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"N8Vs Be Like . . .": Processes of Authenticating Modern Indigenous Identities within Electronic Communal Spaces

Christina Laree Newhall

"A short ride in Geronimo's Cadillac can take us through an exploration of the unexpected juxtaposition of Indians and cars. . . . If you had to pick a single person to stand for *Indianness*, you could do worse than Geronimo, the iconic Apache leader who stands in American popular memory for resistant warriors everywhere. . . . Likewise, if you had to pick a single car to stand for the world of automobiles, you could do worse than a Cadillac. To imagine Geronimo riding in a Cadillac, then, is to put two different symbolic systems in dialogue with one another."[1]

—Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004)

Nearly two decades have passed since Philip Deloria wrote about Geronimo's Cadillac in his groundbreaking work *Indians in Unexpected Places*.[2] In his chapter on technology, Deloria proceeds to unravel the loaded symbolic meanings entangled and instilled within the collective American social imagination that constitute the ideological significances of both "The Indian" and "The Automobile." Those evocative notions coupled and provoked by an image of a Cadillac include mobility, speed, power, status, and progress. Such associations lie at the very heart of American ideals and are inimitably connected to other indexical features relating to social evolution, industry, and modernity, ideals that correspond to what America stands for and what real "Americans" value. These idealistic notions, as Deloria illustrates, are then juxtaposed with associations of nature, primitivism, and defeat, as these are the associations

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that index the American Indian. Through the coupling of these two iconic representatives—each of which poignantly exist in the American imagination—an "unexpected" combination occurs, creating a curious space for both recognition and conversation around established ideological viewpoints.

The combination of Geronimo and a Cadillac contradicts established narratives that have formed the ideological foundation and frameworks upon which a majority of Anglo-Americans comfortably build many unexamined ideological constructs—constructs that supposedly represent a reality of sorts, or at least an expectation of reality. By simply driving a car around in the early twentieth century, Geronimo creates a mixing-up, and perhaps even a messing-up, of Western ideological constructs. Fast-forward almost 200 years and we (unfortunately) find that very few things have changed with regard to the ascription of those symbolic notions that tie modernity to technology and prosperity and indigeneity to primitive backwardness and disappearance. Within the last few decades, the advent of social media has allowed for the creation of new transcendent public 'spaces' wherein the cultivation and maintenance of communities of practice can be fostered without the hinderance of those natural geospatial restrictions that, in previous instances of human history, bound and even defined social communities in very real and physical ways.[3,4,5] Not unlike Geronimo and his Caddy, modern-day Native Americans continue to disrupt the status quo and challenge expectations through their mere presence and activities within modern social spheres. In the following paper, I draw on linguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's framework of tactics of intersubjectivity, to examine the ways which young Indigenous people defy the established dominant discourse of Indigenous disappearance through their conspicuous presence within modern social spheres.[6] I show how the sites of these social spheres (generally hosted on social media platforms) serve in the construction and promotion of authentic identities of indigeneity. I offer that the processes of authentication that Native people partake through the production, reproduction, and distribution of memes disrupts the prevailing dominant discourse of loss and failure, whereby redressing long-imposed power imbalances through the reorganization of the indexical qualities associated with an "authentic" Native identity. Locating an essential "authentic" Native identity has long been a topic of considerable concern for research within the social sciences.[7] Grappling with such notions for the purposes of establishing group and individual identities persist as topics of contention within many Indigenous social domains, including tribal law and policy. The latter is undoubtedly due to the psychological and emotional effects of Western ideologies, related to "the Other," being violently injected into human social relations at every level as part of settler colonialism.

The colonial projects of dislocation, relocation, and assimilation, which aim to atomize individuals through the extermination of tribal life, have—possibly unintentionally—stimulated symbolic unifications across otherwise heterogenous cultural groups allied through the shared experience of invasive settler colonialism and resultant social marginalization. The cocreated discourses forged through the creation and perpetuation of memes within online social platforms has effectively created a community of practice that utilizes multiple communicative strategies to authenticate

and delineate identity and group belonging. This paper concerns the contemporary emergence of symbolic unifications and the emergent identities cultivated through intersubjective relations among Indigenous people of North America.

Methodologies

While a large number of memes were reviewed and procured across several social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and Reddit as well as video clips from YouTube, Vimeo, and TikTok, the memes used within this manuscript have been collected primarily from pages focused on Native American and Alaska Native identities on the media platform Facebook. Facebook remains the top-used social media platform in the world with more than three billion users logging in monthly.[8] Memes depicted within this manuscript are representative of the type(s) found across several of the above-mentioned social media outlets.

