sup>54</sup> Some steps, in particular, determine participants’ involvement and mobilization through frames:

- diagnostic framing for the identification of a problem and assignment of blame;
- prognostic framing to suggest strategies and solutions to a problem;
- motivational framing that serves as a call for action.

When such steps are covered, proper frames are created and, potentially, changes in society can be achieved.<sup>55</sup>

The corpus analysed for this study was created extrapolating three hashtag streams – specifically #grassynarrows, #freegrassy, #FreeGrassyNarrows – from Twitter micro-blogging site. Overall, 608 tweets were downloaded, totalling 137,492 tokens, through the Premium Search Tweets: Full-Archive

<sup>47</sup> Moscato, “Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism”, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Jim A. Kuypers, “Framing Analysis. How to Conduct a Rhetorical Framing Study of the News”, in J.A. Kuypers, ed., *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009). Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice. Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge, England: CUP, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Entman, “Framing”, 51.

<sup>50</sup> For an investigation of the different portrayals of the case of Grassy Narrows as emerging from national newspapers vis-à-vis local newspapers in Canada, see Maria Cristina Nisco, “Environmental Racism in Canadian News Discourse. The Case of Grassy Narrows”, *Anglistica AION*, 22.1 (2018), 25-43.

<sup>51</sup> Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism*.

<sup>52</sup> See Jim A. Kuypers, *Bush’s War. Media Bias and Justification for War in a Terrorist Age* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization”, in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, Sidney G. Tarrow, eds., *From Structure to Action: Social Movement Participation Across Culture* (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1988), 197-217.

<sup>54</sup> Kuypers, “Framing Analysis”, 182.

<sup>55</sup> David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Framing Processes and Social Movements. An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000), 611-639.

API.<sup>56</sup> The reason for selecting the specific tags was that, at the time of writing, they were the ‘trending’ hashtags connected to the seed terms ‘Grassy Narrows’.

#### 4. Analysing the corpus

For this study, the following research questions were formulated in order to discover frames:

1. How do Twitter users create and negotiate discourses about Grassy Narrows and the main events connected to the community?
2. What themes and frames do users mostly resort to in order to enact practices of resistance through online communication?
3. To what extent does communication via Twitter adhere to the three core framing steps that determine participant mobilization?

In an attempt to respond to these research questions, some framing devices that may have been used – key words, metaphors, labels, that shed light on how some themes are framed – will be specifically looked at, and some illustrative examples from the corpus will be provided with the aim of highlighting the way events related to Grassy Narrows are discursively and linguistically expressed.

The first step of analysis was carried out adopting a quantitative approach. The corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine,<sup>57</sup> which allowed the extraction of single words or multi-words typical of the corpus under investigation, sorted by frequency. Searching for frequency within a corpus can be an indicator of markedness, and frequency counts can be used (with supporting contextual information) to unveil overt/covert discursive features.<sup>58</sup> Once retrieved, the terms showing the highest saliency (with regard to frequency) were grouped into thematic categories according to their semantic similarity, based on the assumption that they could provide a snapshot of the main discursive features in the *FreeGrassy* corpus and uncover its discursive specificity. This initial phase of corpus examination was followed by a comprehensive analysis of the context of occurrence of salient lexical items present in the word list through concordance analysis. Viewing the stretch of text where some specific terms appear can be extremely helpful in revealing common patterns and themes within the corpus, consequently, defining its overall focus or topic. Extrapolation of concordance lines may, in fact, have the benefit of indicating the direction to pursue in terms of analysis as guided by the corpus.

Concordances were the starting point of a qualitative analysis based on a meticulous, close reading of the great majority of the tweets comprised in the *FreeGrassy* corpus, paying attention to the most recurrent themes persisting in the tweets collected, which allowed an inductive examination of how they were framed in discourse.<sup>59</sup> Collectively the frames emerging from the tweets represented perspectives and agendas that somehow ‘competed’ with mainstream portrayals of Grassy Narrows and the Canadian Government. Three macro-discourses or frames could be identified, as listed below:

- Mercury poisoning and health crisis;
- Healing;
- Justice and resistance.

<sup>56</sup> The Twitter API is a pre-defined interface with which developers can communicate with the Twitter platform. A number of different parameters can be queried – the object tweet, language, geolocation (but some information is not available for all tweets). The Premium Search Tweets: Full-Archive API provides you with tweets since the first one posted in 2006. Tweets are matched and sent back to you based on the query you specify in your request.

<sup>57</sup> Adam Kilgarriff et al., “The Sketch Engine”, in Williams Geoffrey and Sandra Vessier, eds., *Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX International Congress. EURALEX 2004* (Université de Bretagne-Sud: Lorient, 2004), 105-116.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Baker, *Sociolinguistics and Corpus Linguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2010). See also Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: A&C Black, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Please note that any inaccurate spelling/grammar forms or generally unconventional language features contained in the quoted tweets are all authentic. The author has not modified the excerpts in any way.

Mercury poisoning is certainly the most frequent topic in the tweets. Although almost six decades have gone by since the disaster of Grassy Narrows gained public attention and was then acknowledged as such, numerous tweets still frame the debate recalling the unprecedented health crisis that was caused by the river system mercury poisoning.

[1] Even though 90% of the members of the Grassy Narrows community experience mercury poisoning symptoms, no one will take responsibility for it or acknowledge that impact on these individuals #FreeGrassyNarrows

[2] How has this been allowed to go on for so long? It's a national disaster and human rights travesty. Why has the government not brought clean water to all our First Nations and why do families still need to send away their children to attend school #grassynarrows

[3] The ppl of #GrassyNarrows deserve compensation. Mercury poisoning in the #water and the fish impact ppl in every generation, from elders to newborns. All happening under your watch! #freegrassy

The tweets included in this sub-group are linguistically construed through a relevant number of lexical items bearing a very negative semantic prosody – this is the case of ‘disaster’, ‘travesty’, ‘toxic’, ‘poisoning’, ‘death(s)’, ‘destruction’, ‘social catastrophe’, ‘illnesses’, ‘genocide’, ‘neglect’, and so forth. Twitter users tend to frame their posts about Grassy Narrows highlighting the environmental disaster that destroyed both the eco-system and the life of the community who is still paying the highest price in terms of medical conditions and impairments resulting from contamination. Despite the fact that most of the collected tweets mention mercury pollution and the cleaning-up of the river system, some additional references are also made to industrial logging and mining permits, namely further potential cases of abuse by the Canadian government and corporations in general. Indeed, great emphasis is given to the government’s responsibilities for its lack of action over the years, despite its promises and plans to clean up the river system.

What surfaces very clearly, within the tweets relating to this topic, is the overt relation between mercury poisoning and environmental racism:

[4] I better start seeing some #nopipelines and #grassynarrows with these #NoCoalAB hashtags. Says a lot about Canadians that they only speak up about the environment when the government is about to fuck with the parts they use.

[5] The #1 Canadian example of environmental racism is: #GrassyNarrows

[6] Diabetes is a disease of #colonialism. I'm sure there are experts who will disagree w me, but when your lands have been stolen & healthy traditional foods are no longer accessible or poisoned & not safe to eat how can it not be? #GrassyNarrows

[7] Bodies on the ground, bodies on the line, bodies in solidarity, bodies in opposition, to the indifference of the Canadian state. Bodies demanding to be counted, heard, seen. Justice for Grassy Narrows. No one is illegal on stolen land #freegrassy #GrassyNarrowsRiverRun

[8] Denying people clean water and turning your backs on the illnesses your industries have wrought IS genocide. Justice for Grassy! #freegrassy

[9] People from @FreeGrassy crawling to the Department of Indigenous Affairs. This is what that make us do, this is how we feel – that we have to crawl and beg for our rights. #FreeGrassy

Racism remains the major lens through which a great number of tweets frame Grassy Narrows, which is depicted as the first instance of Canadian racism, white colonial violence, and one of the worst cases of neglect in Canadian history.

Moving to the second recurrent topic, healing appears as one of the major frames through which users interested in or advocating for the case of Grassy Narrows discursively construe their tweets. Community members tirelessly campaign to acknowledge the fact that federal and provincial governments as well as corporations are to be considered guilty of recklessly disregarding Indigenous lives and environment. Above all, they urge the construction of a facility or treatment centre to allow residents of Grassy Narrows to stay close to home while receiving treatment, healthcare and assistance.

[10] We are on a healing path for our people and the forest is our treatment centre

[11] Mercury poisoning has had a dreadful impact on everyone, from young people to elders. We call upon both the Federal and Provincial government to make this centre a reality. #FreeGrassy

[12] Community members urge Ottawa to honour pledge to build mercury treatment facility for Grassy Narrows - #GrassyNarrows

[13] BREAKING: #GrassyNarrows First Nation has secured a contract from Canada to provide full funding to build a Mercury Care Home in the community! A big victory but there is still lots of work to do. Let's keep supporting!

This sub-group of tweets often features the use of metaphors to make the issue more relatable to other Twitter users, while enhancing tweets with powerful and figurative imagery. As instance [10] clearly shows, the forest is equated to Grassy Narrows people's treatment centre; nature and the land are the symbol of the people's healing process. As a matter of fact, in 2020, the federal government signed an agreement to build an on-reserve care home to serve the people who were still suffering from mercury poisoning and provide them with necessary support, but it could hardly be viewed as a form of compensation for the devastation that the community has faced over the years. Indeed, after mercury contamination, the community became plagued with intractable problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicides. Therefore, aspects relating to the healing process are addressed with urgency, tweets pressuring public debate and policy to fund the facility and provide it with specialised equipment.

Tightly connected with the previous topics, is the third most frequent frame emerging from the corpus, namely justice and the urge for the government to compensate for what Grassy Narrows people have experienced over the last decades.

[14] The ppl of #GrassyNarrows deserve justice, not more broken promises  
They have my solidarity

[15] Why must this still be a struggle? Time to compensate all in #GrassyNarrows and figure out a sustainable future, one that does not include more destruction of the land

[16] #GrassyNarrows community members have fought for 50 years for mercury justice and four generations of Grassy Narrows people have become leaders in the growing grassroots movement for Indigenous self-determination and environmental justice.

[17] Grassy Narrows has turned a decades-long injustice into a national issue that can't be ignored. It's time to ramp up the campaign for mercury justice compensation and protect land and water from industrial logging and mining. #FreeGrassy

[18] When we stand together, anything is possible – and #GrassyNarrows is the perfect example of people power in action. Let's help support the cause and spread the word! #FreeGrassy

[19] The youth of Grassy Narrows, Canada want the river cleaned up. Help amplify their demands to #FreeGrassy from mercury poisoning.

[20] EVERYBODY EVERYBODY EVERYBODY

SIGN / SHARE / SHARE / SHARE / SHARE / SIGN THIS #GrassyNarrows

Interestingly, tweets concerning this topic seem to uncover a completely different perspective, framing events related to Grassy Narrows in more positive and powerful terms. In fact, analysis reveals that a significant number of lexical items present in the tweets included in this sub-group feature a positive semantic prosody – as shown by ‘justice’, ‘sustainable future’, ‘Indigenous self-determination’, ‘people power in action’. The imperative mood can be often found to prompt other users to do something (for instance, ‘support the cause’, ‘spread the word’, ‘sign’, ‘share’), persuading them to act. Twitter users seem to be more aware of the path followed, of the growing grassroots movement for Indigenous rights that was founded and its ability and potentiality to influence public policy. Special emphasis is also given to youth, who appear to be addressing the community crisis while being at the forefront in the struggle for Grassy Narrows.

Aligning or dis-aligning with the positions of other online interlocutors,<sup>60</sup> endorsing or dis-endorsing views on issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows, Twitter users influence broader debates about Indigenous rights and living conditions in Canada. They actively contribute to such debates by autonomously framing – and giving resonance to – events related to the community. Indeed, if tweets have a direct and mediated effect on the perceptions of public opinions (as seems to be the case),<sup>61</sup> this form of activism has the benefit of making some positions extremely visible. Due to the platform’s open design which provides users with a public arena for sharing information and opinions, interactions on Twitter can be said to come closest to what is commonly referred to as ‘public debate’. Moreover, they have the additional benefit of re-balancing some existing communication dynamics, allowing certain groups to become more expressive while embracing two pivotal concepts in social media communication, namely freedom and empowerment.

## 5. Concluding remarks

By taking into account the case of Grassy Narrows, this study seeks to contribute to current research on online practices of resistance in environmental conflicts pertaining to the Canadian context. Social media discourse can be said to hold a central role in how legal disputes are re-contextualised and framed to encourage citizens’ involvement on public policy issues.<sup>62</sup> More specifically, the way events concerning Grassy Narrows are discursively construed can certainly offer a lens to investigate how they are framed and the potential, underlying power dynamics embedded in questions of visibility and invisibility as forms of violence and institutional racism. Indeed, digital media constitute a means to engage with society’s most pressing and tricky issues to reach a more inclusive public discourse which can grant access to online communication to minority and/or stigmatised groups.

Linguistic and discursive analysis has allowed the identification of how events concerning Grassy Narrows were framed, what topics were recurrently tackled in relation to the specific case, and what frames were generated, namely how Twitter users (and the public in general) prime and are, in turn, primed to evaluate issues relating to Grassy Narrows, providing and receiving contextual cues for potential/alternative interpretations.

In the attempt to respond to the research questions that were formulated for this study, a series of points can be highlighted. In the first place, Twitter users seem to create and negotiate discourses concerning Grassy Narrows resorting to some key topics and themes: mercury poisoning and health crisis, healing, justice and resistance. Grassy Narrows is still mostly framed as Canada’s shame, and moral outrage seems extremely common in users’ posts, protesting over past and present injustices,

<sup>60</sup> See Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter* and also Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Gaisbauer et al., “Ideological Differences”.

<sup>62</sup> Girolamo Tessuto, Vijay K. Bhatia, Jan Engberg, eds., *Frameworks for Discursive Actions and Practices of the Law* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

infringement of Indigenous rights, lack of healthcare resources, and assistance for vulnerable people. Due to the very nature of tweets, users' geographical and cultural specificities could not be detected,<sup>63</sup> therefore analysis does not shed light on who actually generated the emerging frames (the user being a member of Grassy Narrows community or a member of the general public). Individual and collective moral outrage seems to surge from people's anger and frustration for the violation of ethical values, and explode in a sort of written protest on Twitter. Such feelings, however, become the glue that builds a group with a sense of solidarity, against all threats of personal and collective identities, values, and beliefs. It is, therefore, used reactively as a strategy for change and resistance.

