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Indigenous Peoples Rise Up

The Global Ascendency of Social Media Activism

EDITED BY BRONWYN CARLSON AND JEFF BERGLUND

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10

Artivism

The Role of Art and Social Media in the Movement

MIRANDA BELARDE-LEWIS

Protecting Indigenous rights is an ancient Native North American tradition.[1] My Pueblo ancestors were community organizers, strategic planners, and highly skilled at articulating and spreading the word about both high-level goals as well as the mundane acts required to create the revolution now known as the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, a synchronized attack on the colonizing Spanish conquistadores and the violence of their proselytizing Encomienda system on August 13, 1680 (Wilcox, 2009). The coordination between distinct and independent Pueblo communities relied on trade networks, bonds of family and marriage, and the ability to honestly name the brutal regime for what it was—a direct genocidal threat to Pueblo lives, culture, and spirituality. The Pueblo Revolt was successful, and for twelve short years the Spaniards stayed away from their former encampments in present-day New Mexico.

While the nature of Spanish reentry and recolonizing into New Mexico is the source of much debate, the fact remains that the Indigenous peoples of what is now known as North American are no strangers to political activism in staunch protection of our human rights. Now that we are 340 years post–Pueblo Revolt and firmly in a digitally networked society, how do we get our message across and organize disparate Indigenous communities and our allies

toward meaningful change and action? In this chapter I contend that art is a primary vehicle for the spread of activism, particularly regarding issues of social justice through an Indigenous lens. *Artivism* (art+activism) shines brightly from our phones, tablets, and laptops, illuminating messages that help other Natives and non-Indigenous allies to understand and ultimately support our ongoing battles to protect Indigenous rights for our children and our women and a safe environment for all. This chapter explores the role of art being transmitted through social media and how ancient networks are shifting and being activated precisely because of social media.

The Power of the Media Spotlight: A Brief History of Turtle Island Activism

The analogy of a spotlight is useful, particularly as Native and Indigenous issues and injustices are routinely left out of major international news cycles, despite the shocking brutality of criminal acts perpetrated against Indigenous peoples and the widespread knowledge of these acts spread through the Koori grapevine and the moccasin telegraph. Activism can be powerfully spread when messages are paired with vivid imagery, and the past five decades of Native activism in North America are no exception. A brief overview of several major activism battles waged between Native protectors and local, state, and federal law enforcement highlights the impact of imagery.

The Fish Wars (1960s–1974)

The 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek guaranteed the signatory tribes the right to fish the Puyallup and Nisqually Rivers in Washington State. The Puyallup, Nisqually, Muckleshoot, and Squaxin Island tribes had previously fished the waters since time immemorial, and the legal agreement to retain that right in exchange for millions of acres of land, water, and other natural resources was crucial to their signing of the treaty. As commercial fishing boomed in the Puget Sound region in the mid-twentieth century, tribal fishing rights were being blatantly ignored by the commercial and sport fishermen, and soon State Fish and Game wardens were not only refusing to enforce tribal rights to fish their rivers but actively working against the tribal fishermen, aggressively arresting them and taking the side of the commercial and sport fishermen. The term "Fish Wars" is used to describe the era during the 1960s up until the Boldt decision in 1974 (Wilkins, 2011), but the term is not hyperbole; the tribal fisherman were literally in danger as they fished in the Puyallup and Nisqually rivers.

Through the years of the Fish Wars, countless tribal members fished in protection of their treaty-promised rights to fish on their waters and were subsequently beaten and arrested by Fish and Game wardens. One fisherman came to embody the tribal perspective of the Fish Wars: Billy Frank Jr., a Nisqually man who was arrested over fifty times in defense of his and his community's right to fish.

As news of the Fish Wars began to circulate in mainstream news circles, Frank's best friend Hank Adams (Assiniboine-Sioux) developed and mobilized a media campaign that outlined and complemented the political campaign to assert the fishing portion of the treaty rights. Adams was directly influenced from the leveraging of media attention and campaign building by the Civil Rights movement, immediately preceding the Fish Wars. The Adams-led media campaign included coordinated "fish-ins," press releases, and support from celebrity allies like Dick Gregory, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Marlon Brando. The most successful campaign included Marlon Brando's participation in a fish-in and concluded with him and Frank getting arrested together in March 1964 (Wilkins, 2011). Adams, while not one for the spotlight, even now in his eighties, was absolutely crucial to the media attention and being able to leverage the messaging in support of tribal treaty rights. Ultimately the fight to assert sovereignty over the right to fish was upheld in the seminal case *U.S. v. Washington*, decided by Judge George Boldt in 1974 and affirmed by the Ninth Circuit of Appeals in 1975 (520 F.2d 676). Thanks to the careful planning of Adams and others, they set the precedent for leveraging a media spotlight in support of Indigenous activism through the use of compelling imagery.

