March 2022

Digital Indigeneity: Digital Media's Uses for Identity Formation, Education, and Activism by Indigenous People in the Northeastern United States

Virginia A. McLaurin
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2

Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Indigenous Studies Commons, Native American Studies Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Digital Indigeneity: Digital Media’s Uses for Identity Formation, Education, and Activism by Indigenous People in the Northeastern United States

A Dissertation Presented
by
Virginia A. McLaurin

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

February 2022

Department of Anthropology
Digital Indigeneity: Digital Media’s Uses for Identity Formation, Education, and Activism by Indigenous People in the Northeastern United States

A Dissertation Presented
by
Virginia A. McLaurin

Approved as to style and content by:

______________________________________
Jean Forward, Chair

______________________________________
Jacqueline Urla, Member

______________________________________
Anne Ciecko, Member

______________________________________
Julie Hemment, Department Chair
Anthropology
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to thank as I cross this years-in-the-making finish line. Firstly, I would like to thank my spouse and fellow academic Jonathan Hill for unwavering support, many hours of discussion of our scholarly work, and for being there to pick me up whenever I stumbled. My children, Iris and McClellan Hill, and my mother and father, Michelle and Erik McLaurin, also serve as inspirations and sounding boards for everything that I do.

I give unending thanks and appreciation to Jean Forward for being both my Committee Chair and a constant source of encouragement throughout the PhD process. Without such a steadfast chair – who also loves to talk about dragons – I doubt I would have made it this far. To Committee Members Jacqueline Ursla and Anne Ciecko, I can’t tell you how thankful I am for the years of feedback and talks. These helped to develop my ideas and my scholarship, and always rekindled my love of academia.

I would like to thank the Department of Anthropology at UMass Amherst for its generous support of my fieldwork through a predissertation grant and the Sylvia Forman Fellowship. I have also had incredible experiences working within the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at UMass Amherst, which has been incredibly supportive of my scholarship. A major turning point in my dissertation writing process was attending the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded workshop Understanding Digital Culture: Humanist Lenses for Internet Research which took place in summer 2020. Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill’s work making this incredible opportunity happen, in spite of challenges produced by COVID-19, deserve the highest praise.

Several key figures in my life have helped expand my intellectual journey. These include Chris Couch, Bob Paynter, Joyce Vincent, John Bracey, Donna Moody, Leonard FourHawks, and Laurel Davis-Delano. Greg Young-ing, who I considered a friend and mentor, passed in 2019, but his kindness and his scholarship continue to shine a light into dark spaces for me.

Finally, I give sincere thanks to everyone who participated in this dissertation, including Justin Beatty, Minty LongEarth, Joseph Bruchac, Casey Figueroa, Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz, Chief Cherryl Toney Holley, Jennifer Weston, Darius Coombs, Tom Porter, Alex Nunez, Ana Gonzalez, Randall Steele, Hilary Goodnow, Christiana Becker, Warren Griffin Jr., and Bananaboozhoo (on Facebook). I am fortunate to have been able to hear yours words, and even more fortunate to call many of you friends.
ABSTRACT

DIGITAL INDIGENEITY: DIGITAL MEDIA’S USES FOR IDENTITY FORMATION, EDUCATION, AND ACTIVISM BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THE NORTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 2022

VIRGINIA A. MCLAURIN, B.A., EMORY UNIVERSITY
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Jean Forward

This dissertation seeks to examine the types of digital media being produced in the Northeastern United States, its content, the goals and motivations of its creators, the processes underlying Indigenous digital media creation, and the desired and projected audiences of Indigenous digital artists and content creators. Resulting findings from this study illuminate long histories of Indigenous use of digital media tied to digital media's development in Indigenous lands. I argue that Native people have been producers and influencers in film and later, digital media, and have underwritten digital production due to its development on Indigenous lands. Through interviews and media analysis, I discuss how Indigenous content creators use digital media to express identity, educate others, make political gains, and insert Indigeneity into the future. Insights garnered through interviews and media analyses and comparisons with earlier forms of visual media, particularly Indigenous self-portrayals in film and on websites, all indicate that Indigenous people in the Northeast are largely resisting stereotypical self-representations. Indigenous framings of media landscapes and the sociohistorical processes informing them are emphasized, which furthers research on underrepresented presences, uses, and understandings of digital spaces.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The View from behind the Computer Screen</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions to Academia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods, Terminology, and Scope</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Questions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories and Participant Selection</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous People and the Media</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology and Inequality</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Guide</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. INDIGENOUS MEDIA HISTORY: WE KNOW THE MACHINE</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Indigenous Media Interactions</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Philosophies and Technology</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Involvement in Media History</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Art</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on the Tech World</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation, Incorporation, or Appropriation?</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Indigenous Aesthetic ................................................................. 56
Common Indigenous Film Themes .................................................. 64
  Resisting Stereotypes .................................................................. 64
  Education on Indigenous Issues .................................................. 66
  Assertion and Celebration of Indigenous Identities ....................... 69
Conclusion: Contemporary Indigenous Media Interventions .............. 71

3. IDENTITY EXPRESSION ................................................................. 74
  Introduction: Visual Sovereignty ................................................. 74
  Cooperation, Not Competition .................................................... 78
  Art and Expression .................................................................... 81
  Mascots ................................................................................... 87
  Naming Practices ...................................................................... 89
  Beyond Tribe and Nation ........................................................... 97
  Voice and Silence .................................................................... 103
  Audience .................................................................................. 112
  Website Analysis ...................................................................... 115
  Conversations .......................................................................... 125
  Identity Expressed through Place .............................................. 128
Conclusion: A Break with Stereotypes ............................................. 133

4. EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL: A SPIRALING MODEL OF EDUCATION .... 138
  Introduction: Challenges to Answer ........................................... 138
  Responses to Stereotypes and the Historical Record .................... 145
    Podcasts ............................................................................... 154
    Social Media and Websites ..................................................... 158
  Language Education ................................................................. 167
  Preservation Efforts ................................................................... 173
  Indigenous People and Formal Education ................................ 180
  Policies and Protocols ............................................................... 188
# Table of Contents

## 1. Introduction

A Spiraling Model of Education ........................................................................... 193
Conclusion: Carrying Education into the Future ............................................. 196

## 5. Political Negotiations: They Were Always Our Tools ......................... 199

Introduction: Is Technology Colonialist by Nature? .................................. 199
Acknowledgment of Colonial Histories and Privileges ............................. 209
Appropriation, Legal Concerns, and Legal Identity ...................................... 213
Stereotypes, Public Perceptions, and Political Influence ......................... 221
The Gaming Debate and Digital Media ......................................................... 224
Tourism and Economic Development ......................................................... 230
Language Issues .......................................................................................... 232
Indigenous Celebrity .................................................................................... 235
Digital Media Activism ................................................................................ 238
The Politics of Land and Art ....................................................................... 248
Conclusion: Art and Capitalism ................................................................... 252

## 6. Indigenous Futurism: Back to the Indigenous Future ......................... 257

Introduction: Indigenous Futurisms ............................................................... 257
The Importance of the Future to the Present ............................................... 264
Alter/Native Conceptions of Time and Space .............................................. 269
Ancestors and Descendants ....................................................................... 274
Engaging the Alien ...................................................................................... 279
The Place of Four-Leggeds, Those Who Fly, Those Who Crawl and Those Who Swim ................................................................. 284
Women and Non-Binary Centered Futures ............................................... 286
Body and Spirit ............................................................................................ 290
Sustainability and Hope in the Future ......................................................... 294
Major Works in Indigenous Sci-fi and Fantasy ........................................ 298
Conclusion: Indigenous Art as Medicine for the Future ......................... 304

## 7. Conclusion ............................................................................................. 310
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Research Questions Revisited</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: What digital media is being produced by Indigenous people in the Northeast?</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Digital Media</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2: What are the goals and motivations of Indigenous digital media producers in the Northeast?</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3: What is the content of Indigenous digital media in the Northeast?</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ4: How is digital media produced, and what kind of organizational work is a part of the production process?</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ5: Who are the desired and projected audiences for these Indigenous digital media creators?</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poking at Pop Culture</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing in Solidarity: Black Lives Matter</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility at the Heart of Indigeneity</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Movements</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Media in the Future</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES AND EVENTS ATTENDED | 367 |
APPENDIX B: WEBSITES ANALYZED | 368 |
BIBLIOGRAPHY | 369 |
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Top ten most commonly used words in Tweets bearing the hashtag #StandwithMashpee.</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1: Coded count of group names used by websites</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2: Coded count of “tribe/tribal,” “Nation,” and “sovereign.”</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3: Spread of the words “first” or “original.”</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4: Charted historical references by website</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5: Spread of 18th century and older references across websites</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6: Spread of 19th century references across websites</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7: Spread of 20th century references across websites</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8: Spread of 21st century references across websites</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9: Comment history on “The Breakdown: Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Land in Trust” YouTube video</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10: Word frequency chart for “The Breakdown: Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Land in Trust” YouTube video</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11: Spread of language references across websites</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12: Spread of Indigenous language use across websites</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13: Spread of archaeological references across websites</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14: Nipmuc Nation Powwow Protocol, 2017</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15: Two visualizations of a spiraling model of education</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16: Spread of gaming references across websites</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 17: Spread of economic development references across websites……231

Figure 18: The first #StandWithMashpee Tweet……………………………….243

Figure 19: Word Cloud drawing from Tweets bearing
the hashtag #StandwithMashpee…………………………………………246

Figure 20: Vader Sentiment Analysis on Tweets bearing
the hashtag #StandwithMashpee…………………………………………247

Figure 21: Meme depicting Wes Studi’s character from Dances with Wolves,
Photoshopped to hold a roll of toilet paper, referencing the shortages in the
early Covid-19 quarantine periods of 2020……………………………………334

Figure 22: Tweet from Dallas Goldtooth referencing similarities
between the Covid-19 pandemic and historical pandemics associated
with the colonial period…………………………………………………………335

Figure 23: The Rock Driving Meme, with text inserted referencing that
Covid-19 is severe enough that Indigenous people are urging people
to listen to the government………………………………………………………336

Figure 24: A humorous meme about demonstrating spirituality over Zoom……337

Figure 25: A meme using an example of Hollywood Redface to satirize
appropriative practices of non-Indigenous people…………………………338

Figure 26: A social media post referencing pop culture staple The Hitchhiker's
Guide to the Galaxy novel, wherein intelligent dolphins disappear
prior to the end of the world……………………………………………………339

Figure 27: A collection of memes based on CNN’s description of Native Americans
as “something else.”……………………………………………………………340

Figure 28: “Tribute to the Healthcare Warriors in Indian Country
During COVID-19, 2020” by Muscogee Creek artist Johnnie Diacon…………342

Figure 29: A social media shareable post that demonstrated support
for the Mashpee Wampanoag…………………………………………………355

Figure 30: Social media post showing that the
2021 Nipmuc Powwow was cancelled……………………………………….358
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The View from behind the Computer Screen

In 2016, as I was finishing coursework and preparing this dissertation, reports about the Standing Rock water protection efforts were beginning to circulate. More locally, stories were spreading about the Mashpee Wampanoag’s efforts to construct a Taunton Casino with lands placed in federal trust status. In my own very close personal circle, in between fundraising events for Standing Rock, I co-wrote and filmed a fake sitcom commercial advertising the University of Massachusetts’ Josephine White Eagle Cultural Center with friends from within the local Native community. Online conversations snapped and sparked like a bonfire, and live video footage allowed those of us in the Northeast to feel connected to movements happening thousands of miles away like those at Standing Rock, and to see posts from our friends and relations who were able to travel there.

Although the acts of protection that took place at Standing Rock, between North and South Dakota, are far from the Northeastern area that this dissertation takes as its focus, they were critical in bringing Indigenous issues into more mainstream consciousness, and for demonstrating the sophisticated ways that Native people are engaging with complicated technologies. In spite of some critical Marxist readings of media as always enmeshed in systems of capitalism, Indigenous activists using drones to monitor construction crews and police and manipulating GPS data to render data on camp attendees useless visibly demonstrated that media can, at the same time, be subsumed
into anti-capitalist endeavors. In similar ways, Indigenous people in the Northeast have selectively engaged in digital media practices which reflect their own concerns around identity, education, activism, and the place of Indigenous people in the present and the future.