Twitter users enact practices of resistance through digital activism which takes the shape of a series of initiatives, dissemination of news, calls for action. In fact, communication via Twitter seems to adhere to the three core framing steps that determine participants' involvement and mobilization through some specific frames. Indeed, the identification of a problem and assignment of blame (diagnostic framing) – which characterises the first sub-group of tweets focused on mercury poisoning, health crisis, and environmental racism – is followed by suggestions of strategies and solutions to the problem (prognostic framing) – with tweets regarding the healing process and the urge to build a treatment centre. As for the last step, motivational framing, a large group of tweets serve the function of calling for action, exhorting users to engage with issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows.

If Indigenous populations have experienced the violence of environmental racism through varying forms of invisibility and collective amnesia, Twitter users seem to undo and resist the power dynamics that allowed the Canadian society to selectively leave First Nations through silent abuse and social neglect. By participating to the production of discourses in the public online sphere, they provide events concerning Grassy Narrows with new meanings, creating competing narratives that affect people's perceptions and value orientations, thus altering the parameters for public debates.

In an expansion of Habermas' concept of public sphere (as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in an identifiable space),<sup>64</sup> Twitter contributes to the shaping of public opinions and allows differing stances to reach a wide audience characterised by few formal constraints. It can thus be regarded as a sort of counter-public space or sphere, a "parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs".<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> As a matter of fact, Twitter data feature two classes of geographical metadata: 1) tweet location (available when users share their location when posting), 2) account location (based on the 'home' location provided by users in their public profile). Retweets, however, cannot have a place attached to them. Such information was not taken into account because it was not shared systematically by all users.

<sup>64</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* trans. by Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), 67.



## Counternarratives of Maunakea. Crossing Digital Spaces, Claiming Ancestral Knowledge in Hawai'i

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the resistance to the proposed construction of the TMT telescope on Maunakea, exploring the legal and cultural clashes behind the protests and the strong social media presence of the Maunakea protectors. Digital activism allowed the Kū Kia'i Mauna movement to enhance the grassroots organizing and to take back the narrative of the protest, countering an overwhelming settler colonial media discourse, establishing connections across “webs, rhizomes, and rivers” with Indigenous movements worldwide. Building on the scholarly work about Hawaiian spatial practices and colonial cartography and on the intersection of storytelling and the reconstruction of the 'ike kupuna (ancestral knowledge), this article explores how Indigenous scholars and activists productively negotiated digital mediascapes to disseminate counternarratives. Finally, digitalization has enabled the creation of a Maunakea social media archive, to collect and organize multimedia materials, for the sake of research for activists and educators across the globe.

Keywords: *Indigenous, Hawai'i, Maunakea, digital activism, TMT, Hawaiian sovereignty*

### 1. A Premise

On July 15, 2019, the construction of the TMT, Thirty Meters Telescope, was scheduled to begin. Again. The largest telescope in the Northern hemisphere was planned to be built on the peak of Maunakea, the sacred mountain on the island of Hawai'i and the tallest mountain on earth if measured from the peak to the ocean floor. In Hawaiian traditions of creation, the mountain is an ancestor and shares genealogical ties with Native Hawaiians, or Kānaka Maoli.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the most sacred sites, if not the most sacred, in Hawaiian culture. For Kia'i, the guardians/protectors, there is a deep cultural responsibility to protect the mountain from desecration; it is, in fact, a genealogical duty to those who came before them and the generations who will succeed them.<sup>2</sup> From March 25, 2015, to Oct 19, 2021, in two waves of protest, tens of thousands of Kia'i camped at the base of the access road to the mountain to prevent trucks to carry materials to begin the construction.

The history of Native Hawaiians' resistance against settler colonialism dates back to the very first contact with Euro-American explorers, missionaries, and capitalists, from the end of the Eighteenth century, and it developed especially in conjunction with the overthrow of the monarchy in 1893 and then again when it became officially the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the United States in 1959. A founding moment in contemporary Native Hawaiian culture is the 1970s reawakening in resistance and activism known as

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<sup>1</sup> See Leon No'eau Peralto, “Portrait. Mauna a Wākea”, in Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua et al., eds., *A Nation Rising* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2014), 233-243. In the following pages, I will use three terms interchangeably to refer to the indigenous population of Hawai'i: Hawaiians, Native Hawaiians, and Kanaka Maoli (or Kānaka in its plural form). For issues related to the multiple spellings of Maunakea/ Mauna Kea/ Mauna a Wākea, see Puakea Nogelmeier, “Maunakea And Maunaloa Deserve Our Respect”, *Civil Beat* (2017), <https://www.civilbeat.org/2017/11/maunakea-and-maunaloa-deserve-our-respect/>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See Candace Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2021), 86-88, and Frances Nguyen, “The Pandemic Hasn't Stopped Native Hawaiians' Fight to Protect Maunakea”, *Vox* (2020) <https://www.vox.com/2020/8/7/21354619/mauna-kea-tmt-telescope-native-hawaiians>, accessed 9 November 2022.

the Hawaiian Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> The new millennium has seen several instances of conflict, clashes, and negotiations between the State and Kānaka Maoli, but the events surrounding the construction of the TMT on Maunakea are arguably the most significant, and inspiring, cultural battles of the last decades. Kānaka Maoli have been protesting the desecration of Maunakea for decades: sometimes news barely made it across the sea to the other islands, more seldomly they reached the continent and were published or broadcast on some news outlet in California. With the movement to protect Maunakea in 2019, however, the issue acquired national relevance, and it was broadcast globally, especially thanks to social media, which as the scholars Carlson and Berglund underline, “can be harnessed to disrupt public spheres, center indigenous voices, challenge political processes, and create communities of change”.<sup>4</sup> The protest on Maunakea became an opportunity to dramatize a contest between different narratives: more specifically the proliferation and dissemination of counternarratives called into question the bias and interest of dominant voices and media platforms that had defended an aura of reliability and objectivity up to that point. The exceptional convergence of online activism with on-the-ground strategies and actions, adds another level of investigation into the potentialities of digital cultures, but also on the political significance of *actual bodies occupying actual space*, which was at the very core of a few pivotal moments of the protests, and in a very concrete sense contributed to its overall transformative impact.

The events surrounding the Maunakea conflict directly invoke crucial questions about the status of Hawai’i, the limits of democracy, the dark side of scientific discourse, and of course about Indigenous rights, issues that are at once exquisitely place-specific, and yet global. In particular, in the mind of a white European like myself, this conflict seems to activate a series of binary oppositions that invite further scrutiny. On the one hand, a progressive tradition in Euro-American thought has taught me to treasure scientific modernity, secularity, and progress and to be skeptical of religious beliefs taken as a guide in civic and political life, and to question cultural essentialism. On the other hand, that very tradition is extremely responsive to issues of social justice, of indigenous rights, rights of self-determination, and it fiercely defends minorities and environmental rights against corporate greed and the “rule of the majority”. On a separate but related level, astronomy seems to be a wonderfully “noble” endeavor, aimed at scrutinizing the unknown wonders of the universe, in an attempt to understand its laws and our meaning in it. However, framing astronomy, or scientific research tout court, as a purely intellectual effort may prove profoundly misleading. It means to dismiss its capitalist dimension, constituted of massive capital investments, speculations and revenues, and the acknowledgment that in this case it is mostly linked to a Department at the University of Hawai’i, which despite being a public State University, like many other research universities across the globe, often acts nowadays as a greedy corporation.<sup>5</sup>

The protectors of Maunakea stress the significance Maunakea has for Hawaiian people across history, and its status as a sacred place. In fact, at a foundational level, most Kanaka arguments are rooted in an understanding of Hawai’i as a colonized country: its history of colonization is unerasable from any honest attempt to understand its current situation. Who gets to set the rules in your own home? Who gets to say what is sacred, or how to care for the land? Who gets to control the resources

<sup>3</sup> See the ground-breaking, now classic work by Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter. Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999 [1993])

<sup>4</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund, eds., *Indigenous People Rise Up. The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers U.P.), 8.

<sup>5</sup> See Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “At Rest for the Moment: Update on Mauna Kea Anti-TMT Movement” (2016), [www.indiancountrytoday.com](http://www.indiancountrytoday.com), accessed 9 November 2022. “From the start of the TMT project, private and public funds have been paying the exorbitant salaries and benefits of several individuals associated with TMT in the range of \$200,000 to \$275,000 annually. Also, millions of dollars in contracts have been awarded to an exclusive group of private businesses. Only a select few companies specialize in this type of observatory design, construction, and technology”.

of the land? And finally, in a mainstream media environment dominated by big players and powerful corporations, how do you get your voice across, how do you transform the narrative, how do you claim it back?

This article aims at looking back to the more than 300 days of continuous resistance at the high elevation protest site (6,632ft) on the access road to Maunakea, briefly exploring the legal and cultural clashes behind the protests – e.g. the alleged binary opposition between technology and nature, modernity and tradition, private and public interests – and highlighting the strong social media presence of the Maunakea protectors. Digital activism allowed the Kū Kia’i Mauna movement, the “guardians of the mountain,” not only to enhance the grassroots organizing, but to take back the narrative of the protest, countering a simplifying and overwhelming settler colonial media discourse, while also establishing powerful connections across “webs, rhizomes, and rivers”<sup>6</sup> with Indigenous movements worldwide (e.g. #IdleNoMore, #NoDAPL) and borrowing digital strategies from other marginalized communities (e.g. #BLM). This article will build on the scholarly work about Hawaiian spatial practices and colonial cartography and on the intersection of storytelling, language revitalization, and the reconstruction of the ‘ike kupuna (ancestral knowledge).<sup>7</sup> It will follow Hearne’s insights exploring how Indigenous scholars and activist productively negotiated digital mediascapes “reimagining the digital as a site of possibility”.<sup>8</sup> Finally, while this specific conflict is still not quite over, digitalization has enabled the creation of a shifting Maunakea social media archive, to collect and organize multimedia and multilingual materials, for the sake of historiography and research, for Kānaka Maoli across the Pacific and the US mainland, and for activists and educators across the globe.

## 2. Interconnectedness

Currently the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the USA, the archipelago is the locus of a history as a sovereign nation, the Hawaiian Kingdom, from the unification of the Islands under King Kamehameha I in 1810 when the island of Kaua’i passed under his rule. Then a colonial history, after the coup in 1893 by businessmen and American landowners backed by the US Navy, when the beloved Queen Lili’uokalani was overthrown. The archipelago became a US businessmen-backed Republic (1894-98), then an incorporated territory (1900), despite great resistance, petitions, and legal actions by Native Hawaiians and by a segment of American citizens and politicians.<sup>9</sup> As scholar and activist Haunani-Kay Trask highlighted, “we suffered a unilateral redefinition of our homeland and our people, a displacement and dispossession in our own country. In familial terms, our mother (and thus our heritage and our inheritance) was taken from us. We were orphaned in our land”.<sup>10</sup> In 1959 Hawai’i became officially the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the United States.

Circulation and contact are central to many aspects of the archipelago’s cultural history: circulation around and across the Pacific Ocean by the indigenous people, then from Europe and from the U.S., as the first colonization of the island took place throughout the nineteenth century, and then primarily from Asia, when many laborers came to Hawai’i mostly to work the land. But circulation rarely happens in a neutral environment: more often, there are undeniable structures of inequality, those who hold power, and those who challenge it. Despite the fact that Hawai’i is often depicted as a multicultural paradise, it is also, remarkably, the arena for critical battles around indigenous rights,

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Hearne, “Native to the Device. Thoughts on Digital Indigenous Studies”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 29.1 (2017), 3-26.

<sup>7</sup> See Marie Alohalani Brown, *Ka Po’e Mo’o Akua. Hawaiian Reptilian Water Deities* (Manoa, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Hearne, “Native to the Device”, 9.

<sup>9</sup> See Noenoe Silva, *Aloha Betrayed. Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 16.

state rights, and de-colonization. Whereas commonly we understand the conflict in Hawai‘i as framed by the opposition between Kānaka Maoli and white colonizers, many critics complicate this dichotomy by including a third community, which is also the most conspicuous: settlers of color.<sup>11</sup>

Following iconic Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask, Candace Fujikane is among the leading scholars of this issue. Fujikane, born in Hawai‘i of Japanese ancestry, acknowledges the central role of settlers of color in the perpetuation of colonialism, and their very presence on the islands as a product of the colonial enterprise. She argues therefore for the necessity that settlers actively engage in the process of defending Hawaiian rights against the settler state as allies. For the scholar, “the conditions of settler colonialism require an expansiveness in articulating the *simultaneity of overlapping positionalities*”.<sup>12</sup> Fujikane highlights that settlers of color in Hawai‘i are always already simultaneously positioned, as both subjugated by settler state power, but on the other hand as settlers who often unwittingly support the state in its colonial practices: “[w]hen 65 percent of the ‘i State Legislature is constituted by Asian settlers who are making harmful decisions that undermine Kanaka Maoli traditional and customary practices and environmental protections, we have to recognize the millennia of mālama‘āina (caring for the land) that enabled Kānaka to identify the laws of the elements”.<sup>13</sup>

In her latest work, *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future*, Fujikane moves from two related issues in Hawai‘i today: the first, a political struggle between Indigenous rights and the power of the State, that was mostly visible recently around the proposal to build the TMT on Maunakea. The second has to do with environmental protection, real estate speculation, and climate change in Hawaii. Clearly the two issues are interrelated, and they sometimes can be understood as a conflict between capitalism and indigenous way of life. Fujikane’s intervention in the scholarship about Hawaiian cartographies may provide some crucial information to better contextualize the protest on and about Maunakea, and especially the role that maps played in the legal case surrounding the TMT. The scholar and activist asks us “How are lands mapped as having an ontology – a life, a will, a desire, and an agency – of their own? How can such cartographies help us to grow a decolonial love for lands, seas, and skies that will help to renew abundance on this earth?”<sup>14</sup> As she argues, cartography as a methodology is critical to growing intimate relationships with ‘āina (lands and waters) in ways necessary to our planetary future.

She uses the term “critical settler cartographies” to refer to a methodology of critiquing settler colonial maps and articulating economies of abundance, as a necessary strategy to challenge dominant Western epistemological formations and rethink society and our relationship with the environment. Critical settler cartography is for Fujikane an embodied land-based practice that “exposes the grandiose claims, contradictions, erasures, and ideological interests that drive settler colonial cartography”.<sup>15</sup> In late capitalist economies, the state and the developers fracture and isolate the land into smaller and smaller lots until they can claim that the land has no longer any cultural significance or ecological continuities. As in the case of Maunakea, the settler state cartographically makes abundant indigenous lands *appear* to be wastelands and then carries out the actual *wastelanding* through industrial development. Such strategies of mapping and conceptualizing the land aim at delimiting and domesticating Indigenous places and their significance precisely because the seizure of land is constitutive of occupying and settler states. “In Hawai‘i, settler colonial depictions of the land

<sup>11</sup> On the flawed understanding that Kānaka Maoli constitute a “race issue” in Hawai‘i see Haunani-Kay Trask, “Settlers of Color and ‘Immigrant’ Hegemony”, *Amerasia Journal*, 26.2 (2000), 1-24.

