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Representing Indigenous Protest on Twitter: Examining the Social Media Dialogue that Accompanied a Single Image of the DAPL Protests at Standing Rock

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Abstract:

This paper assesses the role of social media in public representations of Indigenous protest and justice issues. We employ an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of the social media commentary that accompanied a single, widely shared image taken from the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests. The image features a solitary individual on horseback gazing across an improvised barrier at a line of law enforcement officers who are flanked by military-style vehicles, and was widely shared within a few days of its first appearance on Twitter. Our primary argument is that the dialogue accompanying this photograph (i.e., captions) carry colonial undertones shaped by archetypal "media packaging." These representations may divert public discussion away from the justice issues that catalyzed the protests by focussing narrative elsewhere. Our methodology used reverse-image search technologies to locate relevant dialogue. A total of 148 tweets were analyzed, identifying archetypal labelling; paternalistic discourse; good/evil dualities; and subjective decentring as persistent themes. These outcomes align with previous studies on media representation of criminalized Indigenous activism, and in this paper are framed in the context of "media packaging" in alignment with the "Dead Indian" simulacrum. Our paper concludes with discussion about the potential consequences of disingenuous representations.

Introduction

This paper presents an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of the social media commentary that accompanied a single, widely shared image taken from the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests. Our primary argument is that social media users' representations of Indigenous protest carry colonial undertones shaped by archetypal

"media packaging" (Wilkes, Corrigall-Brown, & Myers, 2010, p. 333). This packaging frames Indigenous peoples within a simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994) informed by vestiges of mysticism and savagery replicating "Hollywood's Indian" (Rollins, 2011). These representations may divert public discussion away from the justice issues that catalyzed the protests by focussing narrative elsewhere. To test our argument we employed a novel methodology that pivoted on a single representation, rather than traditional social media research processes that focus on movements (e.g., "hashtags") or events. To this end, we made use of available reverse-image search technologies to develop a non-random sample of tweets that featured the image in question paired with the user's commentary.[1] Resultant analysis of the commentary identified a series of themes that undermined, or outright displaced, the socio-legal and political aspects of the DAPL protests. These arguments are framed by literature that identifies 1) the impact of media representations of Indigenous protest on public dialogue; 2) the role of internet-enabled communication platforms as modern repeaters of these representations; and 3) misinformed narratives about Indigenous causes stemming from digital invisibility.

Background: The DAPL Protests and Social Media

Beginning in early 2016, the actions undertaken by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (SRST) in defense of their traditional lands against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) garnered significant media attention. The proposed route of this pipeline, intended to carry shale oil from northern North Dakota to central Illinois, runs underneath the Missouri River just outside of the boundaries of the Standing Rock reservation. This route is understood to be a threat to the community's drinking water as well as their traditional lands and history. Moreover, the DAPL project and related bodies are accused of undermining consultation processes with Indigenous peoples and avoiding in-depth environmental assessments. By April of 2016 several protest camps had formed in

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[1] The social media service Twitter allows users to share images along with a brief (140 characters at the time of research) statement. These statements were the basis for our dataset.

areas to be affected by the pipeline, and an online petition campaign called "Rezpect our water" was launched (Hersher, 2017), followed shortly by the #NoDAPL movement on Twitter. Through the remainder of 2016 and into early 2017, the dramatic events of the anti-DAPL protests would play out on social media, frequently employing visual imagery to represent both the actions of protesters and those of police and military responses on the newsfeeds of social media users around the world.

As mentioned above, this paper's aim is to investigate the representations present in social media commentary that accompanied a single image (see Figure 1). This photograph began appearing on Twitter feeds in early November 2016, and features a solitary individual on horseback looking across an improvised barrier at a line of law enforcement officers. Attributed to photojournalist Ryan Vizzions and called "Protecting the Sacred," this image employs compelling imagery to represent the tensions between criminalized "activists" and the state. Vizzions' photograph drew significant attention on social media platforms — particularly Twitter — and was widely shared/retweeted during the latter months of 2016.

Despite its sympathetic framing of the DAPL protests, we argue that the related communications about "Protecting the Sacred" generated on social media didactically connects the subject of the photograph with longstanding colonial misrepresentations of Indigenous activism, rather than the underlying justice issues related to the protesters' motives. Social media commentary is character-limited and popularity-motivated, frustrating public engagement in discussions about the historic relations leading up to this moment and the broader legal discourse between the state and SRST leadership.