With this dissertation, I intend to further the instrumentalist view that technology users can influence the uses and effects of technology, discussed in detail in Chapter Five, and seek to understand the goals that Indigenous people in the Northeast have in relation to the use of digital media. As we will see, Northeastern Indigenous artists and creators interpret current digital technology as both problematic in its creation and scope, as well as a meaningful extension of traditional practices and artistic expression.

In my own online milieu, I have encountered from my Indigenous friends and acquaintances from the Northeast an impressive array of art, poetry, literature, digital music, handiwork, educational materials, and events – all brought to me through the soft glow of my computer screen. Writing this dissertation in 2021, after an extended quarantine period, this ability to connect with my community online has been more important than ever as powwows and other cultural events have been cancelled systematically over the last two years. Thus, this dissertation not only shows the clever incorporation of digital media by Indigenous people, but the way that it enhances our resilience and allows us to maintain our identities and traditions across space and time.

**Contributions to Academia**

In this dissertation, I seek to understand the ways Native people in the Northeast United States are producing new/digital media forms through their creations and
collaborations with non-Indigenous creators. How are Indigenous identities and communities created, co-created, recreated, reified, or maintained in digital environments? What are the primary motivations for Native people who are utilizing new/digital media, and what sociopolitical purposes are furthered by Indigenous participation in digital media? What are the goals of Indigenous content creators and sharers? Finding the answers to these questions will answer the call of Dyson and Underwood to further research into Indigenous communities’ interactions online, and provide a snapshot of a particular set of communities’ online interactions within a recent timeframe (Dyson & Underwood 2006).

The results will have significance for Native communities, and possibly other minority communities, who are looking for ways to connect with their members, represent themselves in a digital environment, or educate the public without opening themselves up to appropriative or inappropriate behavior. By using interviews and analyzing digital content, the dissertation will ascertain how Indigenous identities, both personal and communal, are being constructed online - thereby providing a range of options for Native communities to consider as they create representations of themselves. The Northeastern United States, with its active Native communities and its wide range of approaches to the digital sphere, may be instructive to cultural minorities elsewhere attempting to find culturally appropriate ways to ensure cultural survival and the continuation of traditional skills.

Drawing from approaches taken from visual anthropology, critical media studies, Indigenous and postcolonial studies, and the digital humanities, this research examines how Indigenous people in the Northeast have used digital media to form diasporic
communities of support and to generate the production of discourses around identity and understanding of Indigenous peoples by non-Natives. The use of digital media to coalesce as communities with shared values and/or identities challenges notions of the internet as a site of pure alienation and individualism. “Scholars such as Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman have argued that digital, social, and mobile media have facilitated and accelerated a shift away from clearly bounded groups or communities to loose and shifting networks of individuals, a phenomenon they’ve termed ‘networked individualism’” (Florini 2019: 13).

However, Indigenous individuals have experience with this kind of diasporic networking prior to the advent of the internet and digital technologies. Several hundred years of forced and coerced population disbursements under colonial regimes have made many Native individuals adept at jumping into a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous social spaces, and maintaining personal and cultural ties in spite of great spatial and temporal distances. Even earlier in history, one might argue that particularly in the Northeast, the coming together and breaking apart of networks of varying sizes outdates colonial invasions. It was not uncommon for small groups or families to work independently from the rest of a tribal community, sometimes with genders split into different tasks; the group would then seasonally reunite with the rest of the tribal nation; and finally, various nations would gather together and split apart again while focusing on a common task or goal. Similar instances of coming-together and separating can be seen today in the online behaviors and intentions of many Indigenous internet users.

This work sits at the intersection digital media and visual art studies, Indigenous Studies, and Anthropology. It also explores Indigenous futurisms, given both the strong
connections between digital or “new” media and futurism, and the inclusion of concerns about the future from research participants. My research would add to this growing body of literature on Indigenous digital media, and it is one of the only works to focus attention primarily on Native Americans and their digital media creation, distribution, and consumption, rather than broader populations. It will also broaden the field of Indigenous digital media studies by considering not only individuals who create highly visible content such as tribal websites, but also community members who may create content in less visible ways, or just consume content.

**Methods, Terminology, and Scope**

This dissertation examines Native American digital environments in the Northeast, (comprising the New England states of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, as well as New York), and pays particular attention to Indigenous media production and circulation as they relate to Indigenous identity politics, public education, and activist efforts. Focusing on the Northeast included several communities. This was necessary for two major reasons. Firstly, it demonstrated the varied approaches to digital spaces taken even by Indigenous populations that share some linguistic and cultural similarities. This helps to dispel the notion that there is one Native “culture,” and highlight the plurality of Indigenous cultures as well as each Native nation’s self-determination. Secondly, focusing on one tribe alone would limit our broader understanding of digital spaces, given that each community has its own geographical, political, social, familial, and colonial histories which may impact its approach to digital media. Focusing on a community with few young people and many Elders who do not engage with technology, for instance, may
produce a site where in-person learning is valued far more than online learning. Nations with more funding or a more dispersed population have appeared to gravitate toward online options for cultural learning and community building. Looking at one geographic area - the Northeast – kept this study feasible while allowing the research to track variability in trends across Native communities. The Northeast is also notable for a high degree of connectivity, both in online and offline spaces, and a history of intertribal cooperation, intermarriage, and political negotiations.

Digital media will be defined as content that can be shared and viewed through a machine apparatus. This could include photographs, digital drawings, scanned images, text, audio files, web sites (including social media sites), and digital video files. In this dissertation, I examine Indigenous produced digital media art online (pieces created through digital formats as well as images of more traditional art such as beadwork), social media sites, digital films, live and recorded online events, blogs, podcasts, and tribal nation and community websites. At times, I also analyze digital media that are produced by non-Indigenous people with significant Native involvement and/or content that were recommended by Indigenous contacts in the Northeast. The network I have chosen to analyze is vast, as I wanted to take a broad overview of Indigenous digital media practices in the Northeastern United States. In terms of the media forms and platforms used, this could include: short films hosted on sites like YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook video; music shared through SoundCloud and YouTube; individual and tribal social media profiles on sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and others; digital art shared on social media sites and sold through websites; blog posts hosted on larger institutional sites or personal blogs; and podcasts hosted on a variety of platforms. Rather
than attempt to gather large data sets on all of these media forms from all of these sites, I chose instead to focus on several in-person interviews and discussions at local events with members of the communities in this area, or who were closely connected to Indigenous communities if not members themselves. This allowed for qualitative research that focuses on the intentions behind the creation of social media posts. It also acknowledged the fact that each Indigenous individual is generally active on multiple online sites and may be producing different types of digital media with different values and meanings on any given day.

In relation to each of these types of digital media, a few core areas that were identified through preliminary research are further examined: identity formation and maintenance, community involvement, cultural learning (including language skills), public education, and activism. All media featured in this dissertation was created, co-created, featured, or widely shared by Indigenous people, with the vast majority created directly by Indigenous people. While internet and computer access is certainly an issue, as many researchers have demonstrated (Ginsburg 2008; Pirbhai-Illich 2011), this dissertation will focus on the behavior of those who have some degree of access to the internet in order to generate digital content. The primary goal is to understand how digital media is being utilized by communities of Indigenous people in the Northeastern United States, and furthermore, how Indigenous identities and concerns are articulated in digital media.

I include some content analysis on websites in particular, as well as podcasts, short digital films, blogs, digital art, literature, and social media pages. In this dissertation, I use traditional qualitative ethnographic methods such as in-depth
interviews and participant observation, including casual conversations at local Indigenous events. I conducted a thorough coding of websites and tweets using an open coding method, which allowed for a grounded analysis that drew major themes directly from both literature and the coded websites, and an application of theories that explains the prevalence of the uncovered themes. Analysis of the codes was carried out using the dedoose analytical software. I also utilized quantitative methods such as gathering statistics on YouTube video viewership and a Vader sentiment analysis on a body of Tweets, using the Orange program.

Interviews with community site creators were conducted in person, via telephone, and via instant messaging. All interviews conducted after the Covid-19 pandemic were necessarily done via phone or Zoom. While each method proved effective in interviews focused on digital subjects, prior to 2020, I preferred in-person interviews which appeared to make most participants more at ease (Kazmer and Xie 2008). The fact that interviewees tended to speak longer during our in-person meetings supports the findings of Linda Tuhuwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) and Sonya Atalay’s *Community-based Archaeology: Research With, By, and for Indigenous and Local Communities* (2012), which advocate for in-person meetings and follow up trips over lengthy period of time to build relationships with subjects or “co-researchers.” The experience of seeing this dynamic in action, in itself, was an interesting finding on how in-person versus digital relationships are built in Northeastern Native communities. Of course, occasional weather issues, personal circumstances, and later, the Covid-19 pandemic, dictated that some interviews take place
over the phone or Zoom. Still, in these cases an effort was made to send consent forms and gift cards, as well as more personal gifts as “thank you” offerings, via mail.

I see the use of digital technologies as an extension of Indigenous uses of other media forms, and on an even deeper level, as a continuation of Indigenous creation of communication technologies and forms of expression. I do not posit the use of these “new media” as in any way antithetical to Indigenous identity or authenticity. Rather, their use demonstrates continuation of traditional values from multiple Indigenous cultures, which have long emphasized intellectual creativity, engagement with cultural differences, and wise use of available materials to meet the (Indigenous) public good (Baker 2005; Burrows 2016; Gauthier 2013; Herr 2020; Hopkins 2006; Iseke & Moore 2011; LaPensée & Lewis 2013; Leggatt 2016; Lewis 2014; Loft 2014; Marques et al. 2019; Maskegon-Iskwew 2005; Medak-Saltzman 2017; Wemigwans 2008; Willox et al. 2012; Young-ing 2005).

Prior to publishing this text, it was sent to every individual contributor, even though prior permissions were given to use quotes. Doing this is not only “a recognition of humanity” (Florini 2019, 218). It is, additionally, part of an anti-colonialist approach to research that pays close attention to what it takes from others and endeavors to approach the work in an equitable way. Still, it must be honestly considered that as a researcher, I gratefully benefit from the permission to use the thoughtful words and ideas of the people who agreed to be part of this text. A full list of interviewees (either by name or anonymously), is provided in Appendix A, and a list of websites analyzed is provided in Appendix B.

**Major Questions**
My research methods were tailored to five major research questions, as follows:

RQ1: What digital media is being produced by Indigenous people in the Northeast?

This question allowed me to construct an overview of the major types of digital media being produced (and, to a lesser degree, consumed) by Indigenous people in the Northeast. Of course, the nature of digital media is that it is highly spreadable, and so both scholarly work and a handful of media texts produced outside of the Northeast, but useful for understanding the region (or popular within it), are also included at times. The hope is that this dissertation’s emphasis on regional digital production may act as a guide in future Indigenous digital media research. It will also give a broad look at how a larger network of Indigenous people are using digital media, in comparison to the majority of Indigenous digital media scholarship which has focused on individual artists’ use and production of specific forms of digital media.

RQ2: What are the goals and motivations of Indigenous digital media producers in the Northeast?

This question examines the driving factors that lead Indigenous people to get involved in digital media production. Looking at individual producers as well as communities, I have investigated the ongoing question of how media forms and colonization interact from an Indigenous perspective. Interviews revealed that some communities feel pressured to have an “online presence,” but are also concerned about appropriation of traditional knowledge once it is made widely available online. Additionally, many individual Indigenous artists spoke to the negotiation of using digital
media to promote art while keeping it secure. I also investigated the use of the terms such as “Indigenous artist” and “Indigenous producer,” asking if Indigenous digital media producers feel that there is something substantively different about their productions based on their Indigenous identity.

RQ3: What is the content of Indigenous digital media in the Northeast?