<sup>12</sup> Candace Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. For a thorough study of how Hawaiian leaders selectively appropriated Western ideas and technology – also with regards to mapping the land – to both transform and give continuity to traditional concepts of Hawaiian statecraft in the kingdom, focusing on agency and on “‘Ōiwi optics” rather than imitations of foreign models, see also Kamanamaikalani Beamer, *No Mākou Ka Mana: Liberating the Nation* (Kamehameha Publishing, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Fujikane, *Mapping*, 17.

as ‘lying in waste’ were aimed at seizing political control over both people and land and erasing a vast Kanaka Maoli knowledge base”.<sup>16</sup> When settlers’ cartographies of Maunakea indicate the peak as a “waste land”, or when they identify it as the perfect location for the largest telescope on earth, they ignore for example its rich historical, cultural, and spiritual significance, but also its crucial role as the location of five aquifer systems on the island of Hawai’i.<sup>17</sup>

In her research on the scholarship about 19<sup>th</sup> century legal documents, Fujikane came across the term “mo’o’āina”, and it is via this concept that I would like to move towards considerations regarding digital activism. “Mo’o’āina are the small land divisions, part of a larger land base, genealogically connected to one another”, and “what is deeply telling and beautiful about maps of mo’o’āina is that they are defined by their relationality with that which lies on their edges, borders that are not boundaries of separation but seams of relationality”.<sup>18</sup> Mo’o’āina is a principle that structures ‘Ōiwi cartographies of resurgence through the restoration of interconnected waterways: “Kanaka practitioners based their own maps on centuries of kilo practices evident in ‘ike kupuna (ancestral knowledge) of Mauna a Wākea”.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the maps produced by the settler state, also in the legal battles around the construction of the TMT, these relational cartographies highlight varied ecosystems spread along the land and crossed by vast arteries of surface and subterranean waterways. Following this understanding of land as an *interconnected* network, we can realize how a harmful event in one place ripples out to all others, and by the same principle, a restorative change catalyzes far-reaching and often unexpected forms of revitalization elsewhere.

Alongside mo’o’āina, another fundamental concept to understand Pacific Indigenous epistemologies of spatiality and interconnectedness is the notion of wā (or vā), a relational space/time, that indicates the social and spiritual relations between people. Much scholarship has been produced on this concept, especially with regard to the Pasifika cultures of Samoa and Tonga.<sup>20</sup> Samoan author Albert Wendt, in a discussion about traditional tatauing, wrote that:

Important to the Samoan view of reality is the concept of Va or Wa in Maori and Japanese. Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships/the contexts change. [...] A well-known Samoan expression is ‘ia teu le va.’ Cherish/nurse/care for the va, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism: who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of va, relationships.<sup>21</sup>

Here the relational space of vā organically links the individual to a context, a community, and connects people to a relationship with place. Most importantly, this concept stresses the ancestral responsibility to actively care, the agency to nurture a relationship with place. Notions of relationality and interconnectedness are clearly reminiscent of the way cyberspace and social media work, and both

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>20</sup> Among the most often cited authors who discussed vā is Albert Wendt, in *Out of the Vaive, the Deadwater. A Writer’s Early Life* (Wellington, NZ: Bridget Williams Books, 2015). See also Tevita O. Ka’ili, *Marking Indigeneity. The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations* (Tucson, AZ: U. of Arizona P., 2017); I’Uogafa Tuagalu “Heuristics of the Vā”, *AlterNative An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 4.1 (2008), 108-126, Melani Anae, “Teu Le Va. Samoan Relational Ethics”, *Knowledge Cultures*, 4.3 (2016), 117-130; and Stephen Garner and Terry Pouono, “The Digital Vā. Teu Le Vā in Online Spaces”, *Cursor* (2021), <https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/33f0jhi2/release/2>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Wendt, “Tatauing the Post-colonial Body”, originally in *Span*, 42-43 (1996), 15-29, now online <https://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/wendt/tatauing.asp>, accessed 9 November 2022.

these ideas invite an epistemological shift, both in cartography and in the way discursive formations relate to power structures. In fact, Indigenous scholars have applied the notion of *vā* to the development of digital space, as an opportunity to indigenize the digital environment, enriching it with Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and centering it around communal learning, a practice so crucial to Pasifika cultures, in the acknowledgment that “the digital space must not impoverish, distil and strip the rich cultural significance of Pasifika ways of knowing and being”.<sup>22</sup>

This idea of interconnectedness questions Euro-American epistemologies of *individuation* and *separation*, not unlike the *mo’o’aina* highlighted by Fujikane’s work. Just like the reconceptualization of cartography in an indigenous perspective, social media may function in fact as a “tool to articulate counter narrative and to contest selective or dismissive framing by mainstream media”.<sup>23</sup> A foundational moment in the new configuration of activism and digital media may be located in the Arab Spring movement of 2010-11 across much of the Arab world, when, in the face of governmental crackdown, youth and activists:

advertised protests through Facebook events, giving live updates to each other on law enforcement via Twitter, and shared the videos of their battles on YouTube for the world to see. These tactics changed how resistance was done. They showed how effective social media and the internet could be in energizing an entire movement, and how quickly massive numbers of people could be mobilized. This new realm of organizing opened a new battleground between activists and the governments they organized against.<sup>24</sup>

A similarly dramatic change took place in indigenous communities in North America in the winter of 2012 thanks to the *Idle No More* movement through Canada and across the world.<sup>25</sup>

In “Native to the Device” the scholar Hearne follows a set of three metaphors, that deeply resonate with Fujikane’s insight, to describe social media practices by Indigenous activists and youth, “the web, the rhizome, the river”.<sup>26</sup> She borrows the notions from critic Susan Bernardin, who expands the vocabulary for describing the Indigenous digital to include waterways, arguing that “images of rivers and their deltas express the flow, trade connectivity, and networked structure of the digital and the Internet”.<sup>27</sup> For Bernardin, rivers, spiderwebs and rhizomes are ways that Indigenous women activists have explicitly connected spiritual and tribal frameworks to the fundamental forms and structures of digital media.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Pu’uhonua o Pu’uhuluhulu: Education on Maunakea

Understanding the conflict on Maunakea requires in itself an exercise in interconnectedness and intersectional inquiry, because, like many instances we discussed earlier, even in this case it may appear, on the surface, that there are two sides, two main actors: the Kanaka protectors on one side,

<sup>22</sup> Dion Enari and Jacoba Matapo, “The Digital *Vā*. Pasifika Education Innovation During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *MAI. A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship*, 9.4 (2020), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Candis Callison and Alfred Hermida, “Dissent and Resonance. #IdleNoMore as an Emergent Middle Ground”, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 10.4 (2015), p. 696.

<sup>24</sup> Kawena Kapahua, “Stories from the Mauna, Ku’u One Hānau”, *Biography*, 43.3 (2020), 575-581, here 578.

<sup>25</sup> Carlson and Berglund, “Introduction”, *Indigenous People Rise Up*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Hearne, “Native”, 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> On gender perspectives about Hawaiian sovereignty movement, see also Ty P. Kāwika Tengan, *Native Men Remade. Gender and Nation in Contemporary Hawaii* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2008) and Noelani Goodyear-Ka’opua, ed., *Nā Wāhine Koa. Hawaiian Women for sovereignty and Demilitarization*, (Honolulu, HI: Hawai’i U.P., 2018).

and the corporation behind the TMT on the other. In reality, beside the need to question any coherence and homogeneity within each one of these groups, we should also consider the larger society in Hawai'i, and the various economic and political groups that had an interest in the TMT construction, embodied for the sake of simplicity in the governor of Hawai'i David Ige, and the University of Hawai'i, which itself embraces radically different positioning on the issue, and that at the time held the lease for much of the land on Maunakea and on which the telescope was supposed to be built.

In 2014, the Board of Land and Natural Resources approved the \$2.4 billion TMT project, but after Construction attempts were blocked beginning the same year, and 31 protectors were arrested on April 2, 2015, the Supreme Court of Hawai'i invalidated the building permits in December 2015, ruling that the board had not followed due process. Then, in October 2018, the high court approved construction to resume, but continued protests thwarted construction progress. Like Fujikane reminds her readers, mountain lands are protected by state laws as conservation districts (because they are the source of water). However, "the 11,288 acres of the Mauna Kea Science Reserve leased by the University of Hawai'i from the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) is located over five delineated aquifer systems": what the State has branded as the "Astronomy Precinct" sits entirely above the Waimea Aquifer.<sup>29</sup>

On July 13, 2019 a group of Kia'i (protectors) gathered at the base of the Maunakea access road to stop the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope, including about thirty Kia'i who were camping non-stop overnight.<sup>30</sup> A few days later, on July 17, the governor of Hawaii David Ige issued a state of emergency, clearing a path for law enforcement to begin making arrests. According to several witnesses' report, multiple agencies arrived on the scene; there were officers brought in from other islands, Dept. of Land and National Resources, Police, Sheriff, and the National Guard. Hundreds of Kia'i gathered around their kūpuna (elders), who were sitting in front of a massive, militarized police presence dressed in riot gear and armed with chemical dispersants and a long-range acoustic device (LRAD). As journalist Frances Nguyen reports, this was for many the largest law enforcement operation to come down on Hawai'i they have ever witnessed in their lifetime. Kia'i sat in purposeful silence as 38 kūpuna, many in their 70s were arrested, zip-tied and escorted (in some cases carried) by vans away from the camp. As we will see soon, this was perceived as a watershed moment, a generational wake-up call especially for the way in which social media disseminated the images of that repression and those zip-tied kūpuna. As a response to the violence, and with clear and painful echoes for all Hawaiians residents of images from the Dakota Access Pipeline violent repression, and from the Black Lives Matter movement, thousands of Kānaka and allies across the islands reached the camp and started to organize a permanent base. The protectors on site kept watch for construction crews through windstorms, hail, and overnight temperatures that dipped well below 30 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>31</sup>

Marie Alohalani Brown, a renowned scholar and activist who was among the kūpuna (elders) arrested, writes about the camp organization:

it is important to know that it wasn't the leaders who sorted out who ran what (with the exception perhaps of the logistics tent and kapu aloha kia'i). It was an organic process—kia'i attracted to certain kuleana just kept at it, and pretty soon, others recognized them as po'o (head, as in director)...The Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu remains an incredible example of lāhui, in both the sense of nation and

<sup>29</sup> Fujikane, *Mapping*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Marie Alohalani Brown, "Aloha Wale Mauna Kea, Aloha Wale Ku'u Po'e Hoapili Kia'i ma ke Anuanu", *Biography*, 43.3 (2020), 582-587.

<sup>31</sup> Frances Nguyen, "The pandemic hasn't stopped Native Hawaiians' fight to protect Maunakea", *Vox* (2020), <https://www.vox.com/2020/8/7/21354619/mauna-kea-tmt-telescope-native-hawaiians>, accessed 9 November 2022.

people, as a sovereign space/place run organically by intelligent, hardworking, dedicated, selfless aloha 'āina who embody the best of our culture and what it means to be Kānaka 'Ōiwi.<sup>32</sup>

Presley Ke'alaanuhea Ah Mook Sang, one of the founders of the camp university on Maunakea writes that following the arrests of thirty-eight kūpuna on July 17, “the lāhui (nation) arrived at the Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu en masse”. The people on the camp went from barely forty individuals to upwards of 7,000 in a matter of days. The images of the arrested elders circulated on independent social media throughout several groups and individuals' accounts, effectively transformed the narrative of the event, and resulted in an influx of Hawaiians and local allies, global celebrities like Jason Momoa, Dwayne Johnson, and Damian Marley, that decided to take a public stand and support the Protect Maunakea Movement, together with countless allied celebrities across the US, who contributed through their own social media to disseminate counternarratives about the protest. It was at that point that the idea of the Pu'uhuluhulu University was born:

My intent was to educate the masses who showed up to practice aloha 'āina, and secondly, to prove that education is not confined within the walls of Western academia. We decided to claim this new institution as an actual place of Hawaiian learning, as opposed to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, which has publicly portrayed itself as an Indigenous space. ... Unlike the current actions of the University of Hawai'i administration, Pu'uhuluhulu University therefore intentionally allowed and encouraged individuals of our kaiāulu (community) to take ownership of the 'ike (knowledge) they possess, and transfer those knowledge systems to the lāhui.<sup>33</sup>

Hundreds of volunteers and educators contributed to Pu'uhuluhulu University and offered free education to the community for eight months, until the demobilization due to COVID-19. According to one of the founders, roughly one thousand different classes were offered, including History of the Hawaiian Language, Native Hawaiian Legal Rights, Mele Aloha 'Āina, Sea Level Rise, and Natural History. Following in their footsteps, “other grassroots educational systems were created, including Hūnānāniho University, classes at Kahuku, and free online education and workshops provided by programs such as Kanaeokana”.<sup>34</sup>

This fundamental emphasis on education is a legacy of anti-colonial struggle and the “decolonizing of the mind”, to quote Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and it is also reflected in the social media practice of the movement. It reminds us that education may be a powerful tool in the hands of the dominant class to impart conformity and acceptance of the status quo, or on the other hand “it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world”.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. A Digital Emergence

The movement had a robust social media presence that acted as a direct line of communication between the front line and its supporters locally and abroad, but it also aimed at educating the public about the intricate cultural and legal issues behind the conflict, while countering the oversimplifying mainstream media coverage, which had initially characterized the protectors as anti-scientific nostalgics. The young Hawaiian activist Kapulei Flores, who has been documenting the Protect

<sup>32</sup> Marie Alohalani Brown, “Aloha”, 584.