Figure 1: "Protecting the Sacred"

© Ryan Vizzions. Photograph is reproduced with the creator's permission. http://ryan-vizzions-l98k.squarespace.com/about-1/

Media representations of Indigeneity and Indigenous protest

Populist media plays a substantive role in shaping the public's understanding and interpretation of Indigenous relations with justice, particularly in westernized nations like Canada, the U.S., and Australia (Alia, 2010; Ferrell, 1999). While the media may occasionally leverage discussion of broader social issues like community health or structured discrimination (e.g., Duarte, 2017; Moscato, 2016), it primarily does so through a colonial lens that employs archetypal 'knowledge' of Indigeneity to frame discussions (Gilchrist, 2010; Monchalin, 2016). This media packaging focusses on confirmatory and contradictory representations of Indigenous peoples and their communities, frequently defining them as "problem people" (Fleras, 2011, p. 153). Thomas King (2012, p. 53) epitomized these simulacrum as the "Dead Indian":

> They are the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imagining and fears. North America has had a long

association with Native people, but despite the history that the two groups have shared, North America no longer sees Indians. What it sees are war bonnets, beaded shirts, fringed deerskin dresses, loincloths, headbands, feathered lances, tomahawks, moccasins, face paint, and bone chokers. (p. 53–55)

These representations run the gamut from noble savagery through to villainous debasement, yet continuously reinforce "stigma of problem people or menacing subversives" throughout (Fleras, 2011, p. 216). Not only that, they also confirm long-held stereotypes of Indigenous deviance by emphasizing imagery of poverty, gangs, and addictions (e.g., Garcia-Del Moral, 2011; Jiwani, 2006; Johnson, 2011; Leavitt et al., 2015). Historically, this framing of Indigenous peoples has been used to rationalize the imposition of Westernized justice within their communities; the same misrepresentations were then employed when the ill-fitting legal systems failed (Weaver, 2014). In short, the "Dead Indian" trope is often employed within media formats to simultaneously explain why Indigenous communities come into conflict with the law, and why law fails to fix these communities.

These typifications are particularly relevant when considering media coverage of Indigenous collective activism like the DAPL protests. Popular media formats frequently use depictions of violence and tactics of disruption to frame protests and protesters as criminal "occupiers" (Fleras, 2011; Wilkes et al., 2010), avoiding 'uneasy conversations' about the underlying reasons for the protest and undermining the complexities of land negotiations, duties to consult, and even Indigenous human rights (McCallum & Holland, 2010). This "transgressive" framing (Barker, 2015, p. 52) provokes public responsivity by drawing on latent fears and hostilities rooted in the above-mentioned simulacrum, fueling anti-Indigenous sentiment when occasional concessions — such as Gladue courts — are made (Findlay, 2001). To this end, Miller's (2005) analysis of media coverage during the 1995 Ipperwash crisis identified a pattern of

reporting that represented Indigenous peoples as troublemakers acting illegally, and called upon the violent conclusions at Oka and Gustafsen Lake to colour the discussions. Moreover, he noted that the media coverage vested disproportionate significance in official statements over those made by the "occupiers," espousing a sense of finality in the provincial government's "legal entitlement" (Miller, 2005, p. 36) to the contested lands. These observations are symptomatic of a media environment that prioritizes "episodic framing" (Iyengar, 1991, p. 14) of current events, employing momentary and compelling imagery or statements to form public representations of Indigenous justice issues rather than delving into broader thematic discussions.

Imagery and Public Sentiment

Modern, internet-driven forms of media consumption have only amplified the reliance on compelling imagery to frame public sentiment. The new participatory topography of social media prioritizes easily consumable narratives whose significance is determined through metrics of popularity such as the shares, likes, and upvotes encountered on various popular websites (Howard, 2008; Yoo et al., 2016). Beyond simply sharing the news, this modern framework prioritizes memic transmissions that encapsulate both the immediate implications of a current event and also underlying ideologies in simplified formats that employ truncated language and simplified visual imagery (Dawkins, 2016; Hine et al., 2017). News photographs therefore provide an easily digestible, concise "visual synopsis" (Wilkes & Kehl, 2014, p. 481) of events that, when accompanied with simplified captions, can dramatically inform public narrative.