I chose several websites on which I conducted an in-depth content analysis, to discover and interpret potential themes across Indigenous produced digital media. These websites were downloaded in full in September 2019. The pages were first reviewed for salient themes using an open coding process. After codes were established, every word and image from every page of each website was subsequently coded and dedoose analytic software was used to identify interesting points of overlap or contrast in themes. In addition to this quantitative analysis, I also conducted literary analyses and visual analyses on other pieces discussed in the dissertation. Interviews with Indigenous artists also allowed them to speak directly about their own work and its meaning.

RQ4: How is digital media produced, and what kind of organizational work is a part of the production process?

This question focuses on the realities of production. How do people organize to create sites, especially sites that represent whole communities? What needs and desires lead to the creation of particular sites? What types of topics are considered appropriate for the digital sphere, and what topics produce tensions? Echoing the production-centered work of digital media scholar Faye Ginsburg, this question addressed how production
affects the form, content, and reception of Indigenous produced digital media. Interviews and participant observation were utilized to answer this question.

RQ5: Who are the desired and projected audiences for these Indigenous digital media creators?

While a full survey of all consumers of Indigenous produced digital media in the Northeast is not feasible, the question of who the desired and projected audiences are for the Indigenous digital media producers themselves will further clarify the goals and motivations for digital media production. Interviews with Indigenous digital media producers, both community content creators and individual artists, addressed who they perceive their audiences to be. The focus on ideal or perceived audiences is critical, as most interviewees did not have data about who exactly their audience is. This question also highlights concerns that Indigenous digital media producers may have about the effects of their productions.

In terms of practical considerations, all participants in the study spoke English, many as a first language. While I did not encounter any safety issues, there were of course ethical considerations when undertaking any research project with Indigenous people. The history of anthropological research, and academic research more broadly, has been quite negative in Indigenous communities even when carried out by someone with Native heritage (Smith 1999). I believe that my standing within the communities mitigated some of these concerns, but I also emphasized the choice of anonymity of participants’ responses and their ability to pass on any question. I also sent each interviewee a copy of the dissertation with their contributions highlighted, so that they could raise any issues they had with me prior to a final publication.
Theories and Participant Selection

To discuss Native participation in media spheres necessarily raises, first and foremost, the difficult question of who is “Native” or “Indigenous.” In the past, Native identity in the United States has been defined in a variety of ways by both Native and non-Native groups and individuals. Heated debates about who qualifies as “Indigenous” take place online, with whole Facebook groups dedicated to posting images and videos of individuals who are thought to be ethnic frauds due to factors such as poor drumming, dancing, or singing, or any perceived lack of significant cultural knowledge.

The federal recognition system for tribes operating through the Bureau of Indian Affairs is perhaps the most commonly used criteria for determining Native status. Apart from state recognition, it is the only method for gaining a legally recognized Native identity in the United States. Authors such as Devon Mihesuah have said that federal acknowledgment is the standard for judging whether a person is Indigenous or not, with “very, very few” exceptions, frequently labeling non-recognized tribes or individuals as “fakers” and “frauds” (Mihesuah 2005:28). However, practical experience with tribes who have been through the recognition process, whatever their result, as well as Glen Couthard’s in-depth theoretical approach to the power dynamics of recognition, points to many flaws with using this system to determine “who is Native” (Couthard 2014). The absurdity of one group of people having the power to define another through legal means becomes apparent, and indeed, Couthard (building on the work of Franz Fanon) has effectively argued that the entire concept of recognition maintains a colonialist power imbalance that will only be undone when tribes assert their vision of self regardless of the colonial government’s approval or disapproval (Couthard 2014). Using federal
recognition as the arbiter of Indigenous authenticity also means, logically, that a community may be “not real Indians” on a Tuesday, receive approval of federal recognition on the following Wednesday, and thus be “real Indians” by Thursday, which is farcical. Therefore, my work will disavow the politics of recognition which place power in the hands of colonial governing bodies and create competition among Indigenous groups on the basis of colonial recognition.

A focus on tribal nation sovereignty, though certainly less biased in favor of colonial establishments, also comes with inherent dangers of exclusion, especially in light of centuries of colonization and cultural assimilationist policies. An unfortunately truth is that some nations do not recognize people of legitimate Indigenous descent, perhaps because they have closed their roles or have a blood quantum requirement, a colonialist practice that some tribal nations adopted, or perhaps because the person in question does not have proof of their ancestry on paper. In “Sovereignty’s Betrayals,” Michael Brown has boldly argued that the concept of sovereignty itself is a borrowed term which carries with it the baggage of ruling nobility in Europe, whose sovereignty was expressly derived from a fiat from the God of Western Christianity and gave them absolute power, a concept largely antithetical to most North American Indigenous value systems (Brown 2007). Furthermore, identifiable cases where tribal sovereignty (or what one might call tribal nationalism) has been used to erase or oppose more traditional practices complicates any uncritical enthusiasm for group-based identifications (Lambert 2007). While honoring tribal nations’ self-determination is and should be a primary goal for works conducted in the field of Indigenous Studies, internalized colonization as well as the theoretical and practical foundations of sovereignty make tribal nations’ boundaries a
complicated terrain to work with, especially in a project that seeks to interrogate both dominant and marginalized voices within Native communities.

To determine which voices should be heard as Native voices, I thus utilized a constructivist identity theory which allowed for self-identification (Nagel 1997). While self-identification also runs the inherent risk of appropriation by outsiders who claim Indigenous identity, it puts the power of identification in the hands of the subjects, as opposed to the mainstream culture or the researcher alone. This emphasis on subjects’ understandings of self and community therefore resists reifying the perspective of the academic (Smith 1999). It takes into account multiple ways of defining “indigeneity” - for example, by racial designation, cultural practices, religious/spiritual beliefs, or land practices - as Anna Tsing has demonstrated in her work (Tsing 2007). It is also necessary for any meetings held exclusively online, as one’s online identity is less subject to verification. However, to guarantee a reasonable number of community-invested and culturally competent research subjects, several cautionary measures were taken using this constructivist identity approach. These incorporate tribal nations’ and local communities understandings of who is known to them and who is a member of their community. My own longtime history in the area helped ensure a decent understanding of which individuals were largely accepted as “Indigenous” within the area.

My focus in finding interview participants was to reach out to tribal nation members and local Indigenous artists who are widely recognized as culturally competent and deeply involved in their Indigenous nations or local communities. These insider perspectives were sought in order to ensure a direct set of “insider” voices. Furthermore, blending a postcolonial theory of complex and multifaceted relations of power and the
feminist theories of intersectionality and performativity, identity will be viewed as a complex and shifting set of relations. I agree with Francis Nyamnjoh who writes that academics should be “theorizing pre- and postcolonial identities as complex, negotiated, and relational experiences” (Nyamnjoh 2007:305). This view of identity focuses heavily on multiple factors including community relationships, cultural competency, performativity, self-identification, identification by others, and personal and familial histories.

Additionally, pushing for an even more nuanced frame of reference for identity, Northeastern Indigenous understandings of what it means to be “Native” are approached from every level - band, nation/tribe, cultural complex, regional, colonial nation, and worldwide. Multiple interviewees volunteered these distinctions without being asked, which differentiated their interviews from conversations I had with non-Indigenous allies who often saw a distinction between Native and non-Native, and sometimes between tribal nations, but were rarely aware of the clan distinctions and levels of personal and tribal recognition that several Indigenous interviewees described. This multilayered focus on Indigenous identity relates to Joane Nagel’s work on identity levels, where at more intimate levels identity becomes more closely referenced, while with less familiar outsiders, broader identity markers are made more legible and therefore used more frequently (Nagel 1994).

Here I should also note the words I use to describe the Indigenous heritage of participants. Throughout the dissertation, I use tribal nations when possible. When describing Indigenous people as a collective, or shared experiences, I alternate between “Indigenous” and “Native.” I use the term “Indigenous” because it is the most broadly
accepted word by groups within and outside of North America, validated by the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, because it is used to describe so many groups worldwide, it can be a bit broad, and its usage in the United States lags behind other terms, as I discuss in Chapter Three. “Native” is currently the preferred term by the majority of my personal acquaintances, and thus I use it as well. I caution that its use in the United States, which is seen as respectful, is not viewed in the same light in Canada and other social contexts. I chose not to use “Native American” because this is a legal designation (requiring enrollment in a state or federally recognized tribal nation) and because it excludes Canadian Indigenous people, thus legitimizing the border between the U.S. and Canada that runs through Indigenous nation lands. Finally, I do not use “Indian” or “American Indian” because these terms are often considered older and have fallen out of favor in the U.S. and elsewhere, though a few participants in this dissertation preferred that term for personal and/or legal reasons.

In this dissertation, I draw on specific theories that may broadly fall under the definition of “postcolonial theories.” That this dissertation makes use of postcolonial theory should not be taken as assent that the era of active colonialism is at an end, as some authors suggest (Williams and Chrisman 1994). “Postcolonial theory should not be understood as signifying the end of colonialism or even formal colonialism” (Simpson and Smith 2014:14). The events at Standing Rock, wherein water protectors faced severe police intervention as they peacefully sought to protect a river they maintain treaty rights to the usage of, was highly advertised through digital means. This should be proof enough that active colonialism continues in the present. Instead, postcolonial theories will be used to call attention to the complex set of circumstances produced by colonization,
both past and present, and to draw our focus to the many ways in which Indigenous actors have asserted some degree of agency even in highly unfavorable and oppressive circumstances. Northeastern Indigenous peoples’ use of digital media and social networking sites presents us with a case of problematic technology produced within a deeply flawed capitalistic system, being used in innovative ways to maintain self-determination and preserve traditional practices. How individuals and tribal nations navigate this terrain may provide case studies and possibilities for how to combat the oppressive conditions of colonialism and the capitalist methods through which it reproduces.

Finally, I endeavored to choose the theories that best explained what I found in my data. However, I made the conscious choice to highlight primarily Indigenous theorists, as their works frequently captured the ideas and phenomena that I was attempting to communicate, and were able to gain a significant depth of understanding of Indigenous interactions with media through their own personal belonging to Indigenous communities.

**Indigenous People and the Media**

While the subject of Native American stereotypes in film has been a popular topic for decades, largely focused on films created about Native Americans by non-Indigenous creators, far fewer studies have focused on Indigenous-created media, and even fewer on Indigenous-created digital media.

There has been a wealth of scholarly literature on Native American media production and representation, especially in films. Aleiss (2005) was an early attempt to
chart across time major trends in how Native Americans were portrayed in film, and Fienup-Riordan (1995) similarly graphed the representation of North American Inuit, Cree, and Alaska Native peoples. Other major contributions to the study of how film, and later digital, media portrayed Indigenous people include Hearne (2012), Howe et al. (2013), Kilpatrick (1999), Marubbio and Buffalohead (2013), Rollins and O’Connor (1998 and 2005), and Stedman (1982). One could argue that the continued emphasis on Indigenous stereotypes over Indigenous self-representation in the United States - especially the apparent disinterest in Indigenous digital spheres - in and of itself is a pattern produced by the overarching stereotype of Indigenous people being pre-modern. It places power in the hands of dominant media, and while it can hardly be argued that independent Indigenous media has more reach or influence than mainstream media, those of us who study stereotypes within academia must also strive to highlight the meaningful (often alternative) ways Indigenous people counter such images.