<sup>33</sup> Presley Ke'alaanuhea Ah Mook Sang, “Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu University”, in Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua et al., eds., *The Value of Hawaii 3* (Honolulu: Hawai'i U.P., 2020), 266.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Shaull, “Foreword”, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire, trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos, [1970], (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Maunakea through photography, on her Instagram accounts, and on her website *400years project*, rejects this framing “it’s one too big, one too many ... We don’t have a problem with science; our ancestors used astronomy and the stars to navigate. But we don’t support desecrating the land in order to do that”.<sup>36</sup>

One of the youngest members of the Nā Leo Kāko’o, the Kia’i media team, Kawena Kapahua, was only twenty-one at the time when he started documenting independently via his Twitter account, “posting to a quickly growing audience of attentive and concerned community members” and recording details, police numbers, movements, and he “showed the Kia’i at the cattle guard, as they chained their fates to the fate of our Mauna”; “soon, reporters from national news outlets were coming to me to check they had their facts right on what had occurred”.<sup>37</sup> This eloquent reversal between independent and dominant media outlets may signal the ascendancy of the reputation of the Kanaka counternarrative, not just for the Hawaiian community but globally. Kapahua writes about an exceptional example to measure the constant backlash from mainstream outlets and voices, and how social media activist had to coordinate a strategic pushback:

Days after the police had retreated, Hawai’i Governor David Ige claimed that Pu’uhonua o Pu’uhuluhulu was falling apart. He said it was a corrupt den of drugs and alcohol, and a scene of constant lawbreaking. He painted a picture of a pu’uhonua on fire, playing upon the stereotypes about Hawaiians that the government he led had cultivated for decades to continue our oppression. But almost immediately, videos in response came from Nā Leo Kāko’o, displaying beautiful scenes of a well-organized pu’uhonua—people playing music, talking story, kūpuna passing down knowledge, and culture thriving in the face of armed repression. The governor’s falsehoods were laid bare, and he had to eat his words when he later visited the pu’uhonua, and faced the stares of the thousands of Kia’i he had lied about. Without the media team’s quick and strategic moves to reclaim the narrative, an unchallenged story of the Mauna would have perpetuated the same tired trope of Hawaiians doing drugs and making trouble.<sup>38</sup>

Much more intensely than four years before, in 2015, the confrontation that took place on Maunakea in 2019 had created a widespread interest in the divisive Maunakea telescope. Back in 2015, the TMT Observatory Corporation itself had created an informational microsite, *Maunakea and TMT*, revolving around the core belief that “spirituality and science can harmoniously coexist on Mauna Kea” (<http://maunakeaandtmt.org/>). As Ravazzini and Maier point out, the microsite was created right after the arrest of 31 people and the global protest that followed, on Apr 13 2015, and its declared goal was to provide more background information about the project and to answer some common questions, “their website emphasizes future, harmony, environment, and the necessity of science advancement as embodied in the TMT”.<sup>39</sup> During that first wave of Maunakea protest, one of the main pages for the movement was the Protect Mauna Kea website, created by Ho’opae Pono Peace Project, an affiliate of Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples, in order to promote Maunakea as a sacred place and sustain the campaign against the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope (<http://www.protectmaunakea.org/>).

Four years later, the number of website and social media accounts managed independently or in a coordinated way by Kānaka Maoli had grown exponentially. The official website of the camp (<https://puuhuluhulu.com/>) with its own YouTube channel, kept being updated until the Covid

<sup>36</sup> Katherine Plumhoff, “Mauna Kea Protests. Native Hawaiian Activists Are Fighting for Their Sacred Land. Kapulei Flores is Documenting the Protect Mauna Kea Movement”, *Teen Vogue* (2020) <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/mauna-kea-protest-kapulei-flores>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>37</sup> See Kapahua, “Stories from the Mauna, Ku’u One Hānau”, 579.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 580.

<sup>39</sup> Silvia Ravazzani and Carmen Daniela Maier, “Framing of Issues Across Actors. Exploring Competing Discourses in Digital Arenas”, *Journal of Communication Management*, 21.2 (2017), 186-200.

explosion on March 14, 2020, and it included a “Code of Conducts” to follow on the base, hyperlinks to petitions and donations and other grassroots initiatives, and videos of important moments and speeches on Maunakea. One of the most significant original video contributions is the short documentary film, *Like A Mighty Wave*, created by Mikey Inouye, local filmmaker who is a part of the Mauna media team.

A central figure in the activism and legal fight around Maunakea is Kealoha Pisciotta, the President of Mauna Kea Anaina Hou and Founder of the marine protection group Kai Palaoa in Hawai‘i. She is also the spokesperson for the Mauna Kea Hui. The Mauna Kea Anaina Hou is an “organization comprised of cultural and lineal descendants, and traditional, spiritual and religious practitioners of the sacred traditions of Mauna Kea” “which has litigated many cases protecting Mauna Kea in the past 25 years”, as their rich and highly informative website states (<https://maunakeaanainahou.org/>).

On Instagram, the account of Protect Maunakea, one of two accounts that had been operating from the camp, has about 140 thousand followers, while ainamomona has about 43k followers. Other Instagram accounts that are worth mentioning are kanaeokana, with 31k followers and its own YouTube, facebook, tiktok and twitter accounts, with the goal of “amplifying Hawaiian language, culture, and ‘aina-based action, and Kanaka autonomy” (14k followers). In terms of Instagram tags, #protectmaunakea and #kukiamaunakea both have about 74k posts shared using that tag, #wearemaunakea counts almost 70k posts, while the more general #tmtshutdown has 27k posts shared with that tag. Most of these accounts coordinate collaborative efforts on specific initiatives and action, like the one in July 2020 to commemorate a year since this latest standoff and the kupuna arrests, when a slew of online events and actions was organized under the tag #tmtshutdownweek which included topic-focused talks via Zoom, film screenings, and a petition signing campaign.

With the capacity of saving and organizing Instagram stories, these accounts have effectively utilized the social media archive to create informative and educational multimedia materials under thematic clusters and labels/tags. If we look at their most recent posts and stories we have a sense of the users traffic still present on these pages, and can assess their crucial role as source information and counternarrative on Hawaiian issues, besides and beyond the TMT issue. One of the latest video-posts on the Instagram account of Protect Maunakea (from June 8, 2022) is about the TMT Project filing a cessation for the NPDES permit and has almost 20k views. The post claims that its reason is to avoid further scrutiny and potential legal challenges, that “would have exposed that this permit was actually invalid at the time they attempted to proceed with construction in 2019”.

A post on the Instagram account of ainamomona from Aug 6, 2021, in a trademark style of multiple-slides post, with large capitalized text on colored background, addresses the pivotal issue of the negative impact of mass tourism on Hawai‘i, and it is clearly, yet somewhat unusually, addressed to non-Kānaka followers. On one slide of their post, we read “Stop romanticizing Hawai‘i and respect the land. Stop going around our islands making TikToks and Instagram posts about your exotic getaway that continues the touristy narrative of Hawai‘i” and then on the following slide, they emphasize “start educating yourself on Hawai‘i”. A more recent post on the same ainamomona account, from May 13 2022 addresses the conflict with UH over the most recently passed House Bill HB2024 that in fact will strip the university of its land authorization on Maunakea. It offers another instance of counternarrative, whereby DLNR (Department of Land and Natural Resources) claims that without UH Maunakea would be lost to commercialization, and that it wouldn’t be able to maintain the roads for vehicle access to the summit. In one of its slides, the post cites Ngugi wa Thiong’o on the power of cultural colonization, that undermines the capacity of a people to believe and trust in its own ancestral knowledge. In the comment section below the post, after a series of anaphoric “they [University of Hawai‘i] want you to believe ...” aimed at revealing an arguable paternalistic attitude of the UH about what is best for Maunakea, the author writes “do not fall for this false narrative. We must believe in our lāhui and the capacity we have to stand for our ‘āina”. In both these instances, on mass

tourism and the role of the University, there is an extreme awareness of the power that social media have in countering dominant narratives, and a focus on education and dissemination.

## 5. The Mauna Kea Syllabus Project

What remains in the aftermath of the explosive development of social media in times of emergency? Most of the accounts and platforms mentioned above are now fully dedicated to a wide range of issues related to Kanaka sovereignty, and mālama ‘āina. There have been numerous lawsuits and contested cases hearings challenging the permitting and construction of TMT and other further development atop Maunakea,<sup>40</sup> but as this article approaches completion, the TMT crisis seems to be reaching a new time of stability with the suspension of the building permits, and a new Stewardship for Maunakea.<sup>41</sup> In addition, these online platforms, from Instagram to Youtube to other mentioned outlets, are serving as a social media archive to educate a new generation of Hawaiians and allies globally.

A particularly fascinating project is the Mauna Kea Syllabus Project, an educational resource that seeks to bring diverse voices of the lāhui together in order to enhance education. The creators acknowledge their inspiration to similar initiative like Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter, and Immigration syllabi, when they created thematic categories, guiding questions, readings, and resources, that include interviews with elders and community leaders, and propose a set of syllabi and unit useful for the teaching of the event.

The Mauna Kea Syllabus Project traces its genealogy to Pu‘uhuluhulu University, the brainchild of Presley Keala‘anuhea Ah Mook Sang and others. From the conversations and transformations at Pu‘uhuluhulu University, the Mauna Kea Syllabus was born. The Syllabus as a formal project began in late 2019 in partnership with Hawai‘i Review, a literary print journal published by the Student Media Board at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. In June 2020, organizers of the Mauna Kea Syllabus hosted an online panel “From Standing Rock to Mauna Kea: Digital Learning Exchanges” featuring Anne Spice and Jaskiran Dhillon, scholar-activists who participated in the creation and facilitation of the Standing Rock Syllabus Project, in conversation with Mauna Kea Kia‘i Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua and Uahikea Maile and moderated by Brandy Nālani McDougall. The panelists discussed the significance of digital media in their respective movements and reflected on the possibilities of creating online pedagogy to educate a broader (local and international) audience on the issues impacting the Indigenous communities. That panel served as a starting point of the syllabus we see today.

The Mauna Kea Syllabus is intensely bilingual, since it is also the result of decades of an extraordinary cultural and language revival, but it also inherently multimedial, including texts, videos, music, oral stories, images. In the *Units* menu it incorporates sections on US Settler Colonialism, on Cultivating Solidarities, on Gender Sexuality Pilina (relations), on Environmental Justice etc. One of the units in the Mauna Kea Syllabus is written by Jamaica Osorio, and it is about Ea, a quite recurring

<sup>40</sup> “Archiving a Movement. The Mauna Kea Social Media Archive”, *King Kamehameha V Judiciary History Center*, <https://www.jhchawaii.net/archiving-a-movement-the-mauna-kea-social-media-archives/>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>41</sup> See the statement by Sen. Donna Mercado Kim, chair of the senate committee on Higher Education: “In this new version of the bill [HB2024], the responsibilities to manage the mountain will be bifurcated or split between two entities – the new Mauna Kea Stewardship Authority and the University of Hawai‘i. The Mauna Kea Stewardship Authority will be charged with managing, protecting, and conserving the public uses of the approximately 9,450 acres of Mauna Kea Conservation Lands, while the University will be tasked with managing the 550 acres of Astronomy Research Lands comprised of the Astronomy Precinct, the Hale Pohaku Complex, and the Mauna Kea Access Road”, <https://bigislandnow.com/2022/04/08/maunakea-management-authority-bill-passes-committee-heads-to-senate-floor-for-final-vote/>, accessed 9 November 2022.

word from the Hawaiian Language (‘olelo hawai‘i), which is also present in the state motto, and it is officially translated as “life” as in “The *Life* of the land is perpetuated in Righteousness”. More commonly the concept of Ea has been translated as “sovereignty”, but even this translated term has been under scrutiny by Hawaiian activists, in so far as it inherits and reproduces an alien, Eurocentric notion of land ownership and independence.

Another keyword that the syllabus uses as a starting point for the reader/student is Kuleana, that indicates “a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi ethic of responsibility, authority, and rights that are tied to one’s relationship to place, genealogy, and commitment and effort put forth toward a community and land-base”. Kuleana points to the connection between a people and its ancestry based on place and genealogical belonging, “Mountains, winds, rocks and other non-human beings are recognized as family members and ancestors, and people are obligated to care for their ‘ohana”. The author of this introductory text warns the readers “In drawing upon these curated sources, some of which are meant for particular places, people, and times, we ask that you acknowledge your relationship, your *positionality* in relation to Hawai‘i before engaging with, teaching, or doing work on our islands”.<sup>42</sup>

In conclusion, and to go back to Jamaica Osorio’s reflection on the concept of Ea, he writes:

throughout the course of this syllabus you will not only learn specifically about the violence of the Thirty Meter Telescope and the brilliance of ‘Ōiwi resistance and resurgence. You will encounter the creative and courageous Kanaka scholarship and mo‘olelo that describe some of the many ways the fight to protect Mauna a Wākea was at its center also a fight to reclaim our ea through decolonial pilina, genders, and sexualities, Environmental Justice, Kanaka Science, and Hawaiian Religion.

## 6. Conclusion

The events surrounding the proposed construction of the TMT and the brave and visionary resistance of Kānaka Maoli through social media is a testament to the potential inherent in digital activism in the process of decolonizing education and produce and disseminate transformative counternarratives at the service of justice, truth, and indigenous sovereign rights. As the young media activist Kawena Kapahua writes:

I could see the importance of representation in media, and in storytelling in general. If we are not present in these spaces, our voices could be lost, our perspective never told. And perhaps one day down the road, young Kānaka like me trying to find their way in the world would remain uninspired because they did not learn the mo‘olelo of the battle for the Mauna – only hearing the versions of those who opposed us, vilified us, and targeted us. If we do not tell our stories, others will tell them for us, and as our history has too often shown us, they will be told wrong.<sup>43</sup>

In the past few pages, I have attempted to concisely illustrate the major players and issues at stake in the TMT proposed construction, and more importantly how Kānaka Maoli have responded to this crisis and transformed it into a generational opportunity for resistance, decolonization, and solidarity. Along with the complex battles in the court and at the state level, through a diffused leadership in social media, the movement was able to appropriate and reverse the dominant narrative of the conflict, educating in a powerful community-learning experience, both on site and online, the thousands who went to Maunakea, and those who are interested in learning and sharing those lessons in the classroom and across the world.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.maunakeasyllabus.com/>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Kapahua, “Stories from the Mauna, Ku‘u One Hānau”, 580.

“A Game 10,000 Years in the Making”.  
*Never Alone / Kisima Ingitchuna*  
and Adaptation as a Future-Oriented Technology

**Abstract:** Inuit adaptation technologies, which have been in place for thousands of years, provide unique insight into the burgeoning field of Indigenous video game studies by advancing sovereign articulations of technology in digital space. Grounded in the principles of *ikiaqtaq*, an adaptation of a song, *Never Alone / Kisima Ingitchuna* (2014), extends and nuances how Indigenous stories translate into video games by foregrounding community sustainability and cultural flexibility. Addressing *Iñupiaq* video game development specifically, this essay demonstrates how *ikiaqtaq*, as demonstrated in *Never Alone*, generates the conditions for sovereign storytelling in the digital.