The frameworks of analysis for the textual media have primarily come from the fields of linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and critical discourse analysis. In particular, I draw heavily from Bucholtz and Hall's work on identity and interaction.[9] Central to this work are the principal positions that identity is a *product* rather than a source of linguistic and semiotic practices and, what is more important, that identities encompass "temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles . . . and ethnographically emergent cultural positions," and are "relationally constructed through several, often overlapping, aspects of the relationship between self and other."[10] Much of the terminology and concepts regarding discourse I have used here come from the area of critical discourse analysis. It is important to recognize that this field of analysis is firmly rooted in ideas proposed and elaborated on in the twentieth century, especially by the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michael Foucault. Notions of discourse, public and private spheres, and what constitutes literary "texts" and the methods of their analysis have necessarily changed with the turning of the century as human technologies evolve. In the following, I attempt to extend discussion related to the practices of identity cultivation and negotiation among persons who identify as Indigenous community members within the boundaries of North America specifically, within the creative boundaries of online social spaces.

American Narratives and Collocations

By the end of the nineteenth century, the North American territories, imagined as open spaces of promise and opportunity for European immigrants, had become abysses of incalculable loss for many Native people. A fundamental element of colonization is the reorganization of existing social orders; Indigenous people are necessarily disenfranchised from their lands, and—of greater importance—excluded from the decrees that define humanity and the basic rights imparted therein. An absence of original peoples in spaces designated for projects associated with modernity and prosperity is necessary specifically because the realization of development and progress is symbolically antithetical to the occupation of autochthonous people. Thus, both the spaces and the people native to them are metaphorically ascribed the same qualities:

undeveloped, uncultured, primitive, unspoiled, dangerous, wild, and—critical to these attitudes—in need of intervention by sophisticated Westerners who understand how best to properly exploit the latent untapped potential. As for their part, individual members and tribal societies have dealt with the encumberment of their indexed role within ever-expanding westernized contexts in various ways. Some assimilate into the wider dominant society, others opt to propone and defend traditional lifeways, aligning their practices and beliefs closely to the oral traditions and living memories that have been passed down from the ones who came before since time immemorial. Finding a balance between these "two worlds" is an ongoing challenge for Native American and Alaska Native peoples for a variety of reasons, but notably due to starkly contrasting values and a prevailing discourse that insists Indigenous people are predestined for failure.[11,12,13,14] While there is no experience that can be generalized or typified among Indigenous people as prototypical of "the Native American experience," the fracturing of tribal identities and lifeways has contributed significantly to shaping those discourses that substantiate an internalized narrative of self and instantiate a wider historical assessment of an Indigenous identity. For the sake of a continuity of narrative that establishes a sustained existence across the rupture marked by contact, the notion of a preexisting way of life *before* European contact precipitates a notion of an *after*. This dichotomous timeline is often bridged through identity work.

Borrowing language from historian Patrick Wolfe, "Invasion is a structure, not an event."[15] In the case of settler colonialism within the United States, this structure is foundational to both the ideologies of prosperity and nationhood. This means that the presuppositions that guide the formations of social arrangements in the United States are informed by deeply seated notions that insist on domination through assimilatory campaigns which "destroy to replace."[16] Such campaigns have variously been launched by the auspices of the US government, including the Indian Removal Act, the Dawes Act, and the Indian Reorganization Act, and enacted though destructive educational policies and practices that, as Captain Richard Pratt poignantly indicated in his infamous speech endorsing boarding schools, sought to "kill the Indian in him, and save the man." Within Indigenous communities, defiance of power imbalances and resistance to the projects of colonization has persisted since contact, and while the natural course of intergenerational exchange of culture and language has been unalterably ruptured, reconstructions and reimaginings of discrete, coherent, and enduring Native American identities continue to be sustained through means of communication and negotiation. These identities are often constructed through creative means consistent with modern practices of identity construction but adhere to particular sustaining ideologies that privilege a sense of community over a sense of individuality.

It is critically important that we recognize and discuss the continual acts of resistance to the assaults of settler colonialism, both those overt actions of war and activism and those covert practices of resistance that have sustained Native American cultures, languages, stories, and teachings through the onslaught of Western attempts at genocide and replacement. One of the most insidious assaults on indigeneity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been an active denial of recognition, an insistence on the erasure of "authentic" Native people, and a failure to recognize authentic

expressions of Indigenous perseverance and presence within modern spaces. In this way, "authentic" Native peoples are acknowledged only as figures ossified in a particular historical narrative. This insistence serves to reinforce the realities of colonialism and colonialism's objective of erasure and replacement.

Because reorganization of social order is fundamental to colonial projects, Indigenous people are necessarily disenfranchised from the budding relationships formed around prospect and productivity. As noted before, the absence of original peoples in spaces designated for projects associated with modernity and prosperity is necessary specifically because the realization of development and progress is antithetical to the occupation of autochthonous people, as "they" symbolize the land in situ: undeveloped, uncultured, and primitive. Indeed, the ideas of progress and modernity are built on a discourse of the disappearance of Indigenous people from space and place. Thus, indigeneity must be absent from discourses of innovation and absent from spaces imagined as either contemporary or advanced. Resistance to this notion is imperative to a framework of decolonization, as is the recentering of discourses of authenticity around Indigenous values and Indigenous experiences. The strategies I focus on here are those that facilitate a discrete membership and utilize processes of authentication as they relate to identity and group belonging. This identity work is regularly conducted in the same public spaces that much of today's discourse on social, political, and ideological issues, as well as commerce, education, employment, and current affairs, takes place—cyber space.