Ginsburg’s work (1991, 1993, 1995, 2003, 2008, and 2011) focuses on the creations of Indigenous people themselves, as does Leuthold’s (1998) study on Indigenous media and Knopf’s (2009) highly detailed examination of key Indigenous film productions. The works of Turner (1995 and 2008), Schiwy (2003), and Wortham (2000 and 2004), focus on Indigenous media in South America, but are useful for their focus on self-representation and political uses of new media forms. These texts are all instructive on how Indigenous people have been portrayed by various insider and outsider groups across time, and many digital media productions by Indigenous people today can only be understood in this context - consider the 1491s’ digital short film “Smiling Indians.” Yet to date, only one full book has examined exclusively Indigenous internet
use in depth, *Native on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age* by Kyra Landzelius (2004). In it, Landzelius spreads the focus globally and interprets “Indigenous” broadly, leaving less depth for each featured group. Although she does discuss identity politics and solidarity against corporations, her focus is less on media production or cultural learning, and more on virtual community formation in particular (Landzelius 2004). A short chapter entitled “Indigenous Peoples on the Internet,” by Laurel Dyson, gives a general history and discussion of how Indigenous people have been using the internet. It also addresses structural issues in accessing the internet and a theoretical consideration of what constitutes an “Indigenous website” akin to the guiding factors for Indigenous film designations in Houstin Wood’s *Native Features*. Its short sections on Indigenous identity, connecting the Indigenous diaspora, and Indigenous cyberactivism are particularly relevant to my work, as is its call for further research on Indigenous interventions into the online sphere. There are a few very early lists of Indigenous websites (Miller 1999; Mitten 2003 and 2006; Matesic 2004; Anderson 2003; Wemigwans 2008), and a few studies of specific types of Indigenous websites such as tourist, health, and gaming sites (Choi & Hsu 2001; Cuillier & Ross 2007; Filippi et al. 2013; Seikel 2016), though these are now outdated and only rarely featured Indigenous websites from the Northeastern region of the United States.

Alternately, there are many excellent texts which focus on digital media from non-Indigenous populations. A sampling of general approaches to the subject include Bennett and Segerberg (2011 and 2013), Couldry (2012), Lundby (2009), and Thurlow and Mroczek (2011). Many works, such as Buckingham and Willett (2006), Howard and Hussain (2011), and Hull (2003), focus exclusively on youth and activism. These are
helpful for framing my discussions on Indigenous activist uses for digital media. However, these digital media works do not give significant attention to Indigenous populations.

One field that has led the way in interrogating Indigenous digital media is the field of visual arts. Within this field, debates about the inherent nature of digital media have been taking place; and though they are centered on artistic endeavors such as museum installations and live performances, their core ideas are instructive for my research.

Two main approaches to digital media have been, one, the opinion that it is inherently tied to the capitalist regimes that created the internet - an approach used early in discussions of digital media by Loretta Todd - and two, a more integrative approach to digital terrain utilized by Steven Loft and Buffy Sainte-Marie. As stated by Greg Younging, there is “the substantivist view that technology is so substantial that it has a hegemonic power to the extent that it can control and undermine the intent of its users… and conversely, the instrumentalist view that the users of technology have the ability to determine the outcome of the use of technology” (Younging 2005: 179-180). In other words, Indigenous scholars and artists are asking if Marshall McLuhan was correct when he insisted that the media form itself is the message.

Some people certainly think so. David Garneau points out that some people may see that “the ongoing results of favoring squared efficiency and virtual over organic reality is where Indigenous and non-Indigenous cosmological paradigms continue to clash,” though he also notes that the ability to reproduce resources ad infinitum may agree with Indigenous values of sharing (2018: 82). Others focus on the content of media,
which they see reflecting existing power structures. “Pessimistic perspectives on the relationship between the reproduction of linguistic diversity and electronic mass mediation have even culminated in assessments such as those describing the impact of electronic media on the maintenance of lesser-used languages as ‘cultural nerve gas’” (Eisenlohr 2004: 23).

This dissertation takes the instrumentalist view that technology users can direct the use of technology. However, this is not to say that all media should be accepted uncritically - attention must also be paid to the circumstances outside of that technology. For example, Judith Leggatt argues that Indigenous people can claim territory within digital spaces, but this must not become a substitute for actual lost territories in the real world (2016).

The use of “territory” here is quite intentional, as a running theme through Indigenous digital media writings is the idea of the internet and digital spaces as territory that can be claimed (or reclaimed), coded (or recoded) as Indigenous. “For Indigenous people the ‘media landscape’ becomes just that: a landscape, replete with life and spirit, inclusive of beings, thought, prophecy, and the underlying connectedness of all things - a space that mirrors, memorializes, and points to the structure of Indigenous thought” (Loft 2014:xvi). As a landscape, digital terrain is not seen as alien but rather part of the living whole. “Such is the way we often understand technology, as something alive and filled with spirit” (2bears 2014:14). This idea of the mediascape as terrain may be connected to earlier Indigenous uses of older media forms - recall the Elder on a Yukon radio making land claims as he told traditional stories, or how Kathleen Buddle described Indigenous
women on the radio as taking a position in “no man’s land” (Moore & Tlen 2007; Buddle 2008).

Some long-standing debates about Indigenous visual art in general continue into the arena of digital media. For instance, is digital media as an outside media form inherently harmful to Indigenous cultures, or a boon to be used creatively by Indigenous people? I pose the argument that film and radio are not outside media forms for some Indigenous people, and would continue that line of inquiry here, given that Buffy Sainte-Marie and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun were early digital content creators when most people, Indigenous or not, were not even accessing the internet. Ḥāsiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw made a much broader and more theoretical argument in the same vein when he wrote that Indigenous cultures demonstrate a “truly networked way of being” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2014:191). And of course, when Indigenous people do use digital media or the internet, the question raises whether there is something inherently different about their visual media production. Just as Leuthold and Osawa argued that there are certain guiding factors in Indigenous film, David Garneau, Greg Young-ing, and other writers posit that Indigenous creators have certain guiding factors in their digital media artistic productions that make their interactions with media distinct. Thus, some of the questions addressed in this dissertation are not new, but are being newly applied to some of the digital media forms examined here.

**Technology and Inequality**

Given the focus on highly technological forms of media creation that are at the heart of this dissertation, it is prudent to take a moment to reflect on how Indigenous people have been juxtaposed against technological innovations in the view of mainstream
American society. Europeans, rather than acknowledging the highly complex systems that Indigenous people had in place upon contact, chose to view them as primitive and belonging to earlier centuries of human development. If Indigenous people did not belong in this era, then it was acceptable to ensure that they would never make it into the future through genocidal actions. This view of the inevitability of Indigenous decline meant that Indigenous people themselves were not seen as the users of modern, cutting edge technologies; instead, these technologies were considered ideal ways to “capture” the images and sounds of Indigenous people before they were wiped from the earth. Early ethnologists and anthropologists like Jesse Walter Fewkes used contemporary recording technologies to collect bits and scraps of Indigenous cultures for their collections (and to build academic careers). Nevertheless, historical research covered in Chapter 2 of this dissertation shows that even under these circumstances, Indigenous people have always found ways to gain access to technology and have been instrumental in helping to develop it. The involvement of Indigenous people in cutting edge technologies of the past and present grinds up against dominant ideas of Indigenous people as premodern, primitive, and disappearing. Even discussing Indigenous digital or “new” media art and activism “communicates seemingly contradictory concepts: the misunderstood, ‘static’ Aboriginal culture engaged in the most modern of art practices – new media art” (Claxton 2005:15).

There have been issues of access, to be sure, especially with today’s digital technologies. Many reservations still lack reliable internet access. This is less a problem for Indigenous people in the areas that I focused on (for instance, Massachusetts and Connecticut generally have widespread internet availability, with a few exceptions). In
fact, as far back as 2008, Qureshi and Trumbly-Lamsam found that of the tribal newspapers they analyzed, the Mashantucket Pequot’s newspaper *The Pequot Times* (the only one from the Northeastern area) also contained the most references to developing information technologies, suggesting earlier availability of the internet for Indigenous people in the Northeast. But some households only have access through their smartphones, which can interface differently than web browsers with certain websites and may make internet use more difficult. Furthermore, several texts have demonstrated the ongoing tension between “the emancipatory possibilities of digital and social media” and the ways that these tools are simultaneously shaped by neoliberal capitalist values, an issue that I address in Chapter 5 (Florini 2019: 7). There are also differences in who benefits from the advancement of certain technologies. As I write, there is a growing concern that 5G towers are being placed on tribal lands without consent – perhaps allowing greater internet access, but simultaneously cutting Native people out of the profits of generating this access, and eroding Indigenous sovereignty (Stuber 2020).

Digital media, sometimes known as “new media,” has clear connotations with the cutting edge and futuristic, leading to disciplinary and theoretical links to the field of futurism. Multiple writers, including AbTeC founders Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati, have spoken about the necessity of envisioning Indigenous futures. “We do not tend to spend much time imagining what our communities will be like in one hundred, five hundred, or a thousand years… a people that are absent in the future need not be consulted in the present about how that future comes about” (Lewis 2014:56). Indigenous futurism is a relatively new field, and one that is still largely focused on
individual digital art creators rather than whole communities’ interactions with digital technology.

**Chapter Guide**

Within this dissertation, contributions from a range of authors writing on the topic of digital media in Indigenous communities are utilized. Interviews were conducted with a wide range of Indigenous people in their Northeastern homelands, Indigenous transplants to the area that are now part of the larger Native community, and a few non-Indigenous allies working alongside Indigenous people. Appendix A provides a list of these interviews as well as other events from which I gathered data. Interviews, personal observations, data from website coding, and quantitative data on YouTube and Twitter posts are distributed throughout Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six.

In addition to a wide range of viewpoints from Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, special care was taken to highlight the work of Indigenous authors whose ancestral homelands are the Northeastern United States. Therefore, each chapter centers its discussion on a theory provided by an Indigenous author whose tribal homelands are within the Northeastern United States or nearby Canadian areas (recognizing that national borders were drawn through traditional territories, and that cultural continuity has continued in spite of the problematic implications of those nations’ borders).

This chapter introduced the basic research questions, data collection methods, and goals of this dissertation. Chapter Two is an extended literature review examining the history of scholarship on Indigenous film and other media forms such as radio, since digital media is both informed by earlier media practices and also deviates from them in
relevant ways. The following chapters were grouped according to dominant themes that emerged from website analysis and personal interviews. Chapter Three examines the ways in which website content creators, artists, and digital media users choose to present their identity to the world. Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja’s concept of “visual sovereignty” is used to emphasize the culturally and politically meaningful ways in which Indigenous people portray themselves online (Raheja 2010). Chapter Four examines educational themes, and how Indigenous tribal nations are attempting to educate both tribal members and the broader public through digital media (such as educational videos and online conversations) as well as by other means. Aquinnah Wampanoag leader Linda Coombs’ model of spiraling education is provided as a way of thinking through honest yet age-appropriate Indigenous history and cultural teachings, through digital offerings and traditional in-person teaching, and as a way of conceptualizing the process of learning as a communal act based in reciprocity and morphing with one’s age and experience. Chapter Five surveys political issues and how Indigenous Northeastern communities have responded to local, national, and international issues relevant to Indigenous rights. Additionally, a range of substantivist and instrumentalist approaches to digital media as a tool of liberation or colonialist control are contrasted within this chapter. Chapter Six takes a look at work being done in Indigenous futurism, borrowing the term coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon. Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor’s concept of survivance is also brought into this chapter to highlight the growing emphasis on persistence and revitalization found in futurist works. Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter, fully incorporates recent events taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which had significant impacts on digital media use, as well as major
movements taking place in Indigenous communities in the Northeastern United States as of the writing of this dissertation.

Revisiting the main research questions posed by this dissertation, R1 asks what digital media is being produced by Indigenous people in the Northeast. Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven all address various forms of social media posts, digital film, online educational materials, and websites. R2 asks, what are the goals and motivations of Indigenous digital media producers in the Northeast? Interviews in particular answer this question throughout Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six. In R3, I inquire about the content of digital media in the Northeast. While this is addressed across Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven, there is special attention given to website content analysis in Chapter Three. R4 inquires into how digital media is produced, and what kind of organizational work is a part of the production process. This is largely addressed in Chapters Three and Five through personal interviews. Finally, R5 asked who the desired and projected audiences are for these Indigenous digital media creators. While hard data was generally lacking for audience numbers and demographics, interviews discussed in Chapter Three shine a light on desired audience.

All research questions and key findings related to them are summarized in Chapter Seven, along with updates from the year 2020, after most dissertation research was concluded.