Keywords: *adaptation, video games, Never Alone, screen sovereignty, Iñupiaq, Inuit technology*

Over thousands of years, Alaska Natives have lived and worked together in challenging environments, learning and passing down knowledge, skills and values that have kept communities viable and self-sufficient over time. It is truly a game 10,000 years in the making.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Inuit adaptation technologies, which have been in use for thousands of years, provide unique insight into the burgeoning field of Indigenous video game studies by advancing sovereign articulations of technology in digital space. Grounded in the principles of *ikiaqtaq*, “a song that has been adapted”,<sup>2</sup> *Never Alone / Kisima Ingitchuna*<sup>3</sup> extends and nuances how Indigenous stories translate into video games, foregrounding community sustainability and cultural flexibility. *Never Alone* is, at once, an eloquent extension of traditional Inuit storytelling and a nuanced articulation of new media. The combination highlights how Indigenous peoples are mobilizing “technologies such as creation stories and ceremony” in future-oriented spaces.<sup>4</sup> Working across multiple texts – oral, written, and playable versions of *Never Alone* (or “*Kunuuksaayuka*”) – I argue that the concept of *ikiaqtaq* contributes to our ability “to re-vision the intellectual history of technology”<sup>5</sup> and with it the critical intersections of new media and Indigenous studies.

I foreground *Never Alone* as a case study for this work because it provides significant insight into a uniquely Indigenous process of adaptation. Janet Bushnell, Jonathan Tomhave, and Tylor Prather suggest that *Never Alone*, is “an exemplar of an Indigenous game”.<sup>6</sup> Categorized as an “atmospheric

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Games and Impact, “Never Alone. Parent Guide” (n.d.), [www.gamesandimpact.org](http://www.gamesandimpact.org), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Keavy Martin, *Stories in Another Skin. Approaches to Inuit Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Never Alone. Kisima Ingitchuna* (Upper One Games, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Lou Cornum, “The Space NDN’s Star Map”, in Sophie McCall et al., *Read, Listen, Tell. Stories from Turtle Island* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U.P., 2017), 384.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext. An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 19.4 (2007), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanette Bushnell et al, “How Do You Say Watermelon?”, *Transmotion*, 3.1 (2017), 56.

puzzle platformer”,<sup>7</sup> *Never Alone* tells the story of a young girl named Nuna who travels across a harsh Arctic landscape with her pet fox to stop a never-ending blizzard. Indigenous literature and technology scholars have devoted significant thought to the game, including multiple essays in a special gaming issue of *Transmotion*, edited by Elizabeth LaPensée.<sup>8</sup> Inger Lise Damli Lohne,<sup>9</sup> Peter Keogh Williams,<sup>10</sup> and Kandace Hawley<sup>11</sup> have published entire theses on the game. In short, *Never Alone* has a demonstrated impact in the academic world across various fields and disciplines. However, the existent literature all, in one way or another, looks at *Never Alone* through a cultural or ethnographic lens. This essay, in turn, approaches the game through technology — namely, the Iñupiaq storytelling technologies that make a home for traditional narrative in the often-inhospitable spaces of video games. This turn to the technological, which emphasizes Indigenous resilience and ingenuity, further clarifies *Never Alone*’s contribution to the burgeoning Indigenous video game market. Via a technological reading of *Never Alone* located in the contexts of Iñupiaq storytelling and Indigenous literary studies, I illustrate how Indigenous developers are re-homing traditional stories in the digital through community-specific adaptation techniques.<sup>12</sup>

The theorization offered in this essay is a small contribution to a larger field of study that is carving space for Indigenous video game development. I am a white settler academic, trained primarily as a literary scholar, who studies new media and digital storytelling from social justice perspectives. I also make video games with and for Indigenous communities using small game engines such as Twine and Bitsy to create platforms for community-based storytelling. Maize Longboat (Kanien’kehá:ka) is a key collaborator in this work, helping me and my students to think critically about “Indigenous-led creation”.<sup>13</sup> He also leads in-depth workshops with my students on do-it-yourself video game development using open-source tools. I also have the good fortune to collaborate with Jazmine Horne (Stó:lō), Sharon Desnomie (Stó:lō), Heather Ramsey and the Stó:lō Xwexwílmexw Government (SXG) on *Kw’i:ts’téleq: The Video Game*. Written by Horne in consultation with Stó:lō youth, *Kw’i:ts’téleq* adapts a series of comic books Stó:lō about governance into playable challenges set across six communities.<sup>14</sup> SXG’s objective in creating the game was to produce a knowledge dissemination tool that would extend the reach of the comic book and engage a broader Stó:lō audience, including youth, during the final stages of their treaty negotiations with Canadian government. My team, which operates out of CEDaR, the new media lab that Daisy Rosenblum and I co-direct, supports the SXG team by supplying the labour and digital infrastructure to adapt the storytelling into Twine, a narrative-based video game platform. Via regular Zoom meetings, user tests, and trips to visit the youth group and tour the community, the CEDaR and SXG teams come together to adapt, test, and revise a game that meets the needs of the community, both in its story and in its mechanics. The game and the research produced around it is shared with SXG through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clearly identifies both as SXG’s intellectual property. My team is accountable first and foremost to the community, but the relationship is reciprocal. As

<sup>7</sup> “Never Alone”, [www.neveralongame.com](http://www.neveralongame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>8</sup> *Transmotion*, 3.1 (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Inger Lise Damli Lohne, “*Never Alone*. A Study of Articulations of Indigenous Religion in the Video Game”, (UiT The Arctic University of Norway, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Keogh Williams, “An Analysis of the Ethnographic Significance of the Iñupiaq Video Game *Never Alone* (*Kisima Ingitchuna*)” (Florida State University, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Kandace Hawley, “Videogames as a Platform for Learning. Self-Case Study. The Videogame *Never Alone*” (University of Oulu, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> In this article, “Iñupiaq” refers to Inuit people from the North Slope region in Alaska. “Iñupiat” is singular; “Iñupiaq” is plural. I use “Inuit” to refer to the broader context of Indigenous peoples across the Northern Circumpolar.

<sup>13</sup> Maize Longboat, “Terra Nova. Enacting Videogame Development through Indigenous-Led Creation” (Montreal: Concordia University, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> You can see the *Kw’i:ts’téleq* comic books here: [www.sxta.bc.ca/comic/](http://www.sxta.bc.ca/comic/), accessed 9 November 2022. Read more about the video game in the *Stó:lō Signal Magazine*, 2.1, <https://www.sxta.bc.ca/multimedia/magazine>, accessed 9 November 2022.

researchers, we benefit from publishing materials, with SXG’s consent, that show other communities how to scope, develop, and test their own games.

The projects I work on with Longboat and SXG projects are relational endeavours, built out of Agile development processes that foreground multiple rounds of feedback, discussion, iteration, and community engagement.<sup>15</sup> As a result of the cultural and financial successes of *Never Alone*, video games are no longer a fringe media for Indigenous storytelling. As I will demonstrate below, they have the potential to bolster cultural resurgence and galvanize community. The communities and Indigenous developers I work with are compelled by the ways in which games function as gathering sites, that is as baskets that can hold and connect multiple assets (audio, visual, text, etc.) and perspectives on those assets. Since the publication of his book in 2020, I have more recently begun to build a theory of digital gathering based on Richard Van Camp’s articulation of the idea. Van Camp (Tłı̨chǫ Dene) is instructive in how he frames gathering as both a verb and a noun, and therefore as a relational interface (as opposed to the more traditional academic process of “collecting,” which is often unidirectional and extractive). In *Gathering*, Van Camp writes about the power of bringing people and stories together as a means for initiating healing and cultural resurgence: “Through our stories and traditions and languages we are reclaiming ourselves, coming together, gathering, and gaining strength through our love and connection – remembering and recalling our stories and passing them on for medicine and strength and love and healing”.<sup>16</sup>

In the video game work I do with community, I strive to follow Van Camp’s methodology to foreground cultural sovereignty and accountability, both in the game itself and in the development practices we build around it. As a verb, ‘gathering’ is the collective act of assembling stories, memories, songs, language, photographs, artwork, etc., that are needed to build the content of a video game: its setting, characters, mechanics, quests, visuals, audio, etc. As a noun, however, ‘a gathering’ is the sense of community and collaboration that is built around and nourished through a game’s development. In her discussion of Indigenous filmmaking, Kristin Dowell refers to gathering as a social relationship galvanized through “the act of production”.<sup>17</sup>

For Dowell, Indigenous screen sovereignty, the articulation of community-specific knowledge, traditions, and politics into film, is always in excess to the content. Sovereignty is articulated in the content of a film, but it is enacted in the Indigenous-led creation that produces that film. Gathering around a media project, be it a film or a video game, is, therefore, an active process negotiated out of off-screen relationships, maker sensibilities, and thoughtful engagement of protocol and governance. In developing community-based video games that centre gathering, we use accessible, low-tech content platforms, such as Miro and Figma that allow collaborators to collect assets in communal spaces. We then use those spaces as the gathering sites for team meetings and collaborative prototyping. Starting a new community-based video game development project means identifying and establishing processes that onboard that community as developers. That means developing clear and easy-to-use systems based on iterative development driven by collaborative feedback. Because storytelling should be the focus, technology is useful only inasmuch as it safely and effectively gathers stories and storytellers. Agile processes and digital collaboration tools make the development processes transparent and invite ongoing feedback and discussion. Since game development is an active process of determining or adapting the story, the relationships through which we negotiate those gathering processes become foundational to the game itself.

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<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Pope-Ruark, *Agile Faculty. Practical Strategies for Managing Research, Service, and Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 57-72.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Van Camp, *Gathering. Richard Van Camp on the Joy of Storytelling* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2021), 76.

<sup>17</sup> Kristin Dowell, *Sovereign Screens. Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 2.

Adaptation, which I argue is a future-oriented storytelling technology, offers an exciting and dynamic space to further a conversation in which Indigenous communities are gathering stories in video games. Building on work established in Indigenous literatures, I foreground the ingenuity of Indigenous storytelling by illustrating not only the significance of Indigenous adaptation into the digital, but, stretching back 10,000 years, the technological proficiency implied in Indigenous *foresight* for this adaptation. That is to say, Indigenous storytelling often projects into the future by building space for the next generation of storytellers – and storytelling platforms – into the mechanics of the original narrative. As such, Indigenous adaptation is a dynamic integration of traditional wisdom and the techno-social present, folding past and present, tradition and innovation, storyteller and story gatherer in unique and impactful ways, which, as I demonstrate below, extend and sustain Indigenous sovereignty and ingenuity.

## 2. Adaptation and Inuit Games

My focus here is on adaptation — mainly how it functions as a method of iterating traditional Inuit stories in video game formats. *Never Alone* is the activation site for this analysis. However, the method I draw on for reading the game is grounded in Indigenous literary studies, particularly the existent work on Inuit literatures. According to Keavy Martin, author of *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*, “Inuit storytelling traditions...have much to say about the challenges and potentials of adaptation”.<sup>18</sup> The adaptation of stories, as they are shared and retold within and across communities (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous), is directly connected to the Inuit way of life, which, within an often-unforgiving climate, demands versatility and the ability to change quickly and efficiently. Igloolik writer Rachel A. Qitsualik suggests that “Inuit are the embodiment of adaptability itself, and other peoples who direct eyes towards the Arctic ... would do well to emulate such plasticity”.<sup>19</sup> The necessity of adaptation in the circumpolar north resonates in the Inuktitut word aulatsigunnarniq: “the ability to change quickly for the continuance and well-being of all”.<sup>20</sup> Aulatsigunnarniq also translates into cultural outputs. Inuit stories and songs readily “adapt to new contexts” as the situation demands, illustrating the dynamism and resiliency of narratives with thousands of years of history behind them.<sup>21</sup> While the original structure of a story may feature particular characters, settings, and plots, future tellers of that same story may shift and revise certain elements around the core narrative to meet the needs and contexts in which the story is being (re)told. Hence the title of Martin’s monograph, “stories in a new skin”: while the skeleton of the story remains constant, the “skin” that stretches over it is dynamic and versatile.

It is this survivance, the ability to flex, iterate, and flourish within demanding conditions, that makes Inuit storytelling such a rich and fertile space for outlining a theory of adaptation as it applies to Indigenous video games. Indeed, the skin metaphor deployed by Martin is particularly germane to video game contexts. Skinning a game means changing its look and feel without worrying about the code and infrastructure that affords it. Since skinning is not aimed at a game’s engine, and therefore does not require hard coding, developers often mobilized it as an entry point for community-based digital storytelling. For example, the development team at Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), which runs a long-standing video game workshop called *Skins*, uses the metaphor of skinning as an invitation for Indigenous communities “to embrace computer technology as a means of

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<sup>18</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Katherine Meloche, “Playing in the Digital Qargi. Iñupiat Gaming and Isuma in *Kisima Injitchuḡa*”, *Transmotion*, 3.1 (2017), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

creative expression and production, not just consumption”.<sup>22</sup> In an unpublished interview I conducted with former *Skins* Associate Director, Maize Longboat, he establishes the logic of skinning, as adaptation, in Indigenous systems of renewal and revitalization. Speaking to his experience translating community stories into video games in his time with AbTeC, Longboat highlights how adaptation facilitates meaning-making and traditional knowledge transmission:

You see how an old way of doing things could potentially fit into a new way of doing things, as well as the transformation that might happen in between. It’s always really exciting because I feel like the more ways we can tell stories, the more potential there is for people to understand them and for us to understand them too.<sup>23</sup>

AbTeC and Longboat illustrate how skinning, adapting Indigenous stories for digital media, can be mobilized as a relational technology deployed to facilitate community engagement. As a mediation point, skinning therefore provides a fertile space through which video games can productively articulate (and blur) intersections of old and new, digital and analogue, oral and written, etc. In adapting an old story into a new platform, storytellers (and story facilitators) work in reciprocity with existing narratives, both giving new life to a story while simultaneously receiving life from it (in the form of cultural continuity and connection with ancestors). As a material representation of this process, the act of skinning stories for video games provides an activation site from which to consider the mechanics of adaptation further. While developers might anchor the core materials of an Indigenous video game in history and tradition, that grounding does not preclude the potential for adaptation, which can be, simultaneously and without paradox, dynamic *and* static, rooted *and* transportable. In other words, to be grounded in tradition does not mean to be locked in tradition. According to Lou Cornum, “dynamic traditions, themselves a type of advanced technology, help [Indigenous peoples] to understand how to foster the kind of relationships that make futures possible”.<sup>24</sup>

This all said, despite the possibility afforded by concepts of adaptation, it is not something to be taken up without vigilance. Martin, for instance, carefully balances the centrality of adaptation in Inuit storytelling against the perennial threat of colonial appropriation, which Niigaan Sinclair aptly defines as “theft based on power and privilege”.<sup>25</sup> It should come as no surprise that appropriation is no less of a risk in video game environments than it is anywhere else in the colonial terrain. Hector Postigo even goes so far as to argue that appropriation is built directly into Western video game culture.<sup>26</sup> Indigenous communities and developers are acutely aware of the extractive potential of digital technologies and the risks embedded in adapting traditional knowledge and stories into digital forums.<sup>27</sup> Appropriation of, for example, Indigenous stories, traditional knowledge, artwork, and more, threatens the culture and livelihood of Indigenous peoples and is an issue to be taken extremely seriously. The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) and the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA) provide guidance for considering and mitigating this threat. Indigenous literature scholars connect the threat of appropriation to the decontextualization of words and artwork, which renders living pieces of culture “monumentalized, static, transhistorical,” prohibiting adaptation and

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<sup>22</sup> Jason Lewis and Skawennati, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace”, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 29.2 (2005).