Again, these observations extend to media representations of Indigenous protest: Wilkes and Kehl (2014) traced the usage of a single image taken during the 1990 Oka crisis to identify imagery's role as a vessel for multiple ideologies through populist rhetoric. The "Face to Face" picture, taken by Shaney Komulainen, depicts a masked Indigenous protester glaring into the face of a private in the

Canadian Armed Forces (see Figure 2). Wilkes and Kehl (2014) note that "Face to Face" has been accompanied by captions of peacekeeping, Quebecois nationalism, Kanien'kehaka ('Mohawk') nationalism, and anti-Indigenous sentiment throughout the photograph's history before ultimately being used as an icon of Canadian heritage. The dynamic trajectory of the image's usage is therefore indicative of the potential influence that co-opted imagery paired with reflective commentary may have in mobilizing misrepresentations of Indigenous protest.

Figure 2: "Face to Face"

© Shaney Komulainen / The Canadian Press file photo

Twitter as Representation

As noted above, the popularity-driven nature of social media has taken reductionist captioning to a whole new level. This is particularly evident on the social media platform Twitter, which until very recently limited all written commentary to just 140 characters. Despite this limitation, the platform is widely cited as one of the most influential mechanisms for communicating public sentiments (e.g., Bollen et al., 2011; O'Connor et al., 2010; Schultz et al., 2011). One

of the ways of getting around the character limitation is the pairing of commentary with imagery: del Olmo and Días (2016) observe that imagery has become the predominant form of communication on the platform. In the content-heavy social media environment, compelling imagery appears to have become a significant vessel for representing opinion and ideology, particularly for those external to the immediate situation (Kharroub & Bas, 2015).

Additionally, Twitter's highly connected microblogging approach extends global communication of representations through the sharing ("re-tweeting") of messages by users, theoretically empowering non-traditional leaders to communicate perspectives. To that end, O'Connor et al. (2010) suggest that Twitter serves as a litmus for broader public sentiment on a given issue, identifying significant correlations between traditional polling and Twitter keywords. Indeed, several authors have identified the significance of Twitter as a novel mechanism for communicating Indigenous issues and engaging in protest, with the most notable example being the popularization of the Idle No More movement (e.g., Barker, 2015; Tupper, 2014). Yet despite this opportunity, recent studies have problematized Twitter's role in shaping public sentiment by further exploring the genealogy of opinion leadership. Specifically, Bruns and Stieglitz (2012) illustrate how a core group of politically motivated Tweeters shaped narratives about the 2012 U.S. federal election through communicative volume and connectedness. Similarly, Yoo et al. (2016) demonstrate that the timeliness of these postings also shapes their level of saturation. Thus while Twitter may serve as a relatively representative indicator of public sentiment, the pedigree of these sentiments must be criticised.

This Twitter effect poses a significant challenge when considering representations of Indigenous justice issues on social media. One must consider the source of this messaging and its underlying implications. For example, the voices of colonized and marginalized populations are rarely heard in mainstream media forms, even in instances where their interests are the subject of discussion. Leavitt et

al. (2015) define these omissions as symptoms of "media invisibility," explaining this phenomenon doubly stigmatizes Indigenous peoples by ignoring their perspectives while also shaping their self-perception through the application of colonial-derived stereotypes. This paradox is amplified in the modern participatory media environment, which tends to reflect the perspectives and morals of dominant global social groups who seek to affirm their beliefs online rather than engage in ideological exchange. Additionally, research has demonstrated that Indigenous communities generally experience lower levels of internet connectivity, particularly in private dwellings (McMahon et al., 2014). These structural factors render many Indigenous communities as "digitally invisible" (Longo et al., 2017). Indigenous voices are similarly drowned out by the volume of individuals speaking about them. This may in turn have consequences for settler-colonial relations. As Wotherspoon and Hansen (2013) note, widespread public uptake of Indigenous protest movements like Idle No More may contribute toward Indigenous social exclusion in policy-making and ultimately harm its intentions.