The most universal method of relating social alignments and conducting identity work within online communities has become the transferal (or posting) of highly textualized, or multimodal, images such as memes. A *meme* (related to the word gene) is a unit for carrying cultural ideas though symbols, imitable acts, and thematic phenomena, transmittable among the minds of people in a society through means of mimicry.[17] These textual packages are capable of indexing numerous discourses within a single interpretive instance, constructed to be readily available to the processes of recontextualization and reinterpretation. The meme, as a recent form of highly mediated text, shares those representational challenges existent in the creation of a novel noted by Mikhail Bakhtin: namely, of stylistically characterizing social phenomena.[18] Semiotic resources, or symbols, utilized within memes are not restricted to those kinds of symbols correlating to spoken language. And yet, memes are always "double-voiced," providing parallel interests aimed at representing an *image* of a language. Constructing and distributing a meme is the creative processes of recontextualizing discourses so they become socially tangible and wherein (much like characters in a novel) the language and the "images of speaking persons, clothed in the specifics of a given society at a given point in history, show through behind them." [19]

Important to this discussion is the recognition that this type of multilayered text is a critical medium through which multilayered conversations regarding identity politics are conducted in modern society. Discourses of all types are now widely available in a kind of "space" that lacks geophysical boundaries (though access to this space does require electronic devices and a certain amount of technical proficiency to access). It is important here to understand that *text* may refer to various topics and

to various discourse strands. The term *discourse* as it is used here refers to a continual textual framework for understanding things from a distinct perspective. The linking of discourse strands can create a cache of collective symbols sometimes referred to in literatures on discourse analysis as *topoi*. Topoi "are known to all members of a society. They provide the repertoire of images from which we construct a picture of reality for ourselves. Through collective symbols, we interpret reality, and have reality interpreted for us, especially by the media."[20] Memes, as they are used in social media, are often composed of a complex layering of collective symbols that are redeployed and recontextualized through posts and reposts. Each meme contains within its linguistic and visual cues discursive fragments and redeploys parts of larger discursive texts to convey new diachronic constituents of discourse, extending those discourses and their related text to include new contexts, and therefore new (or renewed) relatable content. Due to the meme's qualities of transmutability, the deployment or posting of a meme by an individual is always a cooperative act of communication, in that the texts are perpetually recycled and reinterpreted in every instance of their usage.

Regarding the forms, mediums, and technologies through which cultural texts may be transmitted (i.e., cellulose polymer film reels to digital file formats, etc.), the inheritance and perpetuation of a dialogue between the past and the present seems to be the nature of media generally. As Tiffany Creegan Miller states, "The continued dialogue between old and new media is therefore a structural condition of all media."[21] This process of the new mediums absorbing the old is one referred to as *remediation*, a term borrowed by Miller and expanded on by authors Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin.[22]

Arguably, though improvements on the verisimilitude of representation are often perceived as the most valuable or significant trait of newer technologies, the key difference between the media of the past and present is one of teleological circulation. The reach of digital media now crosses time-space almost instantaneously without a need for a locatable primary source. These forms of data are fungible and mutable through a variety of modes, allowing the reach of content to cross political and geological boundaries which exist in the "real" world and, thus, create new "spaces" for communities to cultivate through interactions of dialogue. Relating shared experiences across this broadened horizon of interlocutors is the work that many memes do for content creators and those that share (and reshare) memes. Through their ability to connect fragments of multiple preexisting discourses, every "share" becomes an instantiation of identity work by social media users formulating their online persona and connecting to a wider community of users who find their content relatable.

Evolution of a Meme

The resources for creating an internet meme are typically locatable in widely available media texts. They either represent or signify wider public discourse, and sometimes incorporate political or ideological stances from factions within the wider media-using public. The positions and frameworks instantiated in any successful meme are transmuted through the act of editing, posting, and reposting, and can reference an almost infinite number of meanings and social positions regardless of the original content

(abbreviated widely on the internet as *o/c*) creator's initial intents. The following examples in figures 1a through 1f showcase the typical evolution of a popular meme and how the minor modifications of the textual content extend the potential dialogue of a meme through recontextualization.

Figure 1a. *"Woman Yelling at a Cat." Original creator: @missingegirl 2019 via Twitter.*

The images compiled within the meme known as "Woman Yelling at a Cat," include a still image taken from a 2011 episode of the reality television series *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, depicting Taylor Armstrong and Kyle Richards. Armstrong is caught in a moment of distress and anger, pointing her finger in an accusatory manner at an individual out of camera range. This image is juxtaposed with another, uploaded on Tumblr in 2018, of a cat named Smudge, sitting at a table in front of a plate of vegetables with a look that has been variously interpreted as confusion or disgust. Note that the original contexts, and thus original interpretable content, of the images have been changed through the juxtaposition of the images side by side.