<sup>23</sup> Maize Longboat, Personal Correspondence, November 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Lou Cornum, “The Space NDN’s Starmap”, 368.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Jennifer Brant, “Cultural Appropriation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada”, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca., accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Hector Postigo, “Video Game Appropriation through Modifications. Attitudes Concerning Intellectual Property among Modders and Fans”, *Convergence. The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14.1 (2008), 59.

<sup>27</sup> Tahu Kukutai and John Taylor, “Data Sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples. Current Practice and Future Needs”, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Towards an Agenda* (Acton: ANU Press, 2016), 2-4.

future-oriented thinking.<sup>28</sup> Vincent Schilling, for instance, illustrates how video games such as *Civilization VI*, *Oregon Trail*, and *Red Dead Redemption* decontextualize Indigenous history and historical actors (such as Cree leader, Pihtokahanapiwiyyin in *Civilization VI*) in ways that perpetuate racist stereotypes and serve colonial interests.<sup>29</sup>

A large body of Indigenous studies literature traces the boundaries of adaptation as a theoretical concept. For example, from a socio-political perspective, David Garneau identifies the need for Indigenous-only storytelling spaces as “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality”.<sup>30</sup> That is, storytelling spaces in which *only* Indigenous peoples should be welcome. LaPensée notes that there are certain stories in Indigenous nations that *should not* be shared outside of the community or that can *only* be shared at particular times and with particular people, adaptation notwithstanding.<sup>31</sup> In other words, just because some stories are suited to adaptation outside of their communities of origin does not mean those same principles can be applied across all communities and all stories equally and without careful consideration.

To be clear, I am not in any way arguing that appropriation can be beneficial for Indigenous peoples. Nor am I suggesting that non-Indigenous developers should start adapting more Indigenous stories into video games. At the centre of appropriation is a foundational mechanic of settler colonialism: the redistribution of social and financial benefits mobilized through the theft of Indigenous knowledge. Rather, what I hope to make clear at the onset of this essay is the distinct delineation between appropriation and adaptation. Appropriation is the violent erasure of Indigenous agency, “the separation of the creation from the original authors”.<sup>32</sup> Adaptation, however, as I will illustrate in what follows, centres Indigenous agency and resilience. While both concepts imply translation and movement, adaptation, as I am defining it, is driven *by* specific Indigenous communities and peoples, *for* those specific communities and peoples.

The distinction between appropriation and adaptation is significant when applied to what Angela Haas identifies as the “open frontier” of digital space: “where individual rights take precedent over community benefit and alliance building”.<sup>33</sup> Indigenous technology scholars, such as Haas and Marisa Duarte illustrate that despite the colonial ideologies that haunt digital infrastructure, Indigenous knowledge, properly stewarded, can flourish in those spaces, and even bolster tribal sovereignty. According to Duarte, Indigenous technology studies must hold up “the inherent sovereignty of Native peoples choosing to use ICTs and build the infrastructure for it across their sacred lands toward their own tribal goals”, even when, and perhaps particularly when, “non-tribal critics, including Indigenous scholars, decry such efforts as a perpetuation of corporate colonialism, neoliberalism, technological hegemony, and other such challenging allegations”.<sup>34</sup> In other words, assuming that technology and digital spaces are always appropriative may elide Indigenous agency. Adapting a traditional story for gameplay in, for example, a Unity game engine, does not necessarily mean that the platform will subsume the content. That does not mean that digital spaces should go unexamined: “careful

<sup>28</sup> Sophie McCall, “I Can Only Sing This Song to Someone Who Understands It. Community Filmmaking and the Politics of Partial Translation in Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner”, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 83.83 (2004), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Vince Schilling, “Oregon Trail to Assassin’s Creed. Right and Wrong Native American Portrayals in Video Games”, *Indian Country Today*, www.indiancountrytoday.com, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>30</sup> David Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation. Art, Curation, and Healing”, in Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, eds., *Arts of Engagement. Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U.P., 2016), 33.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Lapensée, “Games as Enduring Presence”, *PUBLIC*, 54 (2016), 179.

<sup>32</sup> Sócrates Vasquez and Avexnim Cojtí, “Cultural Appropriation. Another Form of Extractivism of Indigenous Communities” in *Cultural Survival*, www.culturalsurvival.org, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Haas, 93.

<sup>34</sup> Marisa Elena Duarte, *Network Sovereignty. Building the Internet Across Indian Country*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 134.

investigation of the impacts of digital systems is about articulating the boundaries around these systems”, both in terms of what they can, and what they cannot, contribute to tribal sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> It does mean, however, that critics must be ready to acknowledge the existence of Indigenous sovereignty in digital spaces. Foregrounding these sovereignties as they persist and even flourish in “inhospitable” digital climates, including the often toxic and colonial environments of video games, can be a means of amplifying and expanding the ways in which Indigenous peoples are applying technology toward retaining their values, relational structures, and storytelling protocols.

### 3. Ikiaqtaq and *Never Alone*

*Never Alone* is a collaboration between the Cook Island Tribal Council (CITC), their production company, Upper One Games, and E-Line Media, a progressive gaming company that emphasizes positive social impact in the game design and development processes. The game was released to massive critical acclaim, winning “Best Debut Game” at the 2015 BAFTA Games Awards as well as “Game of the Year” and “Most Significant Impact” at the 2015 Games for Change Awards. In their analysis, Bushell, Tomhave, and Prather identify *Never Alone* as “an exemplar of an Indigenous game”<sup>36</sup> because of the survivance through which the developers assert Iñupiat presence in the digital. That is to say, Inuit storytelling does not just survive in the digital space of a video game; it flourishes. It does so to such a degree that we should consider the impact Indigenous stories might have on video games as a medium, rather than emphasizing, as the media tends to, the impact that the medium has on Indigenous stories.<sup>37</sup>

*Never Alone* tells the story of a young Iñupiat girl, Nuna, and her friend and companion, an Arctic fox. Across eight chapters, gamers direct the two characters (at times toggling back and forth between them, or, if playing in two-player mode, working collaboratively) to solve puzzles, leap gaps, and escape angry polar bears. They do so to save Nuna’s community from a seemingly never-ending snowstorm that is preventing them from hunting. A significant portion of the game’s mechanics are built to foreground Nuna’s relationships with the land. She must commune with fox and carefully engage helping spirits in order to navigate the difficult environment. The player too is encouraged to learn more about Iñupiat territory. As they progress, they collect “cultural insights,” which are hidden throughout the levels. The cultural insights contain short documentary films on Iñupiat land, language, and culture. Nuna’s connection to her community, which sets the stakes for her journey, held alongside the relationships that she (and the player) must negotiate with the land and spirits, render this game a nuanced exploration in reciprocity and place-based learning.

However, holding all of this together (narrative, mechanics, community orientation), is an overarching mechanic of adaptation. That is because *Never Alone* is not a new story; rather, it is an ikiaqtaq. Ikiaqtaq means, “a song that has been adapted”.<sup>38</sup> Or, as Iglulik elder Emile Imaruittuq articulates it, “it’s another person’s song I am using but I am creating my own words”.<sup>39</sup> To put that differently, while many traditional Inuit songs maintain an identifiable narrative structure throughout multiple iterations, ikiaqtaq provides the possibility, to use Martin’s metaphor, for the story to perennially shed and cultivate new skins according to the time, place, and context it is told. In this sense, the processes of ikiaqtaq are decidedly malleable, which allows a given story to move

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>36</sup> Jeanette Bushnell, “How Do You Say Watermelon?”, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Jesse Matheson, “The Rise of Indigenous Storytelling in Games” in IGN Entertainment (January 15, 2015). [www.ign.com](http://www.ign.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 101.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 97.

comfortably through time, media, and space while remaining firmly connected to its community and a lineage of storytellers.

*Never Alone* is an ikiaqtaq of the Iñupiaq unikkaaqtuat (traditional song) “Kunuksaayuka,” first published in 1980 in the collection *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People*. “Kunuksaayuka” and all of the stories in *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut* are transcribed from earlier recordings of Iñupiat master storyteller Robert Nasruk Cleveland, who told them to the geographer Don Charles Foote in the 1960s. Foote selected pieces from the recordings to be translated into English for *Human Geographical Studies in Northwestern Arctic Alaska: The Point Hope and Upper Kobuk River Projects*, and the recordings themselves were archived. In 1979, Ruth (Tatqaviñ) Ramoth-Sampson and Angeline (Ipiilik) Newlin worked with Minnie Gray, Cleveland’s daughter, to transcribe all Foote’s tapes and publish them as part of the Iñupiaq literature collection in Upper Kobok, thus repatriating the stories into the community.<sup>40</sup> For most Iñupiaq people, *Stories of the Black River People* represented the first time that “Kunuksaayuka,” and many other stories, were written down, providing new points of access to traditional stories for a broader swath of the community. However, as a piece of oral storytelling, “Kunuksaayuka” stretches back, as the epigram I open this essay with suggests, 10,000 years.<sup>41</sup>

The balance between fidelity and adaptation, tradition and innovation, as it takes shape in the process of ikiaqtaq, is intricate, nuanced, and grounded in community praxis. It is significant, for instance, that Cleveland is the primary storytelling source for the *Never Alone* source text. Cleveland was a master storyteller trained in the narrative traditions of his people. He “spent countless hours in the qargi; it was in these community houses with Elders that he began to learn classic Iñupiaq stories and develop the storytelling skills that distinguished him as one of the leading masters of the oral storytelling tradition”.<sup>42</sup> Cleveland’s role in the community not only establishes “Kunuksaayuka,” within a long and sophisticated tradition of Iñupiat storytelling, it also threads a tradition of ikiaqtaq back from *Never Alone* to *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut* and thus into the centuries-old tradition of Inuit storytelling that grounds the game solidly in community.

An Inuit storyteller’s relationship to their stories is vital because ikiaqtaq builds the history of the oration of the story into the story itself. In this sense, while the process of ikiaqtaq adapts, it also extends and makes visible the circuitry of its telling by foregrounding that lineage in its retelling: “the importance of naming a song’s history: namely, the identity of the song’s composer (or adaptor)” is a fundamental part of how that song, or story, is shared and passed on, from person to person, community to community, and generation to generation.<sup>43</sup> Peter Irniq further explains that the individual deploying ikiaqtaq in a given situation “must acknowledge [the lineage of the song], perhaps by saying ‘pisiruna ikaqtaq qanurlikiaq aturnialirivara’ – ‘how am I going to use this ikiaqtaq?’”.<sup>44</sup> In other words, by drawing previous tellers into new iterations, storytellers bear witness to and extend what Lawrence Kaplan identifies as a long-established process of “oral copywriting”.<sup>45</sup> However, this process also blurs the line between form and content in provocative ways. Previous tellers are incorporated into the story, tracing out a history and a genealogy that, in turn, becomes *part* of the story itself. In the language that Alexander Galloway uses in his analysis of video games, the

<sup>40</sup> Tupou L. Pulu, “Introduction”, *Unipchaanich Imgluktugmiut. Stories of the Black River People*, National Bilingual Materials Development Center, (1980), iv.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Never Alone - The Story of Kunuksaayuka (Conclusion)”, *Never Alone*, (October 2014), [www.neveralongame.com](http://www.neveralongame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence D. Kaplan and Deanna Paniataaq Kingston, “Introduction to Iñupiaq Narratives”, *Words of the Real People. Alaska Native Literature in Translation* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2007), 137.

lineage of the story, including Cleveland himself, therefore becomes part of the diegetic composition of *Never Alone*: “the game’s total world of narrative action”.<sup>46</sup>

*Never Alone* takes up the tradition of *ikiaqtaq* directly, building Cleveland and the lineage of “Kunuksaayuka” into the video game’s design and narrative. James Mumigan Nageak, an Iñupiat Elder and language teacher, narrates *Never Alone* by following *ikiaqtaq* protocols, weaving Cleveland (Nasruk), as the storyteller from whom the story is obtained, into the fabric of the game. Nageak begins *Never Alone* by telling the audience, “I will tell you a very old story. I heard it from Nasruk when I was very young”.<sup>47</sup> Flashing forward to the conclusion, the game closes with a second acknowledgement of Cleveland, solidifying the storyteller’s presence as part of the story. In the final piece of narration before the credits, Nageak once again asserts that “I have heard Nasruk tell the story that way”.<sup>48</sup> Tracing Nageak’s telling back to Cleveland (which one can also do through the game’s secondary materials),<sup>49</sup> we can see that Cleveland similarly ends and begins his telling of “Kunuksaayuka” by acknowledging the relations that told him the story: “I have heard my grandparents tell the story of Kunuksaayuka that way”.<sup>50</sup> In acknowledging Cleveland in the final punctuation of *Never Alone*, Nageak and Upper One Game honour a centuries-old tradition of *ikiaqtaq*, which remediates the previous storyteller into the game while tracing out the lineage of Iñupiat storytelling. Acknowledged at both the introduction and conclusion of *Never Alone*, Cleveland’s presence thus shepherds and contains the digital iteration, gently holding the content of the game within a set of cultural bookends, which millennia of Inuit storytelling have forged.