Conclusion

Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith wrote that “the politics of decolonization requires the building of mass movements capable of dismantling settler colonialism,
white supremacy, and capitalism. The intellectual project of decolonization would necessarily be broad based as anyone and everyone who can help think of and imagine ways out of the moral and political impasse of recognition and into different modes of possibility would have to be enjoined to this intellectual and political process” (2014:10-11). On the one hand, the internet’s ties to capitalism and its seemingly endless thirst for acquisition of new materials make it a dubious prospect for furthering Indigenous goals. On the other hand, calls for a broad appeal to decolonize have found some traction online with both Indigenous groups as well as non-Indigenous allies, as Standing Rock’s news coverage through social media demonstrated.

This work updates earlier studies on Indigenous websites (Mitten 2003; Anderson 2003; Cuillier & Ross 2007; Seikel 2016), providing an in-depth look at a particular American region. It also answers Angela M. Haas’s call for us to “critically reflect on struggles for and engage with such discussions about digital and visual rhetorical sovereignty, or the inherent right for indigenous communities to claim and shape their own communication needs (as well as the rhetoric of their identities) in digital and visual space” (Haas 2007:95-96).

By examining specific online interventions and personal interactions in the case of Northeastern Native communities and individuals, this dissertation interrogates why the internet is used by various Indigenous actors, what the outcomes of internet use are, and what effects Indigenous producers believe digital and social media have on community relations and public outreach. In short, for Native people in the Northeast United States, what work is “new media” doing to solve the old but ever-present problems of colonialism?
CHAPTER 2

INDIGENOUS MEDIA HISTORY: WE KNOW THE MACHINE

Introduction: Indigenous Media Interactions

The history of Native American and Indigenous peoples’ interaction with media technology has frequently been portrayed as the meeting of primitive and modern, the past and the future, simplicity and complexity. Whether celebrated as edifying Indigenous peoples or dreaded as the root cause of assimilation and cultural loss, until recently media technology has been discussed as an alien, foreign factor in the lives of Native people. Marian Bredin, for example, classifies television, film, and radio as having a “southern origin” (originating from southern Canada or the United States) in relation to northern Canadian Cree and Inuit populations, who then “indigenize” or appropriate them. Fienup-Riordan repeatedly discusses the work of Robert Flaherty and his directorial influence on subsequent outsiders’ depictions of First Nations and “Eskimo” peoples (Bredin 1996; Fienup-Riordan 1995).

A deeper look at the history of Natives’ interaction with film begins to reveal a different narrative. While the non-Native audience of Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) might see a primitive people captured in time with the power of the white man’s camera, those who see the production stills or the 1990 documentary Nanook Revisited must face a different reality - the so-called “primitive” Inuit were the ones setting up shots, working the camera, and generally acting in every capacity in which you might imagine a film crew to act (Massot 1990). Highly technical workers, Flaherty even turned to them when his film equipment broke down, and they deftly repaired it (Hopkins
Their shots, utilizing some of the first constructed sets, were Inuit co-creations and have become hallmarks in the documentary genre.

Moving forward in time, one could hardly be blamed for thinking that Victor Daniels, the original Tonto in radio and later on television, was simply a product of his time doomed to play what is now seen as an insulting sidekick role with no measurable way to push back against the stereotypes assigned to him. In the role, Daniels affected a stereotypical Native American accent to such a degree that it is now referred to as “Tonto-speak.” However, further probing reveals that Daniels had arguments with white screenwriters over the treatment of historical Native figures such as Geronimo, who was portrayed by Daniels (and in many other films) as a villain despite his status as a heroic resistance fighter for many Indigenous Americans (Floyd 2010). Finally, Daniels reached a point in his career where he refused to play Indigenous antagonists. He fought for the right to speak in his own Southern American accent over choppy “Tonto-speak” and reached out to fellow Native actors trying to make their way in an unfriendly Hollywood environment. The influence of Victor Daniels was largely revealed by another Native in the media business, a young man named Jacob Floyd whose own short film Tonto Plays Himself (2010) highlighted the complexity of this particular man’s career.

Background research into Native involvement in film leads to the inevitable conclusion that media did not “come” to Indigenous peoples any more or less than it “came” to European and American people (Claxton 2005; Hopkins 2006; Maskegon-Iskwew 2005; Massot 1990). Rather, Native people were always at the forefront of film, photography, recording, and digital technologies - though not always recognized for their roles. Indigenous people from a wide array of tribal nation backgrounds have shaped the
very genres and conventions of film, pushed for an exploration of the social potential of photography, and contributed to musical and artistic movements that have influenced the world.

Furthermore, media are highly dependent on funding, and Indigenous nations – though unwillingly, through the continued loss of their rightful lands and natural resources – have underwritten not only the film industry and Silicon Valley, but every major American industry. As such, one could argue that Indigenous communities may rightfully be viewed as the producers of all media created within the United States and other settler societies.

**Indigenous Philosophies and Technology**

Before diving into the history of Indigenous involvement in popular culture and digital technology, we should first examine some philosophical approaches to digital technologies and how Indigenous understandings of the world have contributed to the intellectual terrain of today’s media landscape.

When the phonograph recorder was introduced to the elites of American society in the late 1800s, the results were somewhat unsavory, according to various newspaper reports of the time (Brady 1999). Grown men became nauseated and even blacked out. “When the phonograph was demonstrated in 1878 before members of the National Academy of Sciences, hardly a naive group, several individuals in the audience fainted” (Brady 1999:31). Hearing a voice disembodied was an abstraction that they were not prepared to mentally reconcile.
Indigenous people, however, in spite of newspaper articles that depicted them as uncivilized individuals in awe of the white man’s technology, in fact exhibited no such response upon being introduced to recording technology. “Native and other informants brought their own cultural equipment to the experience of being recorded, enabling them to face the mechanical wonder with more nonchalance than the patronizing anecdotes give them credit for — sometimes with greater sangfroid and dignity than members of the culture intent on recording them… In contrast, it was participants in American mainstream culture who maintained an attitude of mythically charged wonder, albeit somewhat posed and affected, toward the phonograph and its inventor” (Brady 1999:30-31). When ethnologists like Francis La Flesche went into Indigenous communities to record them, he also played them his previous recordings – and there are no faintings, no vomiting in his recordings. In fact, Hopi informants created a clown act mocking the recording invention and the frantic note-taking of anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes (Brady 1999). When the novelty of recording was described to Indigenous individuals – with features like re-playability being emphasized – these individuals often responded that they could find community members who could sing the same songs, even repeatedly, eliminating the novelty of the record.

How is it that Indigenous people were able to take such wildly new innovations in stride, while western audiences were shaken to their core? One might expect that western ideologies, with their Cartesian emphasis on the division between mind and body, would be able to readily accept these emerging technologies. However, several scholars discussed below have argued that Indigenous philosophies and cultural perspectives made them more able to accommodate these innovations.
On the surface level, one might argue that Indigenous societies were more open to change and difference, as opposed to more conservative western cultures. It is true that the incorporation of new ideas and technologies have long been a hallmark of many Indigenous cultures. Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva has stated:

“In fact, new technology and Indigenous peoples have never been strangers or irreconcilable; since time immemorial our young people have traveled from and brought back to our communities the latest technologies… Indigenous communities will bring their own special rhetoric into the melee and adapt communication infrastructures to their own purposes” (Masayesva 2005:175).

Western Massachusetts artist, musician, and community leader Justin Beatty (Anishinaabe) underscored this idea, commenting that “we were inclined to adapt. If something came along and we found it useful, we’d use it. If it was something that had some particular understanding behind its use, we’d try to stay true to that” (personal interview, 2019).

However, it would not do to say that western societies were not also accustomed to some degree of change by the time that they were introduced to the recording technologies that were developed in the late 19th century. During the decades and centuries preceding this time period, western societies in both Europe and the Americas had undergone massive and swift cultural changes themselves. A deeper answer may emerge from an analysis of the way various media were used in Indigenous and western societies.
Indigenous Studies scholar Angela M. Haas has offered “a preliminary hypertextual historiographical decolonial narrative that suggests that the concept of hypertext and the rhetorical work it does are not new – nor is it unique to Western culture, despite the terminology’s Western etymology” (Haas 2007:82-83). Wampum belts are crafted from quahog shells, usually in purples and whites, and the color and their relationship to each other as well as the representational imagery crafted from the beads’ positions, and furthermore the context around the creation of the belt, serve as a form of historical documentation. Haas thus posits that wampum belts function similarly to modern hypertexts, potentially providing a mental framework for understanding increasingly hypertextual forms of media in the modern era. “American Indian communities have employed wampum belts as hypertextual technologies – as wampum belts have extended human memories of inherited knowledges through interconnected, nonlinear designs and associative storage and retrieval methods – long before the ‘discovery’ of Western hypertext” (Haas 2007:77). This work suggests that Indigenous worldviews, which frequently accepted contradictions, abstractions, and multiple identities with ease, also predisposes Indigenous individuals to grasp cutting edge technologies and make sense of them.

Some theorists, focusing on the original meaning of “digital” that emphasizes the work of hands and feet, posit that the basis of all digital technology is handiwork, frequently positioning women, members of lower social classes, and Othered minorities as practitioners of digital labor. “The cyberfeminist theorist Sadie Plant completes the circuit between weaving as indigenous practice and software production: ‘Textiles themselves are very literally the software linings of all technology… it is their
microprocesses which underlie it all: the spindle and the wheel used in spinning yarn are the basis of all later axles, wheels, and rotation; the interlaced threads of the loom compose the most abstract processes of fabrication”’ (Nakamura 2014:934). Given the focus on precision, memory, and repeatability in both oral traditions and many forms of Indigenous crafts, one could certainly draw parallels to more contemporary digital values.

Others approach the concept of cyberspace from an environmental perspective. “Cyberspace has been occupied, transformed, appropriated, and reinvented by Native people in ways similar to how we’ve always approached real space” (Hopkins 2005:135). Online powwows are a prime example of a hybrid social form adapted to online media. The Social Media Powwow, created as the usual powwow season was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, operated across multiple social media sites and encourages environmentalist and social justice posts, as well as an atmosphere of encouragement and positivity.

It is true that many recording technologies were only able to be manufactured and developed because of a western cultural trajectory and capitalist marketplace ethos that sought to exploit natural resources, digging deeper into the earth than most Indigenous societies would have found moral or sustainable. Indigenous societies, left undisturbed by colonization and western influences, may or may not have developed similar technologies (or they may have developed them in more sustainable ways). “So who’s to say that left to our own devices, we wouldn’t have come up with some of these things. If you look at the technologies that we had as Indigenous people prior to contact, we were doing some pretty amazing stuff… and art was considered important. That was a way of conveying ideas and recording a sense of what was going on” (Justin Beatty, personal interview,
What we can see clearly, from the above examples, is that Indigenous societies have historically invested a great deal of time and consideration into varied philosophical frameworks that frequently may have allowed a faster and more nuanced understanding of digital technologies, such that they have not been perceived as embodying foreign or new concepts for Indigenous people.

**Indigenous Involvement in Media History**

**Film**

One of the first industries to focus on, and involve, Indigenous people was the burgeoning film industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In popular culture, James Young Deer capitalized on the interest in Native-based romances and tragedies and used this as his entrée into the film industry. While Young Deer, working with Princess Redwing, was able to produce films that satisfied audiences and were somewhat more culturally accurate and sensitive than those made by their non-Native contemporaries that utilized Indigenous subjects, sadly his time in the film industry did not signal a wave of more Indigenous directors. In her study of the history of Indigenous aesthetics, Loretta Todd notes that “though James Young Deer made films in Hollywood when it was still Hollywoodland, it would be many decades before we were making films” (Todd 2005:107). Instead, over the next several decades, more films about Native people were produced by non-Indigenous creators, and as a result films from the early 1900s often contained stereotypical imagery. Yet even though they were increasingly pushed out of the film industry as it professionalized, many Indigenous people in the U.S. did not take the stereotypes that were emerging in film without protest. In fact, they formally protested even in the early days of the 20th century; in 1911, a group of Indigenous people...