In the now infamous screencap taken from the original broadcast of the *Real Housewives* episode, "Malibu Beach Party From Hell," Armstrong is caught in a dramatic moment, confronting a cast member who had been involved in gossip with other cast members about her marriage and the death of her husband, who had died by suicide shortly before the shooting of the episode. The image of the cat known as Smudge was posted on Tumblr more than seven years later by user @deadbefordeath, who posted the image with the caption "He no like vegetals."[23] By aligning these two unrelated texts, the author of the meme intentionally puts them into a relationship of proximity. This compilation is then open to various interpretive and reinterpretative instantiations as a meme.

A successful meme is a productive meme. The relationship that is forged by the alignment of textual images of a productive meme can be overlayed with more textual content from other public discourses. "Woman Yelling at a Cat" has often been overlain with texts that depict a conflict that is well known within the wider public discourse. This has often included issues of sexism, dating, sports, politics, and even internal

conflicts embedded within popular movies, shows, and other meme content (see fig. 1c for content related to the Marvel Universe franchise). Sometimes the content created within the meme will incorporate novel textual elements borrowed from the meme itself as it has been represented in wider public discourse, thus extending the narrative of the meme and using it as a metadiscursive element about the process of social discourse (see figs. 1d and 1e for content). The use of a meme for metadiscursive content is only possible once the meme has reached a status of iconicity within the wider social domain of the internet and other mass media outlets (see fig. 1e).

Figure 1b

Figure 1c

Figure 1d

Figure 1e

In 2019, Aqqalu Berthelsen created the now famous "Inuk Woman Yelling at a Seal" meme, which draws on the iconicity of the form and presentation of "Woman Yelling at a Cat" but redresses the meme with entirely Indigenous-relevant content. Berthelsen cleverly redeployed the format of the original, which had allowed that meme to become such a mutable vehicle of discourse, but he has constrained the relevance of the content to a Native and First Nations audience. Thus, his meme indexes the widely familiar associative discourses through simulation while inviting exclusively Indigenous-centered dialogue and interpretations (see fig. 1f).

Figure 1f

In an interview with CBC Canada, Berthelsen said, "I put it out there, went to sleep, and I woke up to, like, a thousand, million notifications on my cell phone."[24] Since the instantiation of the indigenized meme, the image has been circulated throughout Native North America and has incurred thousands of culturally specific textual overlays, many including or incorporating endangered Native languages. In the image shown in figure 1f, the meme template provided by Berthelsen has been modified by another content creator with text including an Inupiat word, *niqipiac*, meaning traditional or "real" food.[25] Use of Indigenous languages further restricts the intelligibility of a meme and therefore constrains the meme's relevant content to an audience of possible interlocutors who hold the relevant shared funds of knowledge. I would also submit that memes such as Berthelsen's act as a kind of *translocutor* incorporating or overlaying semiotic facets from and across distinct cultures and cultural discourses, and inviting an expansion of discourse through their instantiation. They mark a memetic "space" located in and between cultural discourses, both representative of and appealing for reinterpretation and interaction.

Cyber-Space, the New Frontier

Memes can effectively forge political alliances among individuals, thus cultivating groups and community through the means of discourse. Between Indigenous interlocutors, memes can assist in erasing difference and highlighting commonalities in a process Bucholtz refers to as *adequation*—the process of making something adequate or suitable.[26] Online memes created by Native Americans can assist in identity work through adequation by emphasizing cultural commonalities that emerge from the conditions of a marginalized social position and reflect or reiterate those established unifying political stances that have emerged from the historical events that led to this position. The humor imparted in Native memes can also help to mitigate what might, at base, be a harsh critique of the power relations extant within the social order of North America. Through humor, members of marginalized groups can offer observations of inequity cloaked in satire.

The memes below in figure 2 are a sample of texts that draw on essentialist notions of indigeneity to create a metacommunicative text that reflexively relates to the shared struggles of colonialism and modernity through humor. Among these memes are depictions that link historical figures and conceptions of indigeneity to the present day. The memes featured here are representative of emergent identities that bridge a multitude of cultural touchstones and are relevant and representative of the imbedded multicultural settings and realities of Native American and Alaska Native people who engage in online consortium. The text and depictions within both memes transmit multiple overlays of meaning and employ a creative use of what literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Bucholtz call *strategic essentialism*.[27,28]