Reading *Never Alone* alongside “Kunuksaayuka” illuminates *ikiaqtaq* as a means of articulating cultural continuity. Doing so also helps to illuminate the systems of reciprocal exchange that sustain and nourish the community’s relationships to their stories. Already, in the movement from the long history of Iñupiat oral storytelling, to Cleveland, to Foote, to Ramoth-Sampson, Newlin, Grey, and, eventually, to *Never Alone*, we see *ikiaqtaq* at work in “Kunuksaayuka”. As the story moves from Cleveland to Foote and from Foote into the south and the pages of academic journals, it remains a uniquely Iñupiat narrative – because it is built with the technology of *ikiaqtaq* as an intimate and robust component of its internal structure. There is more to thinking *ikiaqtaq* as a technology than. According to Martin, not all items move or are shared in the same way in Inuit culture. Martin, for instance, distinguishes between hard and soft objects, the former being knives or guns, or something that could cause death, and the latter being meat or stories. Soft items are open to sharing and adaptation, not only within the community but with outsiders. In support of this claim, Martin refers to Knud Rasmussen, the Greenlandic–Danish polar explorer, sometimes known as the father of “Inuitology,” who made his own *ikiaqtaq* out of Inuit songs via the extensive ethnographic research he did in those communities. What is most important to note in Rasmussen’s adaptations are the technologies of exchange implicit to the stories’ movement, which work symbiotically with the narrator.

Foregrounding Inuit narrative resilience, Martin argues that these stories were not appropriated by Rasmussen, at least not in the sense that we generally understand that word as a diminishment. Instead, in their circular movement away from and back to the community, the stories Rasmussen was working with always already operated according to *ikiaqtaq* technology, which emphasizes reciprocity and community sustainability. According to Uqsuralik Ottokie, Inuit people are “told not to be stingy...

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> See “The Story of Kunuksaayuka,” [www.neveralonegame.com](http://www.neveralonegame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Cleveland, *Unipchaanich Imagluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People*, trans. by Ruth (Tatqaviñ) Ramoth-Sampson et al. (Anchorage: National Bilingual Materials Development Center, 1980), 101.

Don't keep it to yourself. If you are generous it comes back, and it will be a bigger amount".<sup>51</sup> In the sense that Ottokie outlines, sharing stories – much like sharing food and other “soft” objects – provides for a future-oriented system of nourishment and sustainability in which “ownership” is far less important than the health, well-being and continuance of the community. Emphasizing the imminent return of good relations (“it *will* be a bigger amount”), Ottokie makes plain how Inuit storytellers share stories with an eye toward the seventh generation and the possibility those stories hold as what Karyn Recollet calls “futures bundles”.<sup>52</sup> In the ways in which these stories eventually returned to the community, they fulfilled a cycle, independent of Rasmussen, that confirmed their resiliency and community-sustaining attributes. In this sense, *ikiaqtaq* “keeps the songs in the service of the community – even if that means sending them away from time to time”.<sup>53</sup>

When considered through the processes of *ikiaqtaq*, a technology which functions not only as a means to transmit content and mechanics across generations but as a system of reciprocal sustenance, *Never Alone* can more concretely be linked to long-standing systems of well-being that are built into Iñupiat storytelling practices. CITC President and CEO Gloria O'Neill identifies this sustainability as the “double bottom line”<sup>54</sup> of Upper One games, which means, equally, that *Never Alone* needed to generate profits for the Iñupiaq community while supporting and proliferating Iñupiaq knowledge, both within and outside of the community. Far beyond the capitalist/neoliberal usage of “the bottom line”, which uses the financial balance sheet as the primary guiding principle, here the phrase is shorthand for cultural resurgence. O'Neill illustrates how *Never Alone*, as an extension of Iñupiaq culture and stories, supports the community materially: putting food on the table, while simultaneously reasserting the power and potential of their long-standing storytelling traditions. Sending the story away, into digital contexts, and gaming consoles worldwide, it came back with very generous returns, much beyond the balance sheet. Importantly, those returns were not just financial: they were also cultural. In an interview with the *Guardian*, O'Neill outlines the Cook Island Tribal Council's (CITC) decision to invest in video games:

The board said: “we want you to make an investment, we want you to develop a double bottom line company, making money first and making impact second” ... So, we looked at everything from traditional real estate to funeral homes. We also wanted to be bold and be courageous, so we started thinking about how CITC could become more progressive. How could we use technology? And we asked ourselves at the time, what is the greatest asset of our people? And we said, our culture and our stories. It was one thing, however, for CITC to identify that the native Alaskan community's strongest asset was its long history of storytelling. But how to turn that into something that made money to help support the community in the future, while also sharing it with others? The answer, CITC decided, was to build video games.<sup>55</sup>

By identifying storytelling as a community asset and video games as a medium by which to proliferate and benefit from that asset, the CITC underwrote their fiscal security with the cultural integrity that sustained the Iñupiaq people for thousands of years. This is screen sovereignty in action: self-determined representation mobilized as the basis for community sustainability. And the double bottom line model worked. Thanks to the success of *Never Alone*, Upper One built a reputation as a significant

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 103.

<sup>52</sup> Karyn Recollet, “Choreographies of the Fall. Futures Bundles & Landing When Future Falls Are Immanent”, *Theatre*, 49.3 (2019), 89.

<sup>53</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 114.

<sup>54</sup> Jane Parkinson, “Alaska's Indigenous Game *Never Alone* Teaches Co-Operation through Stories”, *The Guardian*, Monday 29 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/29/never-alone-alaskas-indigenous-game-never-alone-teaches-cooperation-through-stories>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

player in the rising genre of “world games”, video games that “bring carefully-selected stories from indigenous cultures from around the planet to life in compelling, innovative ways”.<sup>56</sup> The Iñupiaq community, which, according to Amy Fredeen, the CITC CFO, included “everybody from eighty-five-year-old elders who live most of the year in remote villages to kids in Barrow High School” found new points of connection to community-specific systems of knowledge exchange passed down for thousands of years.<sup>57</sup> The Iñupiaq community also saw an influx of capital thanks to sales on the gaming platform Steam as well as mainstream gaming consoles and platforms like Xbox, and later iOS and Android, tapping directly into an indie gaming industry that was, at the time, reporting \$7 billion in sales.<sup>58</sup> When Fredeen told the *New Yorker* that Iñupiaq stories “can travel”,<sup>59</sup> it is therefore quite possible that she was not simply referring to the ready uptake of *Never Alone* into global culture (a unidirectional movement) but rather to the circular paths that Iñupiaq storytelling technologies mobilize, to support and sustain their relations in travelling away *and* returning home.

#### 4. Conclusion

Video game platforms are novel sites for reconfiguring historical narratives towards those which promote Indigenous sovereignty. Ikiqtaq, as *Never Alone* takes it up, is a future-oriented storytelling technology. In the sense that Inuit storytellers build stories so that they will flourish in their retellings (and thus in Inuit futurities), ‘tradition’ does not mean ‘stagnant’ nor even ‘historical’. Instead, the Inuit adaptation processes are relational — sharing and reciprocity are built directly into the story’s structure. Through adaptation, or, more specifically, ikiqtaq, Upper One Games realizes a model for Indigenous technologies anchored in cultural sovereignty and centuries-old storytelling practices. “A game 10,000 years in the making” is not just a clever tagline. *Never Alone*, and “Kunuksaayuka” for that matter, flourish in contemporary spaces because of the robust Inuit narrative technologies that make the movement of a story across time, space, and media not only possible but fluid, sophisticated, and materially advantageous. Drawing directly from centuries of Inuit storytelling, The CITC and Upper One Games underwrite the adaptation of “Kunuksaayuka” into digital space via community-specific models of cultural continuity and economic sustainability. *Never Alone* should therefore not only be celebrated for its content, which is remarkable, but for the innovation that the CITC and Upper One Games have made in Indigenous game design as an *extension* of community storytelling praxis: ikiqtaq.

Framed through adaptation, the research takeaways from *Never Alone* lay potentially foundational infrastructure for future Indigenous game development and analysis. The game teaches us about Iñupiaq culture, land, and language, certainly. Even further, however, it clears a formidable path for the future development of Indigenous games, as articulated through the gathering of traditional stories, protocols, and history. *Never Alone* makes its own space within the genre of video games by adapting the medium to resonate with Iñupiaq technology. Of course, ikiqtaq is not something that can be lifted out of Inuit contexts and mobilized in any Indigenous community. However, it does model a very successful, localized storytelling process that illustrates the potential for Indigenous *sovereignty* in video games. As more and more communities find the technological means to express their own sovereignties in digital space, video games, and other new media, will play increasingly important roles as sociopolitical tools. *Never Alone* is possible because of thousands of years of Indigenous

<sup>56</sup> “Never Alone. World Games”, [www.neveralonegame.com](http://www.neveralonegame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Parkin, “Could a Video Game Help to Preserve Inuit Culture?”, *The New Yorker* (2014), [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Mike Dunham, “Game Changer”. First Native-Produced Video Game *Never Alone* Brings Culture to the Console”, *Anchorage Daily News*, [www.adn.com](http://www.adn.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Parkin, “Could a Video Game Help”.

adaptive ingenuity. We are only just beginning to see that type of ingenuity surface in Indigenous video games. As scholars of Indigenous new media and Indigenous technologies, I hope that inspires us to read, play, and develop these games in conversation with the larger field of Indigenous literatures, and Indigenous studies.

Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life. The Practice and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 259 ISBN 978-3-030-84795-1

*Reviewed by* Jeff Berglund

“Give colonisers an inch, they’ll take a continent.”

Dreamtime saying @IndigenousX host Scott Trindall, March 2nd, 2021

*Indigenous Digital Life* by Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer offers powerful evidence of Indigenous presence and sovereignty, of creativity and engagement, of refusals and critiques, of desiring, and visionary paths for new futures.

The humorous and satiric tweet above – included at the outset of the fifth chapter titled “Fun” – is a pastiche, a palimpsest, and a cogent summary of the power of social media and emerging and transformative technologies to connect the past, the present, and the future. It simultaneously issues a critique of historical mythologies through the sophisticated use of rhetorically implied chiasmus, an allusion to commentary about the oppressed, all by employing a turn-about of a paternalizing cliché reminiscent of a comment in the narrative authored by then then-fugitive American slave, Frederick Douglass where he quotes an owner of human slaves: “give a [slave] an inch, and he’ll take an ell.” Trindall’s tweet invigorates debates and dismantles myths about terra nullius on which founding narratives and rationales about Australia’s “founding” and “settlement” have been built. It also issues a claim of Indigenous sovereignty, rooted in Indigenous wisdom and guidance from time immemorial, all delivered via a contemporary, edgy, and entertaining venue – Twitter – that engages individuals and groups across space and time.

*Indigenous Digital Life* is both a refusal to situate Indigenous Peoples in the past and a refusal of deficit models regarding Indigenous Peoples. It delivers on these necessary refusals through an examination of social media as a space for Indigenous action in a variety of forms, as a contemporary context for meaning-making that is distinct but never separate or apart from the challenges of power relations that structure the physical and offline world. Carlson and Frazer emphasize early in the book that social media is always mediated through race, class, gender, sexuality and political relations with land: social media is a key relational platform “through which settler colonialism is extended, transformed, challenged, and sometimes defeated” (12).

The book’s richness and many layers – each time I return to various parts, I discover new elements – come from the novel insights and stories provided by research participants. Carlson and Frazer note that information provided by participants have shaped the book’s ideas and content. Readers are the beneficiary of the authors’ combined decade of relationship building and research – supported by three Australian Research Council Grants – that spanned 2010-2020 and includes a mixed-method approach that employs semi-structured interviews, qualitative surveys, analysis of news media about Indigenous social media, and ethnographic materials collected by authors through their own social media use and research or what they reference as “netographic data” (10). These methods are further framed by stand-point theory that centers the experiences, knowledge, philosophies, and cosmologies of Indigenous Peoples and thus recognizes that Indigenous users of social media filter their experiences through their own Indigenous world views.

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Carlson has been on the forefront of research about online and social media use by Indigenous Peoples in Australia and has published a full-length book on identity, *The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2016), that includes a discussion of online complications of how Indigeneity is determined. It is no surprise, then, that the first chapter returns to this subject as the groundwork for many later chapters. This first chapter on identity and the second on community provide readers with an understanding of how both notions charge most interactions and inform Indigenous views of subjects explored or shared on social media. These chapters discuss the challenges individuals face online when their personal lives are subjected to scrutiny by others who may form online communities that are affiliative rather than those who are members of filial or kin-based communities linked by families of origin and place-based relations with Country. Performative and visual elements linked to identity and personhood are subject to scrutiny and become the means by which individuals are questioned and critiqued or valued and supported.

The book's remaining chapters cover the following intersecting and salient subjects: hate, desire, fun, death, activism, histories, allies, futures. Carlson and Frazer remark that these discrete subjects appear jumbled in many social media settings, particularly where the boundaries between users is porous and mixed, but even in some contexts where the community is divided about appropriate behavior. Depending on readers' own interests or experiences, particular chapters will stand out among the rest. I was most drawn to chapters with deep, rich examples drawn from Indigenous participants ("Hate," "Desire," "Fun," "Death," and "Activism"), rather than some of the more theoretically dense chapters such as "Histories" and "Allies," though these too offer a rich analysis of the ways that social media provides the space for these negotiations.

Chapters on "Hate," "Desire," "Fun," "Death," and "Activism" perhaps intrigued me the most as they emphasized the affective and emotional components at play in social media use. The chapter on desire and online dating gives a glimpse into aspects of social media that are often relegated to interpersonal interactions rather than communal spaces. The focus in this chapter encompasses a discussion of preference, a notion that is coded with settler colonial discourses about desirability. I suppose I gravitated to these chapters because they provided some of the most pronounced Indigenous agency and self-realization and they powerfully lay out fundamentally human and quotidian details about the lived experience of Indigenous Peoples. This story of Indigenous humanity should be 'a given' but an examination of the colonial archive and ongoing colonial settler aggression and violence provides clear evidence that the colonial project depends on stripping Indigenous Peoples of their very humanity. Social media provides a space for Indigenous People to be fully human: to enjoy, create, entertain, laugh, love, desire, learn, commit to political agency, nurture, mourn, commemorate. The chapter "Fun" examines in detail some exclusive Indigenous online social media groups and provides examples of experimentation, originality, humour, and pleasure, from the creation and dissemination of memes; the participation in hashtags such Chelsea Watego's #AnotherDayInTheColony; the posting of music videos during the COVID-19 lock-down in 2021 on #Koorioke; and, the creation of videos on #BlakTok through the TikTok social media platform. Such hashtags and groups, the authors note, support Indigenous social media users to affiliate and find like-minded audiences. Similarly, hashtags such as #IndigenousDads, #AboriginalLivesMatter, and #SOSBlakAustralia, among others, help galvanize and connect activist and social movements across the Australian nation, and in some cases, across the globe, as powerful demonstrated by the authors' exploration in the chapter, "Activism."