The Occupation of Alcatraz (1969–1971)

As tensions built during the Fish Wars in the Pacific Northwest, Native activists were asserting rights in other areas of the country. A legal technicality regarding unused property helped prompt a group of Native activists known as the American Indian Movement (AIM) to occupy the former island prison Alcatraz, in San Francisco Bay (Smith, 1996). The participants of the Fish Wars in Washington were primarily Natives from local communities; the occupation of Alcatraz comprised a generation of recently relocated (and thus recently "urban") Native peoples from a vast range of tribal communities. Similar to the Fish Wars, however, was the rise of several prominent and key spokespeople, most notably Russel Means, John Trudell, and Dennis Banks, with Means and Trudell being the primary "point people" for media interviews. The media attention built off the previous campaign in the northwest Fish Wars and helped to bring awareness to the fight for Native civil rights. The fiftieth anniversary of the occupation of Alcatraz was commemorated in 2019 by a Paddle to Alcatraz (Alcatraz Canoe Journey, 2019; Ghisolfi, 2019) that coincided with the annual sunrise ceremony on Indigenous Peoples' Day coordinated by local Ohlone people (original Natives of the San Francisco region) and the Native community of the area. Canoe families from Washington, Oregon, and California participated in the first Paddle to Alcatraz.

The Fish Wars and the Occupation of Alcatraz both leveraged the power of the media. As images of brutality against Native peoples began to circulate, voices of non-Natives began to echo the concerns expressed by Native people. The images were crucial to building solidarity.

The Social Media Spotlight

Visuals of Indigenous activism captured media attention in the 1960s and 1970s through newspaper and television broadcasts; current visuals take the form of memes, infographics, and photographs that accompany the different movements and issues being spread through social media. The visuals strengthen and complement the messaging. We are squarely within the digital information age, marked by a global digital network that influences nearly all aspects of life. While Indigenous uses of social media incorporate similar aspects of mainstream users, the use of social media to inform a broad and international audience about injustices in specific local contexts has been invaluable for Native water, land, and human rights advocates. The role of social media in the quick mobilization of activists was first seen in Twitter use by the Arab Spring in the Egypt in 2012 (Howard et al., 2011) and quickly was picked up for similar uses in all different parts of the globe. The role of the visual, particularly the arts, cannot be discounted as a compelling factor in the propagation of Indigenous activism in the 2010s.

Idle No More (2012)

As Pascua Yaqui/Chicanx scholar Marisa Duarte noted in her book *Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet across Indian Country* (2017), the Idle No More movement was the first Indigenous movement of the networked age and marked the first widespread use of social media networks to organize in Native North America (see also Wilson and Zheng, this volume). When the Canadian government sought to privatize the water utility across Canada, a group of four women formed Idle No More to spread awareness of the proposed bill (Bill C-45). A core function of the Idle No More movement was the spontaneous mobilization of round dance flash mobs. Round dances are social dances used to build community and solidarity, usually danced at Native events such as powwows and community feasts (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014). The flash mobs began during the holiday season of 2012, with the majority of them taking place in shopping malls across the United States and Canada, culminating with a gathering at the Peace Arch at the westernmost border crossing between the two countries. The flash mobs, the gathering at the Peace Arch, and other direct actions were coordinated through, and posted on, social media networks and later documented by a number of Indigenous media groups (Rock Paper Jet, 2013).

The round dances were peaceful disruptions of the preholiday capitalist enthusiasm and were accompanied by a wave of artwork outlining the issues, calling for action and displaying hashtags to follow—another defining aspect of the social media activism now vividly on display. Guy Fawkes, the molded and stylized, smiling facemask adopted by the online hacktivist group "Anonymous," was re-created but was adorned with Indigenous Coast Salish designs of the West coast, particularly salient after Natives were being racially profiled at the shopping malls that were the sites of the round dances. Perhaps appropriately, an artist affiliation for the Salish style Guy Fawkes masks has not been attributed. A poster campaign of photoshop "mashups"—digitally altered photos featuring historic figures wearing contemporary clothing—with the words "RISE" and "Idle No More" was developed by Kiowa-Choctaw artist Steven Paul Judd. Ligwilda'xw Kwakwaka'wakw artist Sonny Assu adapted the Obama-era "hope" posters to incorporate the words "Idle No More, Round Dance, Never Idle, Teach, Resist," capitalizing on the iconic Barack Obama campaign poster colors created by Shepard Fairey and Indigenized with northern West Coast design elements (figure 10.1).