Figure 2a

The Indian individual represented in figure 2a, Apache leader Geronimo, is famous (or infamous) for his resistance to colonial occupation. His image has been symbolically deployed here in the form of a meme as a representation of all North American Indians' frustration with colonial systems of belief. This widely recognizable historical figure of resistance successfully ties together complex ideas and ideologies within

complex semiotic bundles linking the past to present through Indigenous identities—recognizably "authentic" to both members of the dominant societal faction and to minoritized racial groups—that simultaneously links the politicized spaces of North America (now the United States). The written text, then, has only the work of directing the observer to certain facets of the semiotic bundles to associate similarities of modern political issues to those of the past, thus neatly highlighting political issues regarding immigration. The creator of this meme has formed a conceptual and ideological continuity through the layering of simple text over the image, poignantly outlining incongruities in political agendas and the hypocrisy of certain beliefs within the dominant societal political projects. By extension, its subtext is extended to the interlocutors who circulate and engage with them as a performance of identity on social platforms.

Dialogue cultivated through the medium of textual media necessarily scaffolds aspects of familiar content in a collusion between content originators and consumers to perpetuate ongoing dialogues that, piece by piece, shape and reshape online discourses. While this is commonplace practice among content creators sharing fractionated bits of recycled media spun into novel new forms through the creation of memes, the memes created by Native American and Alaska Native content creators often overtly allude to a very real history that is ever-present and tangible to a Native audience.

It is important to acknowledge that the memes and other forms of media created and shared by Indigenous content creators does not merely showcase an aptitude or ability to use modern tech, but that content creators are themselves the innovators of the technological mediums they use and the discourses in which they engage. Most social media is user-driven. The platforms provide the tools to upload and edit media, but the users are the architects of these forms of media. They are the narrators of the dialogue and the discourses that they cultivate and perpetuate.

Figure 2b

Romanticized images of the highly spiritual Indian—the hypermasculine, swarthy, "savage" Indian male—are pervasive Western-cultivated stereotypes; among memes created by Natives, such stereotypes are often redeployed as archetypes or chronotopes.[29] Images such as those in the first frame of figure 2b are indicative of the

unachievable ideals associated with a past narrative that indexes an "Indian" identity for the wider dominant culture, but which contrasts with the reality of an embodied Native American identity. The contrast or intentional juxtapositioning of such figures highlight an underlying acknowledgement of the total failure of Natives to actually achieve such standards, and are frequently the crux of the humor inlaid within Native-constructed memes.

Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c

Because humor can play a special role in destabilizing (or balancing) social power, Indigenous memes often use (or reuse) humor-laden media. A meaningful exchange delivered as a joke can serve as a powerful tool for cultivating or delineating the boundaries of social order and the nature of social relations. The memes above in figures 3a, 3b, and 3c downplay intersubjective likeness in a process of what Bucholtz calls *distinction*, wherein the subjects of the meme symbolically represent the structural institutions of power and of the power relations between the dominant members of society and Native peoples.[30] These memes represent what critical discourse analyst Otto Santa Ana identifies as "antihegemonic humor," which exposes biases within hegemonic discourses and invites observers to laugh at their faults.[31] As linguistic anthropologist Kendra Calhoun notes in her article on antihegemonic humor, "Antihegemonic sociopolitical humor must represent dominant discourses and beliefs in order to position them as object of critique."[32] Memes such as those in figures 3a, 3b, and 3c showcase familiar content that has been circulated within mainstream media discourses, but through a reframing and the addition of textual overlays, the media is transformed into an example of prejudice, inequity, or racialization. They then serve as a social position, or stance, and invite a comradery through interaction between the creators and circulators.

Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c

The memes appearing in figures 4a, 4b, and 4c represent the ongoing identity work toward a goal of authentication.[33] These memes include contemporary instantiations of a credible Indigenous experiences. Through visual text, they are meant to highlight aspects of identity that are indicative of an imagined prototypical Native American experience. These types of memes often draw broadly across what might elsewhere be boundaries or lines of difference, including race, gender norms, and religion. Use of memes that incorporate African American Vernacular English or that are indicative of Black experiences are often redeployed in Native memes. Such memes draw attention to the similarities (rather than differences) between historically marginalized groups, at times including themes related to poverty, unstable or broken familial relations, and—perhaps what is most important—survivance. The ability to cast an honest, critical, but humored portrayal of life outside the margins of whiteness and the prosperity that is frequently showcased as the strength and virtue of the American way of life is what gives these memes their gritty and defiant humor.

During an early working of this paper, I presented these memes in a talk to a class of Native students taking a language-revitalization course at a public university. Upon flipping to the memes shown in figures 4a, 4b, and 4c, ripples of laughter could be heard as the students read through each of the meme's content. I asked the class, "What makes these memes funny?" One student offered that, to her, they seemed "not stuck-up, and really relatable." Part of the appeal of certain memes is an ability to see an aspect of oneself within the content. The fact that the images and written text here actually highlight challenges and community or familial idiosyncrasies related to the indexed social positions of Native Americans and Alaska Natives makes the content appealing. By decreasing the social distance between the caricatures within the meme and the target audience, Native content creators engage in the cultivation of an anti-hegemonic discourse and allude to a contiguous community of social media users who have related real-life experiences and challenges. In essence, these memes reveal and allude to a community of practice that may exist in fragmentary geopolitical groups outside the realm of the internet but are united by common experiences. Such experiences may be imposed or indexed by the wider society, but an essential quality of these

memes is that they reframe Indigenous identities by referencing intimate aspects of a lived experience rather than presenting imposed stereotypical traits.