Indigenous actors, even when shoehorned into somewhat stereotypical roles, were consistently working to improve depictions of Native people and provide greater opportunities for future generations of Native actors. Jay Silverheels and Will Sampson, for instance, founded the Indian Actors Workshop in 1966 (Historica Canada Teacher Community 2021). Sampson, whose primary career interest was not acting, had the freedom to turn down roles for Indigenous antagonists and even re-write certain roles. His most famous role, as Chief Bromden in One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest, was meant to be a more stereotypical role. According to Sampson, “He told me what he wanted, and told him that wasn't the way it was” (Lichtenstein 1976). There are numerous casual stories about other Indigenous actors who have negotiated roles, or flat turned them down, risking their own careers in film to do their part in eliminating harmful stereotypes.

As the westerns of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, along with their stereotypes of Indigenous people as menacing and violent, began to wane in popularity in the more progressive eras of the 1960s and 1970s, the film industry began to embrace revisionist westerns like Little Big Man and The Outlaw Josey Wales, further allowing for non-stereotypical performances from Indigenous actors like Chief Dan George.

Having investigated Indigenous filmmaking efforts, Hunkpapa Lakota filmmaker and artist Dana Claxton recalls that in Canada, the 1970s introduced notable independent filmmaking efforts. “Video In (formally Video Inn)… become known as a site for Aboriginal independent media art production” (Claxton 2005:18). Later, Canada also developed the First Nations Access Program in 1991, which morphed into the short-lived
First Nations Video Collective, and was “soon followed by the present-day Indigenous Media Arts Group (IMAG)” (Claxton 2005:20).

The 1980s saw only a few, mostly independent films that featured Indigenous actors and storylines (notably, 1989’s *Powwow Highway*, which was not directed by an Indigenous person but featured many notable Indigenous actors), but the 1990s and particularly the Hollywood epic *Dances with Wolves* ushered in a resurgence of Native subjects in film. As critiqued and lambasted as *Dances with Wolves* now is among Native communities, it was celebrated at the time for its genuine attempts at cultural accuracy; one local Mohawk paper described it as one of the more accurate films ever made up to that time. Perhaps the most laudable aspect of *Dances with Wolves* is that it renewed interest in Indigenous storylines, and allowed for funding for Indigenous people to begin directing, writing, and acting in more of their own feature length and short films.

Today, feature-length, creative Indigenous films continue to grow. Indigenous directors producing feature length fiction films include Jeff Barnaby (Mi’kmaq), Sterlin Harjo (Seminole Nation and Muskogee), Shelley Niro (Mohawk), Chris Eyre (Cheyenne and Arapaho), Randy Redroad (Cherokee), Valeria Red-Horse (Cherokee), Georgina Lightning (Samson Cree Nation), Danis Goulet (Cree-Métis), and Rodrick Pocawatchit (Comanche, Pawnee and Shawnee), to name a few. These directors are often acquainted with an even broader array of Indigenous creatives from around the world, such as well-known Jewish and Maori descent director Taika Waititi. Taika Waititi and Sterling Harjo, for instance, were acquainted through international Indigenous film networks long before Waititi found his recent success in Hollywood with films such as *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Jojo Rabbit* (2019).
Apart from popular culture, Indigenous people have been experiencing film in relation to academic and ethnographic ventures for, essentially, as long as film has existed. Indigenous imagery “circulated widely in documentary form since Thomas Edison’s kinetoscope recorded a Hopi snake dance for the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), about life in a small Inuit community, is often considered to be the first ‘documentary’ film ever made… Navajo filmmakers were also the subjects of the foundational experiment in subject-as-filmmaker documentaries, 1966’s Navajo Film Project” (Peterson 2014:250). As discussed previously, Inuit crewmembers gained experience working cameras in the freezing cold, and came away with a clear understanding of how film scenes are constructs and may not represent reality. Ironically, while believing the Inuit to be primitive, many Americans viewing *Nanook of the North* were unable to see through the film’s instances of artifice and took it as a representation of reality.

Other early notable projects with Indigenous communities include the projects of Tim Asch and Terence Turner from the 1960s. “Later in their careers, Tim Asch and Terence Turner both encouraged and trained their previously filmed subjects to produce their own films” (Lempert 2018:24). Although “for many ‘legacy’ indigenous media organizations, such as the Kayapo Video Project catalyzed by Terry Turner (2006), questions of sustainability loom large,” these funding issues may be slightly less pressing now (Ginsburg 2016:585). Groups that previously relied on outsiders to access to expensive recording and broadcasting technology are now often able to use mobile technology to record and share their stories and concerns with the world.
Often, these initial contacts that focused on documentary, ethnography, and anthropological film allowed for Indigenous filmmakers to enter the documentary genre ahead of more mainstream fictional genres. Several legendary documentary Indigenous filmmakers include Loretta Todd (Métis), who began making films in the 1980s, Sandra Osawa (Makah), whose films were released beginning in the 1980s, and Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), whose filmography also begins in the 1980s. The tradition of Indigenous documentary film has been carried by Indigenous directors across North America, including Zacharias Kunuk (Inuit), Chris Eyre (Cheyenne and Arapaho), Sterlin Harjo (Seminole Nation and Muskogee), Adam Garnet Jones (Cree/Métis), Tracey Penelope Tekahentakwa Deer (Mohawk), Dustinn Craig (White Mountain Apache), Neil Diamond (Cree), and Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs (Mohawk).

In 1997, Vision Maker Media arose as the primary company developing Indigenous documentary films for public television in the United States. It is one of the major funding sources for Indigenous focused documentary films, and has produced such films as *Dawnland*, *Words from a Bear*, *Warrior Women*, *Atsla*, *Grab*, and *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World*. Vision Maker Media maintains ties with LA Skins Fest, which provides learning and networking opportunities for upcoming Indigenous filmmakers.

**Television**

Indigenous creatives have not only focused on the silver screen – they have also long focused on televisual representations. Sadly, academic studies of Indigenous representations have largely ignored television representations, with a few notable exceptions including T tahmahkera 2014, George & Sanders 1995, Fujioka & Lucht 1997,
and FitzGerald 2014. While this dissertation looks primarily at digital creations from the Northeast – thus precluding mainstream television shows – it is worth considering how televisual portrayals interact with forms of digital and social media, and so a brief overview of Indigenous representations on TV is warranted.

Native American Public Telecommunications, formerly known as the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, was founded by Indigenous creators in the public television sector in 1976. Also in the 1970s in Canada, the Aboriginal Film and Media Arts Alliance turned its eye toward television and began producing PSAs about sovereignty and self-government (Claxton 2005:19). But while Indigenous television was being built up, there were still significant concerns about mainstream channels. In the 1970s, the community of Igloolik in Canada “voted against television from the South twice because there was nothing in Inuktituk broadcast on television and nothing about Inuit culture. The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation was formed in 1982 in response to this” (Hopkins 2005:133).

In 1991, Canada approved the first Arctic TV network, Television Northern Canada (TVNC), which would later become the Indigenous-centric Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (Beaucage 2005:141). This trend has been on the rise in other parts of the world. “Indigenous television programs and channels have been established, including National Indigenous Television in Australia, Maori TV in New Zealand, and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in Canada” (Lempert 2018:174). However, the United States lags behind other western colonized states, with no dedicated channels for Indigenous productions, little governmental support for developing Indigenous media, and a general lack of visibility for Indigenous people in television shows and ads.
Indigenous appearances on television also tend to follow regionally specific stereotypes of Indigenous people. For instance, my Master’s thesis in 2012 found that eastern-set shows tended to insinuate that their Native American characters were charlatans because all Indigenous people in these regions are either dead or have lost their cultures, while western shows tended to highly exoticize Native Americans (McLaurin 2012).

Two recent shows are challenging this lack of Indigenous visibility in television: *Rutherford Falls*, and *Reservation Dogs*. Both are available only through streaming services and cannot be viewed through cable packages, but this makes sense as cable is generally in decline in the U.S. Both shows have garnered critical acclaim and have, at the time of this writing, been renewed for second seasons. Although neither fully escaped critiques (particularly in relation to the Black female mayor’s seeming lack of character development on *Rutherford Falls* and the use of African American Vernacular English and hip hop jargon on *Reservation Dogs*), the shows have overall offered a far more nuanced portrayal of modern Indigenous lives than previous non-Indigenous created shows. Additionally, the shows manage to do this with humor – a trait that most Indigenous people would recognize, but which may surprise non-Native audiences more familiar with the “stoic Indian” or “angry warrior” stereotypes.

It is also important to note that Indigenous people are not passive viewers of television. When *The X-Files* premiered “Anasazi,” the last episode of Season 2 but the first in a three-part arc, Diné/Navajo viewers noticed several cultural inaccuracies in the way that the Diné/Navajo characters behaved. They reached out to the show with their complaints, and with suggestions on what to change. Since there were months between
the airing of “Anasazi” and its follow up episode “The Blessing Way,” X-Files creator Chris Carter visited with Diné/Navajo people in an attempt to create more accurate episodes. The final arc’s episode, “Paper Clip,” had a heavy emphasis on the superiority of the oral tradition over modern technologies and may well owe this theme to the Diné/Navajo people with whom Chris Carter visited.

Radio

Radio is often not considered as heavily as other media forms in the United States, since it is currently less common as a major entertainment form. However, there are many isolated reservation areas in both the United States and Canada where radio is still a primary form of entertainment. “All of us grew up with that being our primary source of information in Indian country” (Minty LongEarth, personal interview, 2019). Radio programming also shares some features with podcasts, which are a growing entertainment form.

Bredin writes about the introduction or intrusion of radio into Indigenous communities in Canada. Yet Meadows and Molnar, as well as Kathleen Buddle, point out that Indigenous radio programs have also been ongoing, particularly in rural areas, and have even created distinct radio genres (Bredin 1996; Meadows & Molnar 2002; Buddle 2008; Hansen & Poisey 1991). An Indigenous radio station in the Yukon region of Canada, for example, was credited with having performances that demonstrated “cultural knowledge of place, history, and rights, making a solid claim to the land,” and at the same time reinforcing “the contemporary relevance of oral histories” (Moore & Tlen 2007:269). Describing Indigenous women’s radio shows in Canada, Kathleen Buddle writes that by utilizing radio, “rather than simply surrendering to marginality… Native
women communicators perform their invisibility as a tactical overture... taking up positions in ‘no man’s land’” (143).

Both Valerie Alia and Elizabeth Burrows see Canada as a world leader in Indigenous broadcasting, “with several hundred radio stations, eleven regional radio networks and... six television production outlets” (Burrows 2016:6). Lisa Mitten also noted enthusiastic participation in radio across Canada. “A number of Indian communities, particularly in Canada, boast their own radio stations, often broadcasting in local Native languages, and available by satellite or over the Internet as well as the airwaves” (Mitten 2003:445-446).

Cases in Australia similarly show a fairly high degree of Indigenous participation and interest in radio. In addition to using two-way radios for communication, Australian Indigenous people have become involved with the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and have lobbied for more participation in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Perhaps the most significant development, at least for some local communities in Australia, was the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS). This policy, put in place in 1987, provided small remote communities with the basic technology to interrupt incoming TV and radio signals and broadcast their own, local material if they so choose (Meadows & Molnar 2002). Ginsburg points out that local networks provide more Aboriginal content than larger institutions, and allow for community oversight and appropriate restrictions (1993).

In the United States, “American Indian artists and native-owned newspapers and radio stations intentionally have countered prevailing stereotypes in mainstream media” (Cuillier & Ross 2007:199). While radio is not a major influence today in the
Northeastern United States, it does have a history that had lasting impacts on Indigenous representations. Indigenous voice actors did appear on early radio shows such as *The Lone Ranger*, and could sometimes leverage these roles into television and film roles as Americans increasingly turned from radio and toward TV and film. Local communities have continued with radio programs, with some complications – such as the way Indigenous languages like Diné must be adjusted to the radio format, even as the rest of the United States seemed to turn away from locally crafted radio stations (Klain & Peterson 2000).

**Digital Art**

Joanna Hearne asserts that digital art forms are “more open than traditional cinema to those who are marginalized within dominant image systems” (2017:7). Certainly, Indigenous artists began experimenting with digital art forms and Indigenous individuals have been present from the earliest days of nearly every digital medium. “Buffy Sainte-Marie was one of the first popular musicians to incorporate electronic synthesis and processing as a central musical structure on her 1969 vanguard album *Illuminations*. She was also an early adopter of the Macintosh computer and used its earliest imaging capabilities to produce large-scale digital prints” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:209). While “the fact that an Aboriginal woman was creating high-tech art at a time when the genre was still in its infancy is a testament to her innovation and adaptability,” it is also a testament to Indigenous people being consistently present in the first years of new technologies (Claxton 2005:35).