In many ways the IdleNoMore movement was the galvanizing model for Indigenous communities worldwide; it displayed for us the real-time results of using social media to broadcast time and locations of direct actions as well as helped build solidarity through the shared images of ourselves and our artworks in support of issues that directly threaten our ways of life and our resources.

Water Is Life (2016)

In the summer of 2016, a group of Native youth from the Standing Rock tribal community set up a camp on the banks of the Cannonball River to protest the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Over the next few months, the camp-in protest garnered the attention first of Native people across North America and the Pacific, then from around the globe. The primary vehicles to disseminate information about Standing Rock were word of mouth and social media (Deschine Parkhurst, this volume). When tribal elder and leader of the Standing Rock encampment LaDonna Allard put out the call via social media that fall, thousands made their way to North Dakota to #StandWithStandingRock, in what became one of the largest environmental protests in U.S. history (Estes, 2019; Estes and Dhillon, 2019).

Immediately, art became a primary vehicle to impart the message of #NoDAPL against the pipeline, and more importantly, as part of the #MniWiconi and #WaterIsLife messaging. There were many different subcamps at the Standing Rock camp, with the Art Action Camp (AAC) being one of them. At the AAC artists, lawyers, media teams, and those training in direct actions worked together to create cohesive messaging, across various audiovisual platforms. The artists in the AAC crowdsourced through fundraisers boosted on social media with T-shirts adorned with the artwork being the primary souvenir of the historic gathering. While discussing the AAC, Sarain Fox from the

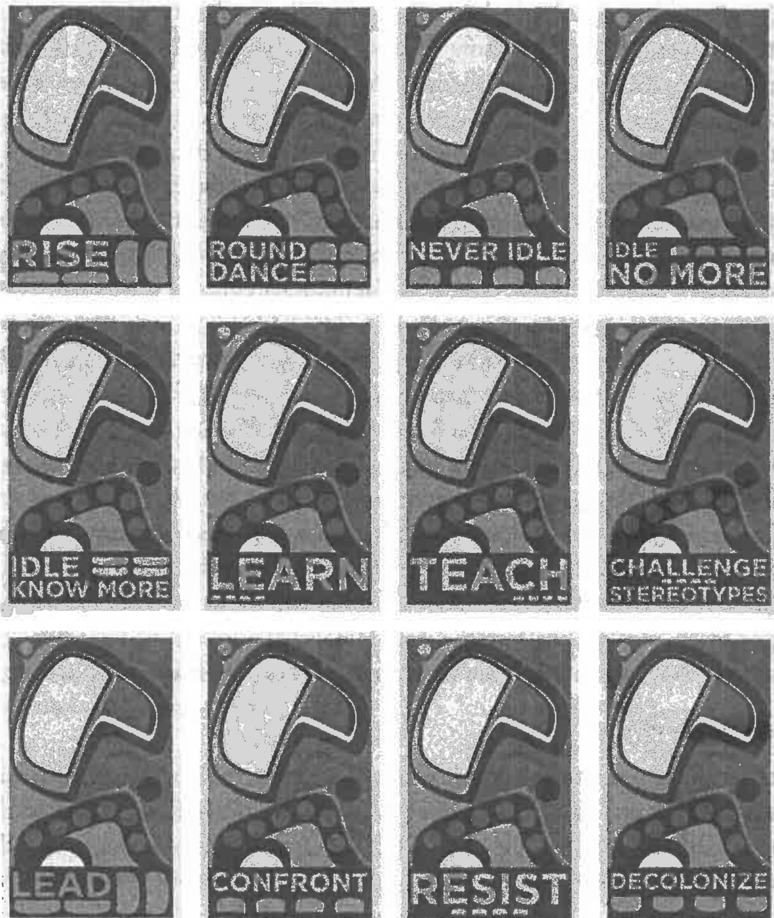

FIG. 10.1 There Is Hope, If We Rise #1–12, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist. (Credit: Sonny Assu, sonnyassu.com.)