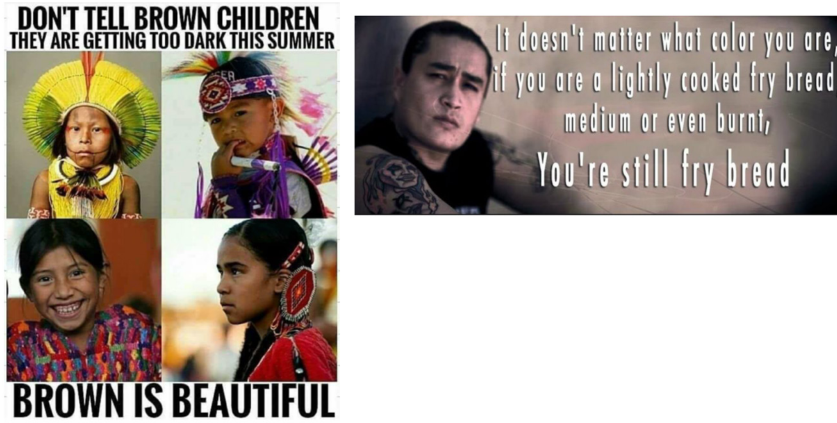
The memes in figures 5a and 5b are examples of more constrained discourses meant for a narrower Indigenous faction. On popular social media platforms, incorporating content that orients meaning around more constrained social experiences particular to only certain factions of the wider population effectively limit access to the meaningful content, whereby rendering these texts "private" community discourses within a "public" (online) space.[34,35]

Figures 5a and 5b

In figure 5a, a widely circulated meme has been redressed with the Yup'ik word *manaq* (chew), but follows up (in accordance with the typical wordplay associated with this particular meme) by inviting the viewer to reinterpret the text without the *m*, thus spelling *anaq* (poop). While indigenous language use can and has been used to index an "authentic" Indigenous identity within highly racialized sociopolitical landscapes through performance, the First Nations and Alaska Native content creators of these memes index an Indigenous identity through situational texts meant to be relatable and interpretable specifically to Native North Americans within a broader virtual backdrop of the worldwide web.[36,37] This is accomplished by obscuring the meaningful content by way of incorporating or alluding to funds of knowledge shared by only a fractional minority of the internet's public sphere. Such memes can effectively serve as tactics of authentication as comprehension of the content serves as a barrier to the "inside" joke or meaning of the text. This tactic further accomplishes outlining the contours of the community groups.

Finally, the memes in figures 6a and 6b are illustrative of identity work done in service of reclaiming and reshaping the narratives that characterize Native Americans and Indigenous people. These texts incorporate tactics of *adequation* in that they emphasize "commonality across lines of difference," but it is important to observe that they do not seek to erase difference.[38]

Figures 6a and 6b



Through *adequation*, these memes serve to create political alignments; the tactic also serves to combat the prevailing homogenizing discourses associated with autochthonous peoples by the dominant discourse. It is specifically the homogenizing projects of assimilation that is the common but unnamed threat that unites individuals who identify as Native. Note that both the preceding memes directly address internalized narratives of racism.

Because memes are composites of meaningful text, the context of their deployment, the location of their posting, and the identity of the poster all contribute to the meaningful interpretation of the meme. These memes frequently involve multiple processes of identity-negotiation as many of the overlaid texts are reflective of interactional conditions that are interrelated issues in Native American lives and imagined communal groups. What appears to keep memes relevant and in circulation is twofold: an ability to be edited for adaptation to emergent dialogues and the ability to relate to past or established dialogues.

Laughing in the Face of Colonization

Given the long tradition of humor in Native American and Alaska Native societies, it is peculiar that the dominant discourse within the United States has insisted on indexing the characteristics of Native people as reserved, stoic, and humorless. Even where a more positive image of the Indian has been invoked or cultivated, we are often portrayed as deeply spiritual, serious, or inclined to repress emotional reactions. And yet, as Kathryn Winona Shanley notes in her critical essay on the paradox of American Indian intellectualism: "[I]f you ask a Native person whether or not Indians are stoic, he or she will probably laugh."[39] Humor has long served an important and even sacred role within indigenous communities. Humor is often centrally featured in certain ceremonies and traditional practices in which important roles or characters are conveyed through dance, play, or spectacle. Particularly important comedic roles

may even be bestowed upon specialized communal factions, such as the clown societies of the Pueblo and Hopi, and the Cherokee Booger Dancers of the southeastern United States.[40]