Prior to the wide availability of the internet, Indigenous people were thus already experimenting with digital technologies. Many exhibits digital in nature were housed in
museum contexts. For instance, in Canada, “the Back/Flash exhibition also included *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992), the first Aboriginal virtual reality work by artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and in addition he was one of the first artists internationally to enter the terrain of VR. He is best known for his large-scale paintings that depict issues surrounding land use, Aboriginal land title, and the legacy of colonialism” (Claxton 2005:36). “Stephen Foster employs video art to analyze identity, investigating the discourse around ethnography. Aboriginal video art, he argues, moves away from specific deconstruction of mass media, image and representation, and towards a psychological experience of colonization” (Claxton 2005:28). Additionally, “in her *Cyborg Living Spaces* (2002), kc Adams… portrays the duality of experience, the seduction/repulsion we often feel when faced with new technologies… Adams places the viewer as participant, and thus, as ‘other’” (Loft 2005:97). Modern-day visual artists such as Rebecca Belmore, Lewis deSoto, Bonnie Devine, Nicholas Galanin, Edgar Heap of Birds, G. Peter Jemison, Steven Paul Judd, Cannupa Hanska Luger (who conceived the STTLNMNT project, which transitioned to a digital occupation in light of Covid-19), James Luna, Meryl McMaster, Alan Michelson, Kent Monkman, Wendy Red Star (whose show *Apsáalooke: Children of the Large-Beaked Bird* will remain at the Massachusetts arts center MassMoCA until May 2022), Sarah Sense, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Skawennati (Tricia Fragnito), Steven Yazzie, and the Postcommodity collective all continue to push the boundaries using digital mediums. These highly experimental forms of digital production may now appear in museums, online, or in combination.
Many current and past digital art pieces have been collected and archived online. The Initiative for Indigenous Futures maintains the Indigenous Digital Art Archive (Indigenous Digital Art Archive). The Indigenous Art Code website contains a Digital Media tag so that artists can quickly be found (Digital Media). Indigenous artists were and are using new forms to articulate their experiences and, simultaneously, to resist expectations of what “Indigenous art” is.

**Websites**

It is a little known fact that many of the earliest computers, used only by government and academic institutions at the time, were handcrafted by Diné/Navajo women. The Fairchild Semiconductor Company built one of the main factories on Diné/Navajo lands, and employed mostly Diné/Navajo women to build microchips. The internal documents of Fairchild Semiconductor, including company newsletters and public brochures, “along with Bureau of Indian Affairs press releases and journalistic coverage by magazines such as *Business Week*, paint a picture of Navajo women workers as uniquely suited by temperament, culture, and gender as ideal predigital digital workers” (Nakamura 2014:920-921). While this may be attributable to tech industries emphasizing physical rather than intellectual labor from people of color, it nevertheless places early production and innovation the literal hands of Indigenous women (Russell 2018:262).

Once the internet became more ubiquitous, Indigenous digital art forms began appearing on websites more and more frequently. Cree and Métis theorist, curator and artist Àhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, a leader in Indigenous digital practices and theories, “created a portal for the dissemination of Aboriginal media-based art in *drumbytes.org*
Building on this website, Maskêgon-Iskwêw brought digital Indigeneity into academic scholarship with his writings on the subject. “Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew’s Drumbeats to Drumbytes investigates the use of the Internet by Aboriginal artists, situating it as perhaps the first truly neutral space where contemporary Aboriginal artists can represent and reinvent themselves” (Townsend 2005:xiii).

Indigenous people were also present in early photo editing online groups. One Indigenous artist I spoke with talked fondly of being a member of the Worth1000 community, an early PhotoShop group where tips and tutorials were shared as well as final products. Many aspects of the site have been archived at W1k.com (About a).

In addition to the groundbreaking work of Ahasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Carcross/Tagish First Nation independent curator, writer, and researcher Candice Hopkins’ work on early Indigenous digital media practitioners highlights another early internet pioneer, “Paula Giese, who started creating web sites for Native audiences in 1993. Her most ambitious project, Native American Indian Resources, is not merely a resource but an extensive map of Native life” (Hopkins 2005:135). Another collection of Indigenous websites was “built and maintained by (now retired) University of Massachusetts staffer Karen Strom,” though the site went inactive upon her passing (Mitten 2003:444). While many of these resources are no longer online, their existence (prior to common internet use by most people in the U.S.) demonstrates an early interest and involvement in the internet and internet studies.

In terms of academic scholarship focused on Indigenous web presence, Lisa Mitten helped begin efforts to catalogue and analyze the websites that began to pop up in
the early 1990s. Mitten found that larger groups such as the Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Lakota/Dakota, Cherokee, Ojibwa, and Navajo (in the tribal terminologies of the time) had the earliest and strongest presences online (Mitten 2003:444). Mary Belgarde writes, “as a librarian and Native person, [Lisa Mitten] has used her archival and computer skills to access excellent sources of information about Native topics” (Belgarde 1998:144). Mary Belgarde herself performed early reviews of Indigenous sites in 1998, including individual pages, tribal nation pages, commercial sites, and educational sites (Belgarde 1998).

Mohawk Bear Clan Elder Tom Porter, who contributed quotes to this dissertation, was part of an early educational effort by sharing teachings on the website FourDirectionsTeachings.com, produced by Indigenous Studies scholar Jennifer Wemigwans and the National Indigenous Literary Association along with the Department of Canadian Heritage (Wemigwans 2008:31). The website is still active and seeks to act “as a space where one could experience and engage with Indigenous cosmological and metaphysical teachings through symbolic imagery,” making it a unique site compared to the Northeastern tribal nation and museum sites examined in this dissertation, which tend to shy away from directly discussing spiritual subjects and stories (Wemigwans 2008:34). The voiceover on the website explains this choice, noting that perhaps “these forms of knowledge help address urgent matters for the world today” (Four Directions Teachings). Other messages intended to teach visitors Indigenous-centric ways of viewing nature also sprung up online. “Printup-Hope’s website and its message of respect for the Earth and the natural world, which is inherent in Haudenosaunee traditions, is accessible online to
Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous people, as well as millions of other users worldwide while it poses no negative environmental or cultural impact” (Young-ing 2005:184-185).

Indigenous people also began using the internet for commercial purposes. Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva personally recollects that “‘the earliest use of computer technology by Indigenous people was by Yupik Eskimos in the polar north, selling their arts and crafts on the internet… northern people, in their vast landscapes, were among the first to experiment with these web links, creating virtual communities” (Hopkins 2005:133). Expanding on this notion, Masayesva notes that they used “communication technologies as a means for physical and cultural survival” (Masayesva 2005:172).

And finally, we should not dismiss using the internet for the purposes of identity expression and purely for fun. Indigenous expression over the platform Second Life, which touts itself as a “virtual world” players can enter, is a particularly interesting case. Mohawk user “Skawennati Tricia Fragnito began making cyber communities in 1996 when she, along with the collective Nation to Nation, produced the first CyberPowWow” (Claxton 2005:37). CyberPowwow describes itself as “part website and part ‘palace’ --a series of interconnected, graphical chat rooms which allow visitors to interact with one another in real time… from 1997 to 2004 CyberPowWow was also an event which took place every two years” both online and in person, in organized spaces where reliable internet access was provided (About ). In creating this online space, Fragnito had to creatively insert Indigenous imagery into a space that had not originally thought to include Indigenous people.

Kali Tal has noted that “in cyberspace, it is finally possible to completely and utterly disappear people of color” (Tal n.d.). The assumption may be that Indigenous
people, and other minorities as well, would choose to present themselves as a non-minority if given such a choice in a digital environment. “Skin color ‘still matters for the player’s experience,’ enough that they will downplay, if not outright suppress the expression of their offline racial identity” (Jim 2015:2). However, as we have always done, Indigenous people steadfastly refuse to simply fade into the mist. Instead, “CyberPowWow is not an experience of shedding identity, but an exercise in reaffirming it” (Hopkins 2005: 136).

**Influence on the Tech World**

Strangely, there were a few instances where Native American belief systems and symbolism, or at least mainstream understandings of them, were coopted by major players within the tech industry.

One such instance is the notion of cybershamanism, developed by ethnobotanist and early internet enthusiast Terence McKenna. “Terrence McKenna and the advocates of the cybershamanism would take the imagined mind, the supposed dreams of the native, and discard the body” (Todd 2005:158). Although cybershamanism as a movement faded quickly – there are few references to it even on the internet – it nevertheless intersected with notions of the overlap between spirituality and technology. A 2002 website describes cybershamanism as “the intelligent use of any material phenomena in order to influence the more subtle realms of existence” (Barton 2002). Because intellect, soul/spirit, and technology are all conceived in western thought as beyond the body, cybershamanism as a viewpoint encouraged the Cartesian mind/body duality that many Marxist and Indigenous theorists find troubling.
Other appropriative acts happened online and with influential members of the tech community. For instance, Stewart Brand, publishing entrepreneur, once put on a multimedia show entitled “America Needs Indians” and “would go on to found the Whole Earth Catalog... which spun off the most influential early online community, the Sausalito-based Internet service provider ‘The Well,’ or ‘Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link,’ solidifying the move ‘from counterculture to cyberculture’” (Nakamura 2014:931).

There is also the story of Tribal Voice’s PowWow chat software. Developed in 1994 by John McAfee (who would become well known for his computer protection software package), it was originally touted as a Native American company with Native American leadership (Academic). One employee was quoted as saying that it was the result of “…some of us Indians deciding to put some stuff up on the Web” (Wagner n.d.). The actual number of Native Americans working for the company appears to have been limited, and references to Native participation and leadership within PowWow stopped over time (Academic n.d.). However, the website featured “links to 19 Native American Home Pages - languages, arts, crafts, culture, spiritualism, annual powwow schedules, health services, scholarships, government agencies and educational sites” and made heavy use of Indigenous symbolism (Wagner n.d.). As a result, it did attract an Indigenous audience as early users. As such, Indigenous users accessed a fairly advanced software that allowed up to seven people to chat, transfer files to each other, play audio, visit websites as a group, and set up profiles on White Pages, a form of early social media where users could personalize a profile and interact with others’ profiles. In spite of the problematic aspects of claiming Indigenous leadership and using somewhat stereotypical
imagery, Indigenous people nevertheless demonstrated their technical skills by actively participating in such an early online platform.

These strange moments of cultural overlap demonstrate the continued power of the “Indian” in the American imaginary, and how real Indigenous people consistently challenge those notions by voicing their actual experiences, defying expectations, and drawing from traditional values to create theories to grapple with new media forms.

**Creation, Incorporation, or Appropriation?**

Some people have argued that Indigenous people, using what they view as “western” media forms, are appropriating them. This use of the word “appropriation” ignores the power dynamics at play; typically the word refers to items from an oppressed or minority group, particularly culturally meaningful or religious items, being taken without that group’s general consent by a dominant cultural group. Yet some mainstream Americans believe that Indigenous people, by using digital technology or even wearing denim jeans, are also “appropriating” outside cultures (which they frequently argue justifies the appropriation of Indigenous items and perhaps other aspects of colonization as well).

Addressing this question, Justin Beatty asserted that “I think when people take the approach of saying we shouldn’t use those things, they are also trying to limit us culturally and say our culture should be static, we should only stick to the things that we had pre-contact, which is not only nonsensical, it’s just not realistic to who we are and what we were even back then. Our culture is dynamic. It’s constantly evolving and changing. We’ve had to roll with the punches. And if you take that approach, then you
shouldn’t use things that came from Native people, right? Fair is fair. If you’re going to say that I have to give these things up, you’ve got to give up your tomato varieties, potatoes, chocolate, medicine, gum, rubber… it’s a two way street. They don’t want you to have a car, but it’s still a two way street” (personal interview, 2019). His comments point to the inevitable conclusion that Indigenous intellectual and creative works have built the world as we currently know it. They also highlight the way that Indigenous cultures are expected to maintain artificial levels of “purity,” an expectation not placed on western cultures.

