

Indigenous Australians and Community: Diasporic networks resisting colonialism online.

The term Indigenous is explained by the United Nations as encompassing self-identification on the level of one's personal identity, community acceptance, and a profound link to country and the natural resources of that land (United Nations, 2000). Australia's Indigenous population, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have resisted, challenged and subverted colonial power since colonialization in 1788. The significance of Aboriginal people's connection to land and culture suggests that connection to community and country is crucial to the resisting of colonial legacies and imperial power (Dew et al. 2019). Aboriginal people have resisted the settler State since their arrival, a sentiment that resonates with Indigenous societies across the globe. From the Frontier Wars (Ryan, 2013) to the #IndigenousDads movement on social media, Indigenous Australian's have defied the purposeful fragmentation of their culture and disconnection from their land for decades. In contemporary Australian society, the presence of resistance and the colonial mythologies which promote the existing health, economic and political disparities experienced by Indigenous Australians is consistent (Carlson et al. 2017). What has recently changed with the rise of digital technologies, is the access to online community and diasporic networks through social media. With this rise Indigenous resistance has become prevalent online and promoted a sense of shared recognition, trauma and understanding amongst diasporic Indigenous networks across the globe (Carlson et al. 2017). This paper will contend that Indigenous Australians resist and challenge colonial legacies and oppression through the ability to form online connections to community, diasporic networks and a sense of shared responsibility and trauma on social media platforms.

Indigenous Australians experience extreme health inequalities, social disadvantages and economic disparities as a result from continuing colonial mythologies. These legacies exist due to the continuing effects of colonialism, which work to vilify and oppress Indigenous people. Kingsley et al. (2013) suggested that the massive wellbeing imbalance which exists between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia is widened when Aboriginal people experience a disconnection from country and community. The Closing the Gap report (2016) disclosed that between 2008 and 2014 the Indigenous infant mortality rate was 4 times higher than the non-Indigenous counterpart, only 62% of Aboriginal students finished year 12, and Indigenous Australians represented 27% of the total adult prisoner population, whilst accounting for only 2% of Australia's total population (Australians Together, 2021). In 2021 whilst some

gaps have been bridged or improved many still remain. The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report (2020), which measures the annual wellbeing of the Indigenous Australian population highlights the connection to community and country as being vital to improve wellbeing outcomes. The report states that “Connection to culture is a key to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s identity and strength. These cultures are a foundation on which wellbeing can continue to be built. (Andersson & Nicol, 2020)”. Indigenous Australian communities report high usage of social media, with an average of more than 60% of the population using Facebook in 2016, which was 20% higher than the National average (Korff, 2022). Carlson and Frazer (2020) argue that Indigenous people increasingly use social media sites to participate in resistance to colonial ideology and discourse but also to connect with online diasporic networks. Digital diasporas are broadly defined as groups of dispersed people who are able to connect or reconnect online and through social media (Keles, 2016). Examples of diasporas regarding Indigenous Australians connecting online can be seen in the “I am proud to be Aboriginal” Facebook page (Carlson & Frazer, 2020), “#IndigenousDads” trending Twitter hashtag (Carlson, 2017), and the use of Facebook to reconnect with family dispersed from the Stolen Generation (Carlson & Frazer, 2020). These examples demonstrate a connection with community online and the importance of using diasporas to garner support for issues relevant to the Indigenous experience in Australia. Diasporas and online communities, not only support and aid the reconnection of community but also work to negate the “concerted effort at elimination, dispossession, and disenfranchisement by colonial forces (Carlson & Frazer, 2020, p.3).” Carlson et al. (2017) examine the case of the Don Dale youth Detention Centre and *Four Corners* episode “Australia’s Shame”, as an example of how the violent abuse of Aboriginal youth led to a rise in social media activism. After the episode aired in 2016, posts, images and videos shared on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter went viral nationally and internationally. Shortly after, a cartoon by Bill Leak was published in *The Australian* which depicted racist and derogatory humor and laid blame for issues faced by Indigenous youth at the feet of Indigenous parents. The response to these events accumulated in the #IndigenousDads movement on twitter which saw Indigenous diasporas and networks across social media spread awareness, and contest stereotypical media representations common to the Indigenous experience (Carlson et al., 2017). Online Indigenous communities refused to accept the colonial and racist implications of these events and in doing so came together in an example of online social activism that demonstrates the importance of shared responsibility in challenging colonial ideology.