In most, if not all, Native American cultures, important life lessons are imparted through storytelling. The Trickster traditions and potlatch ceremonies of the Northwest Coast peoples relive stories of import through seasonal retellings and through ceremonial dances and song. Trickster is a common character among Western tribes and, though he may take many different forms and be reported through many different stories, his role tends to be one that imparts at base a message of caution. Humor is often central to understanding important life lessons, lessons about living a balanced life, lessons about humility, lessons about caring, and lessons about mortality. Trickster is often a central character who has many lessons to learn in such areas. In Native cultures, lessons regarding how to live a good, balanced life have been carried on as the "Original Instructions" and handed down through countless generations since time immemorial. Humor is critical to living a balanced life, and as such, humor is central to understanding one's culture as well as one's own life journey. It should not be surprising, then, that many stories, enactments, or reenactments blur the lines between amusing entertainment and religious acts of reverence, as human life journeys blur such lines as well. Spiritual "balance" is often achieved not through moderation but through an equalizing of life's extremes; with the help of reflection and laughter, wisdom may slowly be conferred on those who pay attention to their people's stories.

Humor also plays a special role in destabilizing social power. Through humor, human beings can mediate otherwise harsh critiques of social order and offer observations of inequity and imbalance. A joke can poignantly reveal underlying truths that have been obscured by the operations of hegemony while simultaneously revealing a proficiency of wit and cogency by a critical-thinking agent. While the mediation of delivery as a joke might soften a blow of criticism, a revelation of marginalized subjects acting and thinking in clever ways invites another revelation, one of being observed and judged by an "Other." The ability to critically observe and make use of wit are inherent qualities of humanity, and it is humanity that subjugators do not recognize in "Others." In this way, humor may be used to redress power imbalances and reveal humanity and intelligence where it has long been actively ignored. If a joke "lands"—that is, if the hearer understands it and finds it funny—one must reckon with the fact that they are dealing with an equal as a meeting of the minds happens in the instant of comprehension. Of course, not all jokes are directed outward; humor mediates human relations on many levels and is frequently used among interlocutors to establish closeness through the relating of shared subjective experiences.

In the above discussion, I have provided samples of memes that are but a few among thousands. While memes and other highly textual forms of media may communicate a vast array of political, ideological, or communicative material, I have focused specifically on how particular memes are strategically constructed and distributed though social media platforms as transferable identity markers, capable of reifying or fortifying an "insider" group membership among competent interlocutors. I have also shown how many of the composite texts are constructed from semiotic resources

relevant to, and indexical of, a generalized Native North American or "Pan-Indian" identity, while others are more restrictive and address, or signify, members belonging to a specific regional or linguistic group. I propose that these compound texts represent sites of resistance to hegemonic discourses by creating counternarratives that, through creative exploitation of existing dominant narrative projections, become instantons of identity work that are authenticated through processes cultivated within the established online communities.

The power to realign narratives of indigeneity along value systems and experiences that exist outside the dictations of the dominant discourse becomes the power to reimagine and redefine an identity outside the constructs of the dominant discourse. These new frontiers of "space," which are yet to be completely bound by the rules of a dormant group, harbor sites where communal-identity work is accomplished by a multitude of individuals who seek out and cocreate relationships along lines of subjective experiences. While the social formations present on the internet are in a constant state of flux as media is constantly reshaped and recapitulated, they consistently provided fertile ground for challenging the status quo. The plasticity, inherent to social media texts, makes it an ideal site for identity work; because of this, social media platforms have become popular hubs to perform and remake, or reimagine, indexed identities. It has also become a site to reevaluate and reclaim. To exist as a modern Native American has been, for so long, an existential paradox due to the historical and foundational narratives woven into the moral and ideological fabric of the United States that, to contend with the momentum of it—by simply existing in a particular place and time—is not to challenge the discourse but to have one's own legitimacy and right to exist challenged. It is in the face of this ocean of hegemonic structures that Indigenous people defiantly laugh, create, and negotiate the validity of their experiences. Indigenous identity schemas must be malleable and plastic to effectively project the survivance of a "traditional" identity within modern contexts.[41] A resilient Indigenous identity is one that is elastic enough to endure a radical delocalization from place, which binds past and present, and sustains a communal identity through the imagining of a coherent continuum of traditional community identities. What is more important, it is one that defies the existential limitations dictated by the dominant discourse.

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that the scope of the work done here can only provide a very incomplete explication of a fragment of data which existed for a brief moment within a very small part of a massive social domain—a domain that is ever-shifting, as the emergence of newer technologies force once-new technologies into obsolescence and their representations of trending mass media, shifting political views, and social discourse into the shadows. While the instability of media is in some part due to the nature of technology, change is primarily the result of a continual emergence of identities that are located not in stable social spheres but through continually negotiated relational and interactional circumstances. In this way, the internet and its

many advanced social platforms has become yet another social site wherein humans partake in communicative negotiations. In addition, this site has proved to be adept at disseminating counternarratives—that is, narratives that run regressive to those that dominate and provide generalizing and stabilizing ideological frameworks within highly organized societies.