Current Study and Critical Discourse

As discussed above, the focus of this study is on the social media commentary that accompanied the widespread circulation of "Protecting the Sacred" on Twitter. While the subject and aesthetic of the image, as well as similar depictions of criminalized activism at the DAPL sites, warrant future examination, our objective is a critical assessment of the dialogue accompanying it. Specifically, we argue that social media participants engage in a system of cultural brokerage (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013) that pairs language with striking imagery to communicate emotion, ideology, and narrative. The resulting knowledge exchange may be disingenuous to the intentions of the depicted actors, who are subject to digital invisibility and whose voices are often unheard. In the case of the anti-DAPL protests, our contention is that the commentary accompanying representations (like the "Protecting the Sacred"

photograph) reaffirms colonial assumptions about Indigenous relations with justice. Our approach hinges upon the assumption that participatory social media now acts as proxy for traditional information sources, playing significant roles in knowledge creation. Further, we also assume that rapid, popularity-based memic transmission of reductionist iconography significantly shapes this knowledge exchange, reaffirming populist narratives that have historically been formed through traditional mediums, jeopardizing settler-colonial relations by potentially fostering Indigenous social exclusion.

Given these assumptions, we elected to critically assess social media communications through an ECA lens. At its core, ECA aims to identify the contextual function of language in reifying 'naturalized' social practices, grounded by research parameters which may include time, medium, or context (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Moreover, ECA's focus is primarily directed toward identifying patterns and generating concepts intended to support theoretical development in lieu of rigid empirical approaches utilized in traditional content analysis schema. ECA therefore provides a framework for critiquing the taken-for-granted assumptions of social values as they present themselves in communicative technologies, leading toward an explanatory critique. This approach is particularly adaptable to modern networked communications whose participatory elements have dramatically shifted the nature of public dialogue (O'Keeffe, 2012). Using this frame, we focussed on two research questions:

> *Research Question 1: How does the social media commentary associated with the equestrian photograph, "Protecting the Sacred," serve to reify archetypal discourse about Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity?*

This first question is intended to explore the implicit narratives associated with the photo "Protecting the Sacred." Our contention is that this messaging recreates the colonial perceptions of indigeneity present in traditional forms of media, and that this process occurs

even when the language is framed in a sympathetic or supportive manner.

> *Research Question 2: How might this commentary shape public perceptions of the Standing Rock/DAPL conflict? How might it affect greater settler-Indigenous relations?*

Second, we aim to investigate the potential latent factors stemming from these widely circulated representations. We argue that the rapid proliferation of imagery in the modern digital visuality paired with the longstanding media misrepresentations described above pivot on criminalized narratives and ultimately engender public sentiments that do not align with the concerns and issues faced by modern Indigenous peoples.

Methodology

Data Gathering and Analytical Approach

Data for this study were collected directly from the social media platform Twitter. While this service does not encapsulate the entirety of social media, it is amongst the most popular services, with an estimated 328 million active users (Statista, 2017). Additionally, the open application program interface (API) simplifies data gathering from Twitter by minimizing hidden or non-public conversation, making most dialogue (relatively) easily accessible.

Despite the relative openness of Twitter, the current study's reliance on a single image presented considerable methodological challenges: whereas a robust field of analytical software has developed for other digital metrics (e.g., text-postings, geolocation, and time), there is a distinct lack of service for parsing out imagery. Additionally, one of dominant facets of the internet age is a general disregard (or apathy) toward intellectual property and copyright (e.g., Menell, 2013). This further complicated data gathering as multiple identical versions of the photograph were shared by Twitter users — indeed, a reverse-

image search through the online service TinEye, limited to the Twitter.com domain, identified at least 43 iterations. To overcome these obstacles we assumed a broad approach to data collection that employed minimal limitations. This entailed a Google "search by image" query inclusive of Boolean operators to search for all occurrences of the "Protecting the Sacred" photograph on the Twitter.com domain. The reverse-image search tool employs a complicated algorithm that incorporates metadata (i.e., hidden information about the photograph) as well as image characteristics to mathematically produce a "fingerprint" which is then compared against billions of archived photos (Jing et al., 2015, p. 1891). In total, the Google search identified more than 419,000 occurrences of the image on Twitter, with most appearing in November of 2016.