show *Viceland* marveled at "the impact that art had on the messaging and the movement at Standing Rock" (Weisenstein, 2017). Fox reflected on the role of the artists in the camp, of the role of art and its efficacy in relaying activist messaging. In direct actions, large signs get damaged, get lost, and the folks holding them get arrested. Small-scale patches of the large banners were printed by the AAC and distributed to all the front-line people (Weisenstein, 2017). The front-line people are the focus in a hyper-documented world; having front-line people wearing the actual signs results in the art being featured in every frame, in every shot, from multiple angles and represents the thoughts and sentiments of the people at the center of that direct action. In an era of fake news and deep fakes, the ability to misrepresent words, to alter images, and to remove

statements from context, the messaging through the art remains as a consistent and pervasive visual representing a cohesive message regardless of how the image is staged or revised. The sheer volume of the art being produced and present at every direct action during the more than six-month encampment at Standing Rock echoed the vocal messaging from everyone present and interviewed at Standing Rock.

There were an incredible number of images that followed one of several major themes during what has colloquially become known simply as "Standing Rock." The themes are "Water is Life," "Mni Wiconi" ("water is life" in the Lakota language), "Defend the Sacred," "Kill the Black Snake," and "No DAPL." As was the case with many aspects that set the Standing Rock experience apart from other political and environmental Indigenous movements, the documentation of various aspects of everyday life in the camps was at a level we haven't yet seen. Case in point is the NoDAPL archive (https://www.nodaplarchive.com/), complete with links to artist websites and with more detailed information about many images of art created in support of the Standing Rock tribe, the Water Protectors, as they became known, for the people of Oceti Sakowin specifically, and in support of water and land rights for Indigenous people worldwide in general.

Just as the Idle No More movement had participation from anonymous and well-known artists, so did Standing Rock. Following the initial call to action, the elders advising the leaders of the camps developed community codes of conduct and dress, stating long skirts were required wearing for all women in the camps. Apsalooké fashion designer Bethany Yellowtail donated fabric, ribbon, sewing supplies, and her own time to conduct training in how to make ribbon skirts, a pan-Native symbol for Indigeneity. She also conducted a fundraiser using various merchandise levels as incentives for monetary donations, all of which benefited the Water Protectors at Standing Rock and became social currency, advocacy, and a symbol for ally-ship for those who purchased the clothing items, not just at the time but still today. Blackfeet artist John Isaiah Pepion used the donations of his fundraisers to contribute to the legal funds used to bail out the Water Protectors arrested during direct actions, and in exchange contributors received a T-shirt with a Red Power fist holding a braid of sweet grass breaking a black pipe signifying the DAPL.

One of the most recognizable images is the "Thunderbird Mom/Water is Life" piece created by Isaac Murdoch (Serpent River First Nation) and Michif (Métis) artist Christi Belcourt. "Thunderbird Mom" was adopted and used by many different artists; the images have since been made available in high res form suitable for silk screen patterns, free of charge if used to protest extractive industry, and in direct actions (Murdoch and Belcourt, 2021) (figure 10.2). One of the most iconic uses of Thunderbird Mom was subtitled "water is not a weapon," superimposed on an image of Water Protectors being blasted with