Memes such as those illustrated here offer Native American and Alaska Native peoples a medium through which they may extend dialogues. By representing aspects of their own communities, languages and lifeways, they extend perspectives, frameworks, and evaluations of social order and historical narratives while simultaneously fortifying their own personal and communal identities. Regardless of contemporary Native American residential locations—whether on tracts of traditional, unceded territories, on confederated reservations, or dispersed within inner-city boroughs—the autochthonous peoples of North America can be said to be living in diaspora as the systematic attempts to strip meaningful relationships, practices, and tenure with traditional place and space have been persistent for nearly 500 years. And, while there is no experience that can be generalized or typified among Indigenous people as prototypical of 'Native American,' the fracturing of tribal identities and lifeways has contributed significantly to shaping those discourses that substantiate an internalized narrative of self and instantiate a wider historical assessment of an Indigenous identity.

For the sake of narrative continuity, the notion of a preexisting way of life *before* European contact precipitates a notion of an *after*. This dichotomous timeline is often bridged through identity work. Communal group identities understood to exist in the *before* are transferred into the *after* and thus into the contemporary. Communal belonging can be achieved variously through tribal affiliation(s), genealogical relations, discursive relationships with place, and the endurance of traditional practices and narrative work. While these are some common tactics, individuals who identify as Native may draw from several of these established methods for identity work, or only one, or variously incorporate them over time. Methods are likely to be strategically deployed accordingly within differing social dynamics or situations. The work of linking time and space to produce an enduring notion of community is explored by cultural anthropologist Sherri Beth Ortner, who investigates the conundrum of locating sites for ethnographic work in the contemporary United States where culturally constructed notions generate communities that are dislocated from their spatial and temporal origins. This leads her to transcend the established practices of ethnographic fieldwork, traditionally conducted within a specific locality, and redefining the boundaries of "community."[42] Ortner identifies two types of "postcommunity" networks that are useful in considering the modern networking in Indigenous communities: *translocal* communities, where individuals have dispersed from a central location associated with a particular communal identity but maintain relationship networks through familial ties; and *neocommunities*, wherein members' dislocation to the original space associated with the original community is minimal (or minimized), and relational maintenance is a routine part of the community members' social work. Both of these communities share a fundamental tie to a specific place and the (imagined) relationships that existed within that space. Community affiliation, then, is tied to ethnohistorical memory and

is maintained through networks that reinforce or remake the ties to place and the relationships imagined or remembered there. Within indigenous postcommunities, the relationships of significance are not only those that are maintained between individuals but also those maintained among place, community, and the self, despite existential dislocation. Within modern contexts, the maintenance of relationships of self to place and to community can be carried out through symbolic means in modern spaces of collaboration and communication, "spaces" that lack fixed tangible coordinates, making ambiguous any sense of real geospatial distances between interlocutors.

As Ortner notes, a breakdown of identifiable on-the-ground communities "and increasing geographic mobility . . . are hallmarks of modernity."[43] For humans, communication serves a multitude of social needs, and since modern societies are highly mobile societies, telecommunication has become the new daily medium of consortium. However, as with most products of human design, now that a new medium has been established, there is a cyclic causational relationship. The sites where family, community, work, and play are organized have become more diffuse due to modern advancements in telecommunications. Individuals and information have become transmutable commodities that are traded for profit in a world of interconnectedness and capitalism. These innovations have cultivated developments of communicative processes in social "spaces" that are both widely accessible and illusory. Such spaces can be accessed instantly within the palm of one's hand, but never visited in a real, corporeal sense. This radical delocalization of culture, though conceptualized as a relatively recent phenomenon for members who align their ideals with the Western dominant discourse, has been a process imposed on those communities subjected to colonization since the time of contact with European invaders.[44]

The work mentioned within this manuscript is intended to showcase the creative ways that Native American and Alaska Native people have engaged in new technologies to create online spaces of community. The work done by the members of these communities is inherently "Indigenous," not merely because of the likely racialized identities the content creators are indexed with in the wider social organization of the Americas but because the content of the memes are ontologically grounded by Indigenous values, perspectives, experiences, and worldviews. As Miller notes in reference to Indigenous tech and media use, "The ontological centrality of relationships is transmitted to cyberspace technology and, specifically, new media, providing Indigenous peoples with a toolkit to strengthen relationships and networks that allows for the continuity of these practices over new platforms."[45] While social researchers struggle to catch their breath and relocate—or redefine—concepts such as "community" and "ethnographic site," Indigenous people are taking the opportunity to redefine the parameters of an Indigenous identity by recentering narratives of identity around intersubjective experiences through modern technologies.

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