Unfortunately, the Twitter search API uses a dynamic framework that restricts unregistered data collection. While this limitation appears to be implemented in order to avoid compromising users' identities, it subsequently limits any single actor from requesting more than 350 tweets at a single time (Bruns & Liang, 2012). Moreover, third-party search results like those provided by Google are drawn from a live stream of tweets (with a velocity of approximately 9,000 per second), making traditional crawling mechanisms technologically unfeasible. As a result of this volume, Google opts not to cache tweets, which translates into a limited time duration for recording search results (Patel, 2015). Although other third-party "scraping" services are available, they provide unsatisfactory and cost-prohibitive solutions.[2]

Given these limitations, the researchers were able to isolate a set of approximately 1,000 unique tweets through multiple iterations of reverse-image searching. The collected tweets were arrayed in spreadsheet and then manually parsed by the co-authors according to an elimination algorithm: Retweets (i.e., forwarding without

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[2] Most services approached by the researchers were unable to provide a reverse-image search process; the best available option was to select tweets containing an image and relevant hashtag. This provided a data set of 400,000 tweets that required manual parsing, and an estimated cost of $1,000.

comment), duplicate comments, and hashtag-only (i.e., no substantive comment) tweets were not retained for study. Moreover, the researchers conducted a partial identification process to ensure the validity of commentary through the Botometer service,[3] which estimates the likelihood that a provided username is a false, or "bot," account. In this study's case, none of the identified user accounts appeared likely to be bots. Upon completing the screening processes detailed above, a total sample of 148 tweets were retained. While this appears to be a relatively low number of data points, it should be noted that the ECA framework prescribes an emphasis on conceptual relevance over frequency and representativeness. This "progressive theoretical" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 56) approach to sampling therefore argues that substantive arguments can be made from limited but well-selected materials. For the present study, the selection procedures described above ensured that the sample, although small, provides a conceptually robust selection of data.

The co-authors engaged in an iterative-inductive analytical process designed to identify persistent themes within the data. Upon establishing a research protocol grounded in the concepts presented by King (2012) and Wilkes et al. (2011) above, each author coded the first fifty tweets in the dataset independently. The researchers then reconvened to compare coding and ensure inter-coder reliability, and correct any significant differentiations. The entire sample of tweets were then re-coded by a single author employing the agreed-upon codes (Moghaddam, 2006). Upon completing this preliminary cycle, the authors worked cooperatively to identify thematic relationships amongst codes, as well as the interrelationships of the broader themes in the context of this study's aims. The goal of this axial coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Moghaddam, 2006) was to identify the narrative forms present in all collected tweets. Broadly speaking, the emerging categories included "archetypal labelling," "paternalistic dialogue," "good/evil dualities," and "decentering from Indigenous

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[3] https://botometer.iuni.iu.edu

issues." The results described below are loosely organized along the implicit/latent lines of the research questions.

Results

Implicit Representations

Archetypal labelling (*n* = 42) As discussed above, the trope of the "Dead Indian" (King, 2012, p. 53) in the media plays a significant role in shaping dialogue about Indigenous justice issues. The use of colonial archetypes — vis-à-vis the "Dead Indian" described by Thomas King (2012) — shape public narratives, legitimizing and confirming long-held perceptions of what it means to be "Indian" and why they often encounter trouble with the law. Its application thus effectively differentiates Indigenous peoples, framing them as exotic and mystic. Viewed from this perspective, social media commentary about "Protect the Sacred," which frequently drew upon these caricatures, reconfirms these normative assumptions and reduces narrative about the Standing Rock protesters into simplified portrayals of noble savagery:

> Tribes speak up for sacred land, police force escalates, human rights abuses spiral. But protestors do not quieten.

> Peaceful #indigenous demonstrators/warriors met w/vile practices of #NDlawEnforcement as @POTUS + @CivilRights look away.

> Sioux dignity lesson in front of the Dakota gas pipeline that crosses its lands: "Defend the sacred" Impressive. Solidarity!

> Today I saw brave water protectors pray while being tear gassed. Their bravery is only surpassed by their inner peace.

The examples provided above demonstrate internalized abstract notions of Indigenous identity that draw upon mythologized concepts. Terms like *warrior*, which in itself has significant and

complex cultural meanings,[4] *inner peace*, and *sacred* are employed with nebulous definition to inform an ethereal sense of Indigeneity. Again, the implication of this discourse is that Indigenous peoples are "others," operating transcendentally from the mainstream.

Social media commentary also paired depictions of Indigenous peoples with deviantized acts, such as the criminalized activism that took place in North Dakota. These depictions normalize resistance as a core element of Indigenous identity, framing the protests (and not the underlying legal machinations) as righteous and justifiable. In many cases this was accomplished by employing historic examples of injustice to garner sympathy amongst readers:

> #HappyThanksgiving 500 years of oppression of Native Americans continues at #StandingRock

> #Thanksgiving Day is here. Let's not forget how it all began, Native Americans helping Pilgrims survive, and to be thankful for each other.