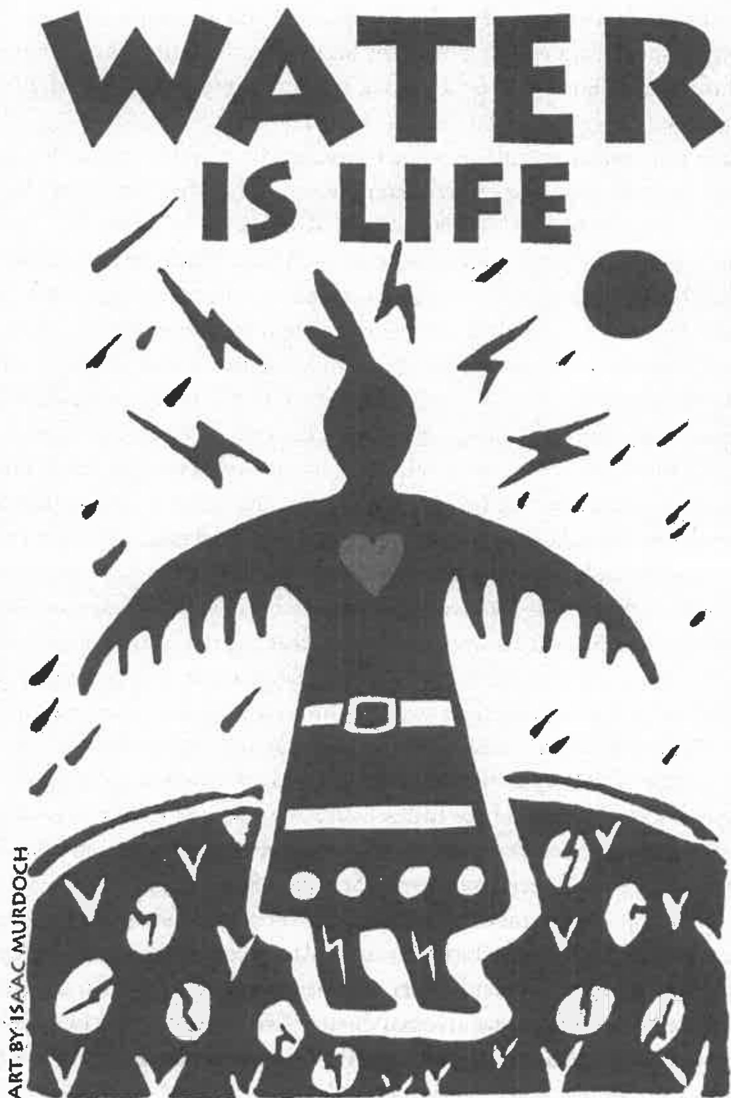

FIG. 10.2 Thunderbird Woman. (Credit: Onaman Collective.)

water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets in subzero temperatures on the night of November 20, 2016 (Lafleur-Vetter and Klett, 2016). The live images of Water Protectors being projected over social media via silent drone footage manned by Digital Smokesignals belied the immense fear, frigidness, and disbelief that must have been palpable among the hundreds of Water Protectors huddled together that November night. The fact that footage even exists of that night is a miracle of the technological age we are living in. The use of social media, particularly Facebook Live, provided a large measure of safety for the Water Protectors that night, and a level of accountability for the private security teams that militarized water against the people who were there to protect it; the importance of the live broadcasting from Standing Rock via social media cannot be overstated.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) (1492–Present)

For decades, indeed for centuries, Indigenous women and girls in the Americas have borne the brunt of the physical and sexual violence of settler colonialism, racism, and misogyny. The use of social media to increase awareness about the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in Turtle Island has worked in a variety of ways to increase visibility about this horrible injustice of unspeakable cruelty enacted in disproportionate ways against Native women along racial and gendered lines. The local awareness of women going missing along the "Highway of Tears" in British Columbia has existed for decades, but during the social media age, Indigenous activists and family members have been able to educate the world about just how dangerous life is for First Nations women in Canada. As awareness spread, the epidemic proportions of just how many Indigenous women have gone missing or are the victims of unsolved murders made visible and revealed the many unsolved cases in the United States and Mexico.

#MMIW has been the subject of general and scholarly consciousness (Duarte and Vigil-Hayes, 2017) and has been expanded to include MMIWG—missing and murdered women and girls—as well as MMIP—missing and murdered Indigenous peoples—acknowledging that Indigenous men and boys are also exploited and harmed in disproportionate rates relative to our numbers in the general population (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018). Duarte and Vigil-Hayes found that the use of #MMIW coupled with #Indigenous across Twitter channels was primarily to alert others about a missing Indigenous person; many times the social media posts were posted prior to police alerts notifying the public about a missing person (see also Moeke-Pickering et al., this volume).

Creating art based on the violent deaths and crushing pain of disappeared Indigenous women and girls is delicate work and has taken a variety of forms, primarily along lines of anger, in memorial, and toward justice and healing. One

of the most poignant examples encompassing all of these aspects is the Walking with Our Sisters (WWOS), a commemorative art installation project envisioned by Michif (Métis) artist Christi Belcourt. Belcourt began the project by first creating beaded vamps (the upper portion of moccasins that cover the toe) for each Indigenous woman then known to be murdered or listed as missing in Canada. In 2013 the conservative estimate was more than seven hundred missing or murdered Indigenous women. Belcourt crowd-sourced via Facebook not for funding but for help creating the vamps. News spread through the offline moccasin telegraph as well as through social media, and before long individual bead artists as well as beading circles were creating the vamps. Some of the vamps were created with specific people in mind; others were created to honor the memory and lives of women taken before their time; children's vamps were created to honor the lives of children stolen through the residential and boarding school eras. Bead workers and community members posted their creations to the WWOS Facebook group as they completed them with varying lengths of descriptive text about the design and materials used, what the design represented, and biographical information about the artist of the pair of vamps. Within a short span of five months, Belcourt's initial ask of seven hundred pairs of vamps had swelled to nearly eighteen hundred donated pairs, and what had started as a modest exhibition and memorial idea had turned into a multivenue installation memorial booked in three- to six-month increments from its inaugural year in 2013 through 2017. The popularity of the exhibition was so great that the exhibition run was later expanded through August of 2019—all by the networking power of social media.