The improved ability to communicate and form networks on social media allows for new methods of activism, shared responsibility and trauma to garner global awareness and enact change on a real-world level. Indigenous resistance has always existed as evidenced by various events such as *Mabo and Others v Queensland*. Social media however has promoted shared recognition and understanding of trauma to transcend national levels to resonate with international events which illuminate the struggle faced by Indigenous people globally. This globalization of the issues facing Indigenous people highlight the need to develop tactics and strategies that subvert colonial power and eventually decolonize the Nation state (Duarte, 2017). Carlson et al. (2017) explain shared recognition in the context that, trauma is understood as an implication of colonization and the systemic practices within many affluent societies which continue to subjugate and vilify Indigenous people. Parallels are drawn between the Indigenous Australian experience and that of African American people in the US. For Indigenous people culture is often linked to issues surrounding over incarceration, poverty, racism, economic disadvantage and settler colonialism (Gunia, 2020). Issues faced by Aboriginal people in Australia resonate with other Indigenous populations and vice versa. As social media use has increased so too has the ability for online communities and networks to extend internationally. These new networks present on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are harnessing digital affordances to “express identities and the collective survival of colonialism (Carlson & Kennedy, 2021, p. 1)” which goes on to provide a basis for the theory of shared recognition. Indigenous people represent marginalized groups in many contemporary societies, the significance of this highlights the need for Indigenous people to form online connections not only for community and cultural identity but also to strengthen in-group solidarity (Duarte, 2017). The argument that in order for colonial legacies to be dismantled Indigenous people must be connected with community is substantiated by the revolutionary #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) movement which swept across the globe in 2020. The hashtag #BLM illustrates how social media platforms like Twitter and digital affordances such as the hashtag, tagging and groups are used by Indigenous networks to challenge colonial ideas and enact activist movements. The Black Lives Matter movement originated in 2013 after the acquittal of a US police officer who killed African American man Trayvon Martin (Andrew, 2020). The social media campaign however gained global attention and mass awareness after videos emerged of George Floyd's death at the hands of US police officers (Abad, 2021). The hashtag which trended globally on twitter was used on average 3.7 million times per day from May 26th 2020 to June 7th 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2020). The huge social media movement which spread across the US and into other countries such as Australia, saw mass protests in response to police brutality and

other ideologies relevant to colonialism. In Australia shared recognition and trauma over the violence experienced by Indigenous people developed into protests in most major cities throughout the remainder of 2020 which called for an end to police violence against Indigenous Australian's, African American peoples and other Indigenous populations (Gunia, 2020). This solidarity amongst persecuted Indigenous groups would likely not have been possible without the use of social media and online connection to community. The #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States and in Australia exhibit's the power of social media activism through its transition to real world action and change.

Online social activism through Indigenous networks and diasporas ultimately transforms into actuality. Whilst this is necessary to the disablement of colonialism it also presents danger to the emotional and physical wellbeing of Indigenous people. This danger is evidenced through the rise of racism online, which is reported as a daily occurrence by 62% of Indigenous users (Kennedy, 2020). The significance of Indigenous Australian's connection to community and country has been established as a pillar in improving the overall wellbeing of Indigenous Australian's. Social media, community and diasporas have been presented as positive tools for social change throughout this paper, limitations and negative consequences however are present in literature concerning this issue. These implications encompass online anonymity, racism on social networking sites and lateral violence. Carlson and Kennedy (2021) explain the risk of identifying as Indigenous online and the disconnection this causes in community, the authors also suggest that Indigenous people "are well aware of the intricacies of navigating a digital environment that exhibits persistent colonial attempts at the subjugation of Indigenous identities (Carlson & Kennedy, 2021, p.1)". The ability to appear anonymously online has been linked to increased instances of racism and derogatory content, especially considering Indigenous people do not necessarily disembodify their identity online but rather embrace it as a way to reclaim a connection to culture (Carlson & Kennedy, 2021). The ability for other users to appear anonymously has been linked to widespread online racism as individuals are able to avoid ramifications from online communities (Santana, 2014). Online racial bullying has been linked to Indigenous Australians experiencing mental health issues and sadness at unprecedented rates (Carlson & Kennedy, 2021). Most alarmingly however is the transition from online racist bullying to real life racial violence and profiling. Carlson et al. (2017) highlight this violence in the case of the tragic death of Elijah Doughty who was hit by a car whilst riding a motorbike through the bush in 2016 (Wahlquist, 2018). The man whose identity remains anonymous, was trying to catch up with Doughty as he was suspicious the bike he was riding belonged to him. Prior to his death

comments were posted online alleging an Aboriginal boy had broken into a vehicle and responding comments referred to the youths as “subhuman mutts” and called for an “annual culling” in hopes to increase the deaths of Aboriginal youths (Purtill, 2016). This horrific circumstance of racial discrimination and lateral violence is synonymous with colonial ideologies present throughout Australia’s history. This distressing example outline’s just one case of discrimination faced by oppressed groups and serves to remind of the real danger faced by Indigenous people in the quest to decolonize nations. This paper acknowledges the limitations and consequences faced by Indigenous people in defiance of colonial power and discourse and identifies the significance of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all Indigenous people throughout the investigation into matters regarding the decolonization of First Nations country.

Indigenous people are characterized by a profound connection to country and community. These connections, whilst historically, have taken place in physical communities have increasingly given way to the existence of online Indigenous networks and diasporas which extend nationally and internationally. These communities, linked through the theories of shared recognition and trauma work to consistently challenge and oppose colonial legacies both online and in real world contexts. The Black Lives Matter movement and other Indigenous Australian experiences are significant as they embody the opportunities presented by social media in destabilizing colonial efforts through real world action. The communities accessed through online diasporas are harnessed by Indigenous people as a weapon in the destruction of colonial sentiments and the defense and empowerment of cultural identity. Further research is recommended to explore how Indigenous experiences and perspectives surrounding community, social media and diasporas are able to assist in the decolonization of colonial powers on a global level.

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