> The greatest genocide of human history was made in the Indians. 60 million people were killed, 800 thousand Indian left behind. Not enough!

Whilst this commentary does promote greater knowledge about the injustices of colonization, it frequently pairs this messaging to historic examples. This "historicism" is accentuated by reliance on the "Dead Indian" simulacrum, serving to reify media tropes rather than develop modernized presentations of Indigenous peoples.

Paternalistic dialogue (*n* = 29) Paradoxically, the messaging of support and righteousness was also often accompanied by

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[4] For a nuanced exploration of "Warrior," we refer you to Taiaiake Alfred's 2005 manuscript *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*.

commentary that undermines the autonomy of Indigenous peoples in seeking redress. Again, this is a reflection of long-established representations that rely on colonial perspectives to frame Indigenous peoples as savages in need of reformation (Johnson, 2011). This normative exchange of savagery popularizes patriarchal tones for settler-Indigenous relations that imply a need for interference by colonizers in order to save the savages from themselves (Chandler, 2014). In many cases the tweets accompanying the photograph recreated these sentiments by openly calling on external parties to intervene at the behest of the Standing Rock protesters:

> Finally good news from North Dakota. We need to protect les autochtones!!

> Army Corps 'Protects' Standing Rock Protesters From Police Brutalization By Telling Them To Get Out Of The Way

> On Dec 4th, hundreds of veterans will head to Standing Rock! Thank you for your service!

> 2017 will be the year of people power. From Trump, to pipelines, to Indigenous struggles and fights all over the planet. We need you all.

> Moreover, the tweets often called for the application of administrative control by the U.S. president and presidential candidates, or through Constitutional rights — concepts stemming from a historic document that instrumentally set out to undermine Indigenous autonomy (Miller, 2005):

> "Right to peaceful demonstrations"

> This under an @BarackObama administration is stunning. @POTUS your voice must be heard now. This is beyond unacceptable #Disgraceful

@realDonaldTrump now that you're president. Fix it.

This application of paternalistic dialogue illustrates how long-ago formed "contours of Indianness" (King, 2012, p. 11) are being replicated through social media commentary. Specifically, representations calling for state interventions at the behest of Indigenous protesters undermines ongoing justice negotiations between Tribal and state/corporate leaders by suggesting to the broader public that these are peoples who need to be saved. Again, this is indicative of an unshakeable mythos of savagery that persists even amongst those who sympathize with Indigenous causes.

Latent Messaging

Good/evil dualities (*n* = 53) The images and commentary emerging from public narrative about the anti-DAPL protests have also been appropriated as proxy for ongoing global good-versus-evil debates. These broad discussions rely on a dualistic trope that represents faceless, powerful, and elitist institutions as aggressors carrying out gross injustices against relatively helpless everyday "Americans." Considering the earlier framing of Indigenous protesters at Standing Rock as 1) historic archetypes engaging in justifiable defiance, and 2) innocent and powerless victims of authority, "Protecting the Sacred" provided a particularly relevant visual representation of this duality:

> When a picture is worth a thousand words (here replace words for evils). Picture of Standing Rock Rising.

> Image of the week of the protests of the Sioux Indians against oil pipeline in #StandingRock.

> Though peaceful, having to face an army of law enforcement. What say you, @POTUS?

> #DavidVsGoliath moment

This messaging, though powerful in its own way, minimizes the nature of negotiations between SRST, DAPL administration, government agencies, and the local public into an oppressor/oppressed narrative. Dualities of this nature jeopardize a forced public opinion, leading into polarized and often irreconcilable differences between political or ideological groupings (de Costa, 2017). In this context, representations of the DAPL protests as good versus evil may ultimately harm the justice process by forcing the public to "choose a side." A second noticeable trend within this theme is a tendency amongst social media users to employ the photograph in more abstract manners. Specifically, commentary often paired the image with ambiguous and generalized political statements that reduced statements about the Standing Rock protesters into non-associated political debate:

> This photo seems even more resonant after the election of You Know Who.

> Meanwhile in America, the war at home.

> The real battle of the world is between those who defend life and those who destroy it. Which side are you on?

> Fight neo-liberalism! Fight capitalism!