Social justice campaigns like MMIW have been able to leverage social media activity for projects such as WWOS. They are rooted in the arts and bringing communities together and provide striking examples of the ways Indigenous peoples are amplifying our activism and our messaging through social media and digital networks in stunning ways.

Considering the Role of Social Media in the Movement

The use of social media to highlight injustices in disparate Indigenous communities to a global audience has the obvious benefit of being able to amplify an underheard message to thousands of "eyes" and potential allies. We only have to look at the direct action standoffs at Standing Rock to see how the use of certain social media functions, particularly Facebook Live, provided a level of safety against further abuses by the private security firms and Morton Country Sheriffs enlisted to protect the capitalist project of drilling and transporting oil. It is my firm belief that the thousands of Facebook users viewing, commenting on, and sharing the video of direct actions prevented further escalation, even in

the face of blatant racism, harassment, violence, tear-gassing, intimidation, and arrests. But as we jump in to boost the signal about our struggles to protect land and water, sacred sites, and vulnerable and exploited persons such as the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples, what privacy rights are we giving up? Information scientists, computer scientists, and data ethics experts have been sounding the alarm about the surveilling power of tracking algorithms coupled with the additional dangers for marginalized communities (Hoffman, 2019) as well as the potential for dystopian social credit tracking systems as has been hyped up about China (Matsakis, 2019). As consumers, we regularly sign over our privacy rights to various "free" social media products, but are these discussions and worries penetrating the Indigenous activist networks, particularly if the "point person" or centralized leadership is nonexistent, as compared to earlier activist movements such as the Fish Wars and the occupation of Alcatraz?

Another tension that requires research through an Indigenous lens by Indigenous information and computer scientists in particular involves how our online profiles contribute to the movements we are seeking to promote *and* that marks us for surveillance (Simpson, 2017). In an increasingly datafied and surveilled society, the use of art can increase the visibility of our struggles and our fight for civil rights, but does it also contribute to the way we are surveilled and targeted for more violence by individuals, hateful online and offline groups, and government agencies? How do we balance the tension between the use of art through social networks and the ability of settlers to exploit/cause further harm, and for our activists to avoid being targeted based on their social media footprint? Aside from reporting harmful, discriminatory, racist, or inappropriate behavior to severely overworked online mediators, or to crowd-source support to get others involved in a "call-out campaign" whereby many followers directly address a problematic post, there is at this point very little to dissuade online violence against anyone, let alone the vitriolic attacks on Native and Indigenous peoples who use social media for activism.

One shining example of solidarity comes from #settlercollector, a Twitter hashtag originating in Canada. Indigenous peoples being attacked by racist trolls can post #settlercollector and any settler-ally can and will jump in to the thread and educate their fellow settlers, relieving the Indigenous person of that burden. This tactic for self-protection, self-care, and mental wellness has been used during the recent era of Reconciliation in Canada, specifically in response to the online and physical threats of violence against the family and filmmakers working to expose the overtly biased investigation and trial surrounding the murder of Colton Boushie, a Cree man whose murderer was subsequently acquitted, exposing long-standing racism in the Canadian criminal justice system (Hubbard, 2019).

Conclusion

The long-standing role of art and visual imagery in the pursuit of reclaiming civil and human rights as Indigenous peoples is manifesting through social media in infinite ways. Earlier activist movements relied on point people, spokespeople, who were usually phenotypically Native—complete with a "Native" look of hairstyles (usually a braid or two, coupled with a folded headband), dark skin, and features, but who were also men. Indigenous activism in the era of social media no longer requires one person to represent entire movements, which in many cases helps prevent one person from being the sole target of online attacks and harassment. There are decentralized but unified messages being echoed across traditional and social media platforms. The active assertion of our treaty, civil, and human rights is being spread across social media from the hearts and minds of Native youth; we are being led by Native women and being guided by Indigenous elders. Our collective action is surrounded and supported by the visual imagery that powerfully expresses the activism of our generation.

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Elahkwah and Gunalchéesh to the people on the front lines, to the elders who have seen this before and who prepare us for what is to come, to the youth pushing us to fight for a better world, and to the artists who help us to communicate that vision.

Note

1 Throughout I use the terms "Native" and "Indigenous" interchangeably unless speaking of a specific Native nation.

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