"Hate" is perhaps the most necessary and troubling chapter of them all, essential reading for anyone in the fields of Indigenous Studies, Digital Technology Studies, Cultural Studies, Settler Colonial Studies and for anyone who cares about the emotional and physical well-being of others. This chapter probes the dark underbelly of the online world by analyzing the racist and prejudicial actions that Indigenous social media users are subjected to. These involve racist stereotyping, racist humour,

interpersonal racist abuse, including that of well-known figures such as athletes, and actions or statements issued by online anti-Indigenous communities. Carlson and Frazer report that almost *all* of their interview subjects mentioned racism and that the experience was an intrinsic and routine part of being online, but one that was difficult to become inured to.

The chapter on “Death” offers a provocation that resonates deeply: that social media’s influence on grieving and mourning practices demonstrates the dynamic, *living* culture of Indigenous Peoples, one that is evolving, complicated, and future-leaning. This will come as no surprise to Indigenous Peoples, but it’s counter to settler discourse about Indigenous attitudes and rituals about death. Because Indigenous Peoples have been dispersed across the continent of Australia and the world, often due to forces linked to colonization, the in-person and physical work of Sorry Business has become increasingly complicated and social media has provided a means by which such obligations might be practiced or fulfilled from great distances. The lockdowns associated with the global COVID-19 pandemic have further shifted attitudes about grieving online. As a result, social media has become a site of complicated negotiations and intracultural contests over appropriate and “authentic” responses to death. Social media is now a venue where families and individuals first learn about loved ones’ deaths, where the images and names of the deceased are shared, and where Sorry Business is practiced. Furthermore, those grieving are witnessed, scrutinized, and sometimes joined by complete strangers, though perhaps members of chosen affiliated online communities. As a result, social media has turned inside-out some age-old protocols about privacy and control; grieving online is now more public for many rather than involving mainly intimate, familial and local place-based groups of mourners.

The final chapter of the book delightfully filters the broad strokes of the previous topically organized chapters through the framework of Indigenous Futurism and in its reminder that Indigenous Peoples are active agents engaged in being and becoming, that Indigenous Peoples are “always-already imagining and building other futures” (241). *Indigenous Digital Life* richly delivers on its promise to examine how social media is different for Indigenous People. It does so by realistically examining the pitfalls and threats that are ever-present components of social media and online life, that coexist alongside other transformative elements. *Indigenous Digital Life* deserves recognition and an expansive readership. It will change the way readers understand and think about their own actions and engagement on social media platforms.

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Denise Bolduc, Mnawaate Gordon-Corbiere, Rebeka Tabobondung, Brian Wright-McLeod (Eds.), *Indigenous Toronto. Stories That Carry This Place*, Toronto, Coach House Books, 2021, 304 pp., ISBN 9781552454152

*Reviewed by* Paolo Frascà

While treaty recognition is a very important step in the right direction, the Anishinaabe notions of land stewardship and communal relations with non-human beings need to come back to the forefront of the discussion of land. We speak in ownership terms because that is what is understood in the white world we inhabit. But if we could – as Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor has asked – unwind ourselves from the white words we have become, the idea that all lands are there to sustain life in a collective stewardship model doesn't seem so idealistic.

Wanda Nanibush, “Williams Treaties”, in *Indigenous Toronto*

As Nanibush highlights in the quote above, it is imperative to dismantle anthropocentric conceptions of relationship to land, as well as to name and relinquish the white gaze through which this relationship has been viewed and realized for the last five centuries in the Canadian context. While balanced Nation-to-Nation relationships, based on pre- and post-contact treaties and agreements such as the Two-Row Wampum (Guswenta) or One Dish One Spoon, can exist and should be pursued, a re-Indigenization of our settler worldview and a recentering of Indigenous knowledge must be prioritized. The teachings, histories, and stories offered within the collection *Indigenous Toronto. Stories That Carry This Place* are indispensable in this pursuit because they provide foundational knowledge based on which new, yet ancestrally rooted, kinds of Nation-to-Nation relationships can be formed.

The stories in *Indigenous Toronto* nurture a process of unlearning and relearning in a specific geographical and cultural context, encouraging readers to ground themselves in their local reality. At the same time, the texts invite readers who live in any industrial, colonial North American metropolis to search beyond the noise and beneath the asphalt for the stories it holds, as well as to recognize the contemporary Indigenous realities of their urban space. To that end, this book responds to an urgent need from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Toronto area, and beyond, to unearth and mobilize knowledges that have been obscured by colonial and migration histories. As Hayden King reminds us in his introduction to the volume, historical studies about the city of Toronto have described this place as being, for the most part, “empty and free for the taking”; King tells us that most historical accounts of this area refer to Indigenous people as marginal and passive to the history of the city and that, unsurprisingly, these accounts eulogize the theft of this land by Europeans as a noble undertaking (10-11). Therefore, *Indigenous Toronto* is a valuable contribution to the ongoing correction of the historiography on this city; its publication marks a significant moment in historical research on Toronto that allows Indigenous people to tell their own stories and speak of their own histories.

The collection features a diverse selection of pieces from Indigenous researchers, artists, elders, and knowledge-keepers, yielding a polyphonous volume that should be integrated in grade-school, secondary-school, and post-secondary curricula and that is linguistically accessible to a wide community of readers. The book begins with a section on Agreements, Naming, and Places: this section focuses on treaty-making processes in Ontario, their fallacies, and the material, cultural, spiritual and legal detriment that resulted from unfair negotiations. One article within this section, by Margaret Sault, focusses on the Toronto Purchase (Treaty 13), a devious process of land acquisition by

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the Crown that was settled only in the 2010s, and only monetarily. The second section of the book, titled *Trailblazers and Changemakers*, contains the stories of a number of figures of the Toronto Indigenous community who have left a mark on the city through their community work, art, activism, and scientific endeavours. Quite remarkable, in this section, is the story of Oronhyatekha, also known as Doctor O, a Kanien'kehá:ka medical professional and businessperson known for his extraordinary contributions to education, healthcare, and politics. The book's following section, titled *How We Carry This Place*, focuses on contemporary stories that exemplify how Indigenous knowledges and experience enrich and contribute to life in Toronto. Many are the social-justice initiatives led by Indigenous peoples discussed in this chapter: they include renaming projects such as Ogimaa Mikana, educational projects such as Spirit School, community well-being efforts such as Anishnawbe Health Toronto, and the remarkable housing projects led by Nokomis Verna Patronella Johnston and Millie Redmond. Finally, the book's section *Transforming the City* offers meditations on ways to reclaim Indigenous Toronto through exploration of the land, placenames, and by viewing the hi/story of the city through the teachings of the Seven Fires prophecy. In this last text, Elder Jim Dumont Onaubinisay observes that "we are in a time of change. It's a time when the voices of young people will become significant in creating the change that is coming, and the change that is already here" (278).

I reflect on *Indigenous Toronto. Stories That Carry This Place* as an Italian-born settler on Turtle Island, living in Toronto since my early teenage years, and as a person with a Canadian educational background that did not center the histories and teachings of the original peoples of this land. I receive and use the knowledge from this text from the position of a white guest in this territory and as an academic in the fields of Italian studies and Italian migration studies. This text is particularly important for settler-migrants, and settler-migrant scholars, because the histories and teachings in this collection are precious in the pursuit of Nation-to-Nation solidarity and of balanced knowledge exchanges.

Margaret Cozry, a contributor to the volume, reflects on the differences between Indigenous people and migrants in the city when she first arrived from the Ojibway Perry Island Reserve: "I found that Natives didn't have a community like the European immigrants all had. The Europeans lived together in enclaves and spoke their own languages and never learned who built the foundation of Canada: us" (154). For Italian-Canadian communities in particular, the relationship with this land is informed by notions of colonialism and ownership, especially if we think of the harmful use of ethnic icons such as Giovanni Caboto and Cristoforo Colombo to legitimize the presence of Italians in Canada. For Italian-Canadians, *Indigenous Toronto* can become a tool of liberation from narratives that bind us to empire and separate us from our histories as migrants and from our role as treaty people: "We all hold a piece of the puzzle", reminds us Albert Marshall (178). "Now that we know" (251), as the title of Lila Pine's piece within the volume forewarns, we must join efforts for reconciliation, recognition, and restitution. Thanks to *Indigenous Toronto*, we deepen our understanding of Toronto as an Indigenous city – beyond the spectralization, the obfuscation, the concrete – and we are reminded that settlers and migrants must be engaged listeners and followers of Indigenous leadership.



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## Notes on Contributors

**Vincenzo Bavaro** is Associate Professor of U.S. Literature at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. He was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Tulane University, New Orleans, in 2019/2020. He is the author of two books, and his most recent publications focus on issues of kinship in LGBTQ culture, African American Theater and performance, and urban conflicts over spatial justice. As a member of the editorial committee of *Ácoma*, the Italian journal of North American studies, he was the co-editor most recently of special issues on *Queer Families* (2019) and *Contemporary US Drama* (2021). For *Anglistica AION* he authored *Satisfied with the Stones. Notes on Masculinity, Land, and Family in Alani Apio’s Kamāu* (*Anglistica AION*, 14.2, 2010) and co-edited with Shirley Geok-lin Lim a special issue on *Making Sense of Mess: Marginal Lives, Impossible Spaces, and Global Capital* (2017).

**Jeff Berglund** is Professor of English at Northern Arizona University, where he teaches Indigenous and American Indian literatures and film, U.S. multi-ethnic literature, U.S. Southwest literature, and contemporary U.S. literature. From 2016 to 2022, he served as the university’s Director of Liberal Studies (now General Studies). He has received awards for his teaching, service, and research, including in 2008, the university’s prestigious award, The President’s Distinguished Teaching Award. In 2019 he was awarded by the Commission for Native Americans the Cal Seciwa Award for Outstanding Faculty. In addition to other scholarly articles, Jeff is the author of *Cannibal Fictions: American Explorations of Colonialism, Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (2006, University of Wisconsin Press), the editor of *The Diné Reader: An Anthology of Navajo Literature* (2021, University of Arizona Press, co-edited with Esther Belin, Connie Jacobs, and Anthony Webster), and co-edited and contributed to *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up: The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism* (2021, Rutgers University Press).

**Bronwyn Carlson** is a Professor and Head of the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. She is the author of *The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?* (2016), which includes a chapter on identity and community on social media. She is widely published on the topic of Indigenous cultural, social, intimate and political engagements on social media including co-editing and contributing to two special issues; the *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* (2017) on “Indigenous Activism on Social Media” and *Media International Australia* (2018) on “Indigenous Innovation on Social Media”, and an edited volume with Rutgers University Press (2021) *Indigenous People Rise Up: The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism*.

**Georgia Coe** is a non-Indigenous PhD candidate at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. Her PhD seeks to explore the lived experiences and digital immersions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gender, sex, and sexuality diverse peoples, as well as understand and promote their Social, Cultural and Emotional Wellbeing. Georgia’s research interests include Indigenous health and wellbeing broadly, gender, sexuality, digital platforms and connectedly, communications media and culture. Georgia’s recent publications are: “Writing Themselves In: Indigenous Gender and Sexuality Diverse Australians Online” (2022), and co-authored the articles “Transforming Colonial Social Suffering: Strategies of Hope and Resistance by LGBTIQ+ Indigenous Peoples in Settler-colonial Australia” (2022) and “Mobility Tactics: Young LGBTIQ+ Indigenous Australians’ Belonging and Connectedness (2022).

**Paolo Frascà**, PhD, is Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream and Language Coordinator in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Toronto. His work focuses on Italian language and

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**David Gaertner** is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies at the University of British Columbia and the co-Director, with Daisy Rosenblum, of the CEDaR Space, a community-oriented new media and digital storytelling lab. He is the author of *The Theatre of Regret: Literature, Art, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Canada* (2021), the editor of *Sóhkêyih̓ta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe* (2018), and co-editor of *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island* (2017).

**Chiara Minestrelli**, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media at the London College of Communication (UAL) and Course Leader of the BA (HONS) Contemporary Media Cultures in London. She holds a doctorate in Indigenous Studies from Monash University (Melbourne, Australia). Her monograph, *Australian Indigenous Hip Hop: The Politics of Culture, Identity, and Spirituality* (2017, Routledge) is an ethnographic study that investigates the discursive and performative strategies employed by Australian Indigenous artists to discuss politics, identity, culture and spirituality through Hip Hop music and culture. In 2020, she was awarded two LCC research Funds and organised a series of workshops called *Decolonising the Arts: Challenges and possibilities*, and *Anti-racism discussions*. Both events saw the participation of Indigenous artists, scholars and activists from around the world. She is currently looking at possible uses of VR for Indigenous performance and storytelling.

**Anna Mongibello**, PhD, is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” (Italy). Her research interests include digital activism, New Media Discourse, Digital Discourse and Social Media Discourse analyzed from a multimodal and discursive perspective; computer-mediated communication; Media and News Discourse; the intersections of language, ideology and power explored through corpus-based critical discourse analysis. She is a member of the Board of the Italian Association for Canadian Studies. In 2012 she was awarded the Doctoral Student Research Award issued by the Government of Canada and the International Council for Canadian Studies. She has published two books and numerous articles in national and international journals. She is the author of *Indigenous Peoples in Canadian TV News: A Corpus-based Analysis of Mainstream and Indigenous News Discourses* (2018). In 2021 she organized the international conference “Indigenous resistance in the digital age: the politics of language, media and culture.”

**Maria Cristina Nisco**, PhD in English for Special Purposes, is an Associate Professor in English Language and Translation Studies at the University of Naples “Parthenope”. Her current research areas include identity and diversity in news and legal discourse, through the lens offered by CDA and corpus linguistics. She has published extensively in edited volumes on the linguistic and discursive construal of ethnic and gender diversity, migration, and disability. Among her recent publications, the *International Journal of Language Studies* special issue on “Disability, Shame and Discrimination” (co-edited with B. Hughes, 2022, 16/4), “Online Abuse and Disability Hate Speech” (2020), “Disability in the Populist Press: An Investigation of British Tabloids” (2019), *Agency in the British Press: A Corpus-based Discourse Analysis of the 2011 UK Riots* (2016), *Languaging Diversity* (co-edited with G. Balirano, 2015). She is also the co-editor in chief of the international peer-reviewed *I-LanD Journal*, and the Deputy Director of the I-LanD Research Centre.