Decentering (*n* = 34) Finally, in connection with the previous theme, a number of tweets were identified that disconnected the "Protecting the Sacred" photograph from the Standing Rock protesters and instead applied it to a range of alternative ideologies. This "decentering" refers to the reorganization of dialogue about "Protecting the Sacred" along unrelated conceptual lines. This observation might best be understood through recalling Monchalin's (2016) critique of the sexualized "squaw" wherein she observed that traditional cultural and spiritual items like the headdress and war paint were donned by scantily clad European pop stars to denote exotic sexiness. Similarly framed, an image denoting a lone

Indigenous person standing in defiance against representatives of the state provides tempting allegory for broader political tensions:

> This photo is all of us now.

> All the guns in the world can't save your soul.

> This is disgusting. This is what dictators and authoritarians do when their people protest against them. Just shameful.

> The voice of the people is louder than the roar of the cannon.
> ~ Armenian proverb

This misapplication decentres representations of the DAPL protests from dialogue about justice and repurposes it to tangentially related and largely non-Indigenous issues. Much of this commentary aligns with what C. R. King (2013) termed "commodity racism," reflecting the preponderance of Eurocentric media corporations to use the exotic mysticism of Indigeneity as a marketing tool that denotes an alternative to modernity. Rather than encouraging dialogue about the DAPL project and its impact on local Indigenous populations (even allowing for previous archetypal labelling), these social media posts used the photograph in question as an analogous tool. Furthermore, many commenters wholly removed any notion of Indigeneity from their tweets and instead reconstructed its meaning to align sensationalist tropes:

> As I said a few weeks ago, the great photojournalism of 2016 is continuing to resemble stills from a scary, not-entirely-realistic movie.

> If they put this scene in a movie you'd accuse the director of laying it on too thick.

> The one industry in which America has now surpassed China is photos of lone protesters standing up to militarized authoritarianism.

Here, the recollection of mass-media tropes, particularly those formed by Hollywood, undermines the veracity of the events occurring at Standing Rock and the contested DAPL sites by comparing them with fictional representations; in other words, they jeopardize fictionalizing the anti-DAPL protests.

Discussion

Our study adds to the growing body of literature on (mis)representation of Indigenous justice through application of a novel analytical tool. Visual imagery has become a dominant medium for ideological exchange on social networking platforms. As demonstrated above, the photograph and accompanying commentary can serve as an effective vessel for communicating ideology; moreover, the relative ease of reproducing imagery in digital environments subjects the medium to ever-increasing rates of co-option. This seems to be the case for "Respect the Sacred," whose wild popularity in the latter part of 2016 led to its association with a range of social media commentary that frequently misaligned with principle components of Indigenous justice (e.g., Weaver, 2014). Our analysis demonstrates that the photograph's usage on Twitter often served as a mechanism to demonstrate archetypal narratives in participatory media. Indeed, at least in the context of tweets about the DAPL protests, we found that the simulacrum of the "Dead Indian" (King, 2012; King, 2013) plays a pivotal role in shaping public commentary about Indigenous justice related to the DAPL (perhaps most directly demonstrated through the public's frequent use of "Indian" as a descriptor). There may also be a corollary effect on broader discussions of justice as the mythologized "Indian" is not compatible with Western justice systems (Weaver, 2014; Riley, 2011).

We also observed that these representations of Indigenous justice reify interventionist assumptions about autonomy. In so doing, the Twitter commentary simultaneously ascribes sympathetic reception of the contested issues while also maintaining social differentiation, mirroring historic rationales for colonial "justice" practices like residential schools or forced migration (Johnson, 2011). In this context, the commentary provided above recreated the implication of media messaging that Indigenous peoples cannot save themselves, so we (the colonizers) must save them. Our study also illustrates a reductionist trajectory among social media commentary that frames Indigenous-colonial tensions as a simplistic good-versus-evil dichotomy. As discussed by de Costa (2017), representations of this manner may force a polarization on the issues raised by DAPL protestors as popular depictions begin to align with socio-political orientations.

While such polarization may seem commonplace, especially in the context of social media, it risks entrenching narratives that could impact justice relations (e.g., Miller, 2005) or even encourage co-option of the image for alternative usage as was described by Wilkes and Kehl (2014). Similarly, the noted decentring trend within Twitter commentary may serve to move the subject of "Protecting the Sacred" away from the social justice issues raised by DAPL protesters and instead employ it as a rhetorical device. This allegorical employment reframes the intent of the imagery along myopic, populist lines, abstracting its original intentions and replacing them with non-sequiturs.

Limitations

Several limitations to this paper should be considered. First, the methodology provided above does not ensure saturation nor triangulation. Indeed, given the technical limitations described earlier, we were only able to provide a relatively small sample. Furthermore, the limited data availability meant that we could not employ any form of a random sampling framework. Thus we cannot

claim that this dataset or our findings carry any representative weight. To help ameliorate these substantial limitations, we rely upon the principles of qualitative media analysis introduced by Altheide and Schneider (2013). To this end, we propose that our observations be considered a reflective interpretation about dialogue stemming from and relating to a single event.

Second, it should be noted that social scientists are only just beginning to unravel the contextual meaning of social media in the daily lives of connected individuals. Whilst Twitter is a widely used medium, there is no guarantee that it exhaustively represents the perspectives and opinions of modern publics. Indeed, there is current and significant debate in academia over whether or not online activism carries any impactful weight, or is simply a manifestation of the social media "echo chamber" (e.g., Goldie et al., 2014). Moreover, the characteristics of our sample remain untested. While we were able to roughly confirm the authenticity of the Twitter users (as opposed to the presence of bots), we could not imagine an ethically sound framework for delving any deeper into their identities. Thus, this gives rise to justifiable concerns that Indigenous or otherwise well-informed people may have been included in our critique.

Finally, the semiotic analyses presented above may be subject to some level of confirmation bias. As Charmaz (2014) discusses, our pre-existing interpretive frames are instrumental in shaping our approaches to research. Similarly, Valverde (2006, p. 36) warns that imputing "motives to the makers of representations" may be a function of personal political or ideological alignment. While we made every effort to focus on social effect — to Valverde's (2006) suggestion — our analysis may nonetheless slip into consideration of motive. Thus it must be considered that the themes identified above may be pre-ordained manifestations of our underlying knowledge. To this end, it should also be noted that one of the co-authors is of settler heritage. While every effort has been made to develop a conceptually grounded background and analysis, it should be cautioned that this

author could also be repeating similar colonial attitudes through lack of experiential knowledge and his own internalized definitions of "Indianness."

Conclusion

Our purpose in writing this paper has not been to critique the use of visual imagery as a communicative tool — in fact, we believe that depictions of Indigenous peoples *of all walks*, paired with responsible commentary, can significantly contribute toward improving public discourse about decolonization and surrounding issues. The challenge here is that these representations must be produced with genuine and considered intent, concepts that are generally at odds with the nature of participatory social media. As has been demonstrated above, the modern visually driven forms of media rely upon compelling images that can be appropriated as mechanisms to convey ideological concepts in the simplest fashion possible. In the case of "Protecting the Sacred," it seems that social media commentary did not let the facts get in the way of a good story.

This is not to say that all hope is lost. The rapid "informationalization" (Castells, 2009) of society will continue to present opportunities to widely share insights about Indigenous justice in non-traditional ways external to the confines of traditional media, reaching young and future generations in new ways. Indeed, one must look no further than the Idle No More and Black Lives Matter social movements for examples. Our hope in providing this critique, then, is that it can contribute toward a greater public awareness about control and content of social media representations with particular emphasis on their potential to affect colonized populations.

To improve upon our work and address some of the limitations described above, we feel that future study of this nature would do well to improve these methods by developing a more robust sampling frame. This poses a significant barrier to critically assessing interplay

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between social media and imagery as technological limitations and should be prioritized for future critical media analyses. If future researchers could devise an improved reverse-image searching method they would certainly be doing this field of research a favour. Second, we feel that future research might be expanded to include other singular forms of visual media to further test the interpretive frame devised above to illustrate the role of digital representations and their captioning in shaping public "knowledge" on a given issue.

The findings presented in this paper have direct implications for future study. At the outset, we feel that it is of great importance that social media representations about Indigeneity generally, and Indigenous justice specifically, is critically examined. Our paper presents a step toward that direction by developing a social media application of Wilkes and Kehl's (2014) approach. Second we also demonstrate that this dialogue, paired with compelling imagery, can replicate archetypal assumptions of Indigeneity through both manifest and latent mechanisms. Thus it raises the importance of contextual awareness for those who might robotically retweet or share messaging of this nature without pausing to consider its implications.

Acknowledgements

Biographical Notes

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