This is not to assert that the film industry or the digital realm, nor mainstream western cultures in general, have always been receptive to or thankful for the contributions and interventions of Indigenous creators. Instead, these Native media workers are often put into positions of resistance, opposition, or at the very least, alteration of stereotypical and inaccurate portrayals by members of dominant societies.

Speaking specifically about Indigenous science fiction, Chelsea M. Herr writes that “First, if we characterize Native-made works of art that incorporate pop culture references as ‘appropriative,’ then we actively erase the ongoing history of assimilation and acculturation that Indigenous populations have endured since European contact. You cannot appropriate what has been forced on you and your community for five centuries. Choosing to participate in the dominant culture – to whatever degree – is a means of both survival and adaptation. My second contention, which is directly related to the first, is that the terminology assumes that colonized peoples do not belong, at least visibly, in ‘non-Indigenous’ (read: popular or mainstream) spaces. Finally, the third contention is
the implication that mainstream SF themes have no correlation to Indigenous ways of knowing and being” (Herr 2020:33).

Of course, this dissertation asserts that these “western” media forms are Indigenous co-creations from the beginning. In addition to financially underwriting and thus enabling the development of these industries with their contributions, Indigenous works build up these media industries, sometimes by laying a theoretical groundwork for understanding abstraction, sometimes by shaping the ways that technology can create art that even its developers could not have predicted, and sometimes literally creating technologies by hand like the Diné/Navajo women working in the Fairchild Semiconductor factory.

**The Indigenous Aesthetic**

Throughout history, Indigenous creators have endeavored in colonialist contexts to produce their own images of themselves. One of the recurring theoretical questions in Indigenous film and Indigenous art more broadly, is if there is any unifying aspect of Indigenous media given the great diversity between Indigenous cultures. Some successful Indigenous directors such as Blackhorse Lowe and Sterlin Harjo have at times shied away from the term “Native director,” finding it potentially limiting to their creative potential. Others, such as director Sandra Owasa, feel that certain intentions are inherent to being an Indigenous media producer.

In the 1960s, the anthropologists John Adair and Sol Worth traveled to the Diné/Navajo Nation territories and gave Diné/Navajo individuals film cameras and some training, with the notion that this would allow some Indigenous aesthetic that differs from
the mainstream to come to the forefront of their filmmaking. “The premise was that Natives skip to the beat of a different drum” (Young-Ing 2005:167). Most films centered on Dine/Navajo life and everyday processes, though the authors noted that interestingly, the students tended to start a film showing the finished product and then backtrack to detail its creation, thus eschewing “a standard narrative progression with a building of tension” (Cohn 2010). If the anthropologists were hoping for more experimental films, they could turn to an art student within their group named Al Clah, whose film deviated from the format that other Dine/Navajo students’ films followed (Mead 1975).

Subsequent generations of Indigenous filmmakers have also produced less ethnographic and more art-house works.

Steven Leuthold also attempted to find a unifying aesthetic theme across Indigenous visual arts, including dance, film, photography, pottery, and painting. While he found a few general trends - such as emphasis on landscape photography and the general importance of natural environments - he also found a great diversity across Indigenous visual arts (Leuthold 1998). This is hardly surprising, given the variety of media he studied as well as the inherent cultural diversity and plethora of experiences among Indigenous peoples. Other Indigenous Studies scholars and Indigenous creators have provided yet other ideas on what they believe to be Indigenous aesthetics, largely focusing on the medium of film.

Several theorists have posited that the experiences of being colonized, and the political nature of that identity, constitute a hallmark of Indigenous film and media production. Margaret Mead argued this in 1975, noting that minority groups have additional considerations about how they are portrayed, and an awareness of white
audiences’ perceptions and how those impact them in the long run. Faye Ginsburg identifies two “central and enduring concerns” of Indigenous media, the first of which is “cultural and political activism” (Peterson 2014:249). In contradistinction to some younger Native filmmakers who find the term “Native filmmaker” somewhat narrow or limiting, Sandra Osawa insists that “you have to be filled with a powerful mission basically to right the wrongs that have been done to us, as Indian people, in the media. When you do this and when you have this powerful feeling, then you can call yourself an American Indian filmmaker. Until then, I don’t think you have that right” (Marubbio, Elise & Eric L. Buffalohead 2013:321).

While the reaction to stereotypes and colonizing forces are one way to approach Indigenous aesthetics and media goals, another approach is to look toward traditional, even pre-colonial media to draw links between those forms of expression and more contemporary forms such as film. “Indigenous peoples have a distinct ethos based on a unique identity that stems from their history, cultures, and traditions. Indigenous peoples also have several responsibilities placed upon them through internal cultural imperatives… the ultimate responsibility of being the link between one’s ancestors and future generations” (Young-ing 2005:183).

Oral tradition, for instance, frequently uses repetition and long pauses for effects on listeners, and these may be reflected in Indigenous productions. Even volume in the telling of stories may have underlying cultural values. Iseke and Moore, for instance, discuss how the volume at which stories are told may act to signal the importance of an event or concept within the story, or may be used to force audiences to pay greater attention (Iseke & Moore 2011:30). Filmmaker Loretta Todd expands on this idea of
traditional aesthetics entering film and digital media by naming it attentiveness. “Without making a prescription for Aboriginal aesthetic, attentiveness would seem to serve as one link in Aboriginal aesthetics” (Todd 2005:121). Unpacking what she means by attentiveness, Todd links it to traditional values and governing traditions, including oral tradition. “Let’s say attentiveness reflects a principle… attentiveness is also directly related to our institutions of governance: oral tradition requires precision of knowledge combined with creative expression” (Todd 2005:120-121).

Another approach to Indigenous aesthetics emerging from traditional cultural practices sees them as emerging from relationships to other beings and the land. Christine Ballengee-Morris states that “Native art is closely related to cultural identity and development of individual identity within a collective identity. Two major themes, religion and nature, shape the relationship between indigenous aesthetic/cultural expression and American Indian individual and collective identification(s)” (Ballengee-Morris 2008:31). Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva Jr. writes that early experiences later drive decisions about when to record, and that “the aesthetic applied is community derived and driven” (Masayesva 2005: 168, 174). Some experts broaden this notion to include all aspects of being an Indigenous person. Masayesva Jr. continues, noting that “it is the accumulative experience (i.e., all the experiences, traditional or not, that inform our lives as Native people today) that ‘refines and defines the indigenous aesthetic’” (Hopkins 2005:132). Focusing on a relationship between oppression and Indigenous aesthetics, he additionally writes that “the Indigenous aesthetic will become stronger in direct proportion to the oppressions of the colonizers,” which likely includes intrusions
upon the land and Indigenous peoples’ traditional relationship to it and the living creatures upon it (Masayesva 2005:176).

Even when Indigenous artists specifically want to express some aspect of Indigeneity within their art, the question of how to do this is complex. Jason Edward Lewis asks “what makes it Indigenous? Because it’s being made by an Indigenous person? Because it’s transforming tradition in some way that’s very contemporary? Maybe it’s so contemporary it’s not even recognizable where the tradition is from? Some combination of these things?” (Smyth 2016). Indigenous people have varied symbolism across tribal nations, and the history of stereotypes of Indigenous people often make those authentic symbols invisible alongside well-known, but inaccurate, symbols of “Indian-ness.” “There’s 10,000 years or more of language and symbolism that’s been built up into an Indigenous library. And some things are very much tied into specific communities or families even, and tribes certainly – but then other things are more broad” (Casey Figueroa, personal interview, 2019). Figueroa also addressed more stereotypical or recognizable signs of Indigeneity, and asked “how do you communicate Indigenous identity when that symbolism has been removed?”

Looking more at production techniques, Loretta Todd posed the question “have we internalized the images made of us, the idea of ‘us’ by the colonizer – from the camera angles to the editing to the music?” (Todd 2005: 107). Following up on this notion, Peterson argued that Indigenous film directors have to consider how to approach issues like “negotiating which languages are considered appropriate for audiences, capturing and editing interviews, and debating whether specific discursive styles such as long oral narratives can keep audiences attentive” (Peterson 2014:248). Several artists
interviewed in this dissertation used techniques that attempted incorporate Indigenous worldviews into their work, as opposed to more recognizable symbols like headdresses and eagle feathers. Instead, these artists might (for instance) use rounded brushstrokes to indicate cyclical Indigenous conceptions of time. Minty LongEarth from the Breakdances with Wolves podcast said “we’re very careful about trying to sift through how much of that is a white or westernized idea and how we’re supposed to approach a topic or way of doing things” (personal interview, 2019).

Such values may also come out in the process of creating and displaying media. Australian Indigenous filmmaker Frances Peters has pointed out the importance of the creative process and how the spirit involved in a piece’s creation impacts its creation and the aesthetics of the final product (Urla 1993). On the Hollywood level, Maori director Taika Waititi has ensured that his films, even Marvel’s *Thor: Ragnarok*, exhibit respect for the traditional holders of the land through ceremony, and has advocated for training Indigenous youth in production techniques while his films are shooting (Jasper 2017). Houston Wood added to this approach the idea that public viewings may be undertaken with an eye toward Indigenous values such as sharing, gathering feedback on the piece, or contributing works back to the community (Wood 2008).

Furthermore, we can approach Indigenous aesthetics from another direction and ask if exclusionary acts are the hallmark of Indigenous approaches to media. Sam Pack believed that if there is a Native aesthetic, it may revolve around what is *not* photographed rather than what is photographed, and how it is photographed (Pack 2000). This dissertation will discuss self-chosen Indigenous silences in more detail in Chapter Three.
All of these concerns about Indigenous aesthetics, of course, are inextricably tied to the question of who counts as “Indigenous,” who wants to be given the title of “Indigenous artist,” how traditional versus contemporary Indigenous arts are recognized, and who can produce art about Indigenous subjects. Speaking to the issue of whom to identify as a “Native artist,” Steven Loft insisted that “we cannot and do not separate the work of Aboriginal artists from their Indigeneity, but we also do not define them by it” (Loft 2005:90).

Discussing the term “Native artist” and what it appears to entail, Casey Figueroa noted a common pressure for one’s work to be centered on Indigenous issues or traditionalism. While he said that Native artists often cared greatly about Indigenous issues, at the same time, “it can be kind of oppressive to feel required to save an entire culture,” and does not use the term for himself (personal interview, 2019). He did note that this kind of pressure was incredibly individual, and that some people may have different and culturally informed responses about to whom they are responsible. But he is not wrong in stating that there is a general expectation for Indigenous artists to represent their homes, and possibly all Native Americans. “These artists are sharing what it is that is distinct about living in an Indigenous community, not just giving you what is important to them personally” (Masayesva 2005:174). Minty LongEarth noted that when her podcast co-host Gyasi Ross goes home to Squamish, his home, he “has to answer to everybody” (personal interview, 2019). Ross has discussed this feeling of community responsibility himself in talks directed at high school students, and has been a representative of the greater Pacific Northwest Indigenous community when visiting
areas like the Northeastern United States (Gyasi Ross Community Responsibility Speech 2015).

While “the focus on indigenous aesthetics and the filmmaking process has limited discourse to the cultural practices of distinctly defined groups,” it is important to note that not all Indigenous people have such clear-cut cultural ties (Lempert 2012:24). Due to out-of-tribal-nation adoption practices in the United States and Canada, as well as persistent cultural eradication programs and urban relocation efforts, each Indigenous artist or content creator may have a slightly different (or incredibly different) experience of what it means to be Indigenous. An “Indigenous aesthetic,” then – or even a particular tribal nation’s aesthetic – would be necessarily hard to define.

Addressing these complexities, Steven Loft writes that “what is important to note here, is that this is not a dialogue about the formation of some pan-Indian identity politic, but about the expression of an Indigenous aesthetic and where it resides in a media-saturated society… the work of each artist also contemperonizes an Indigenous aesthetic” (Loft 2005:96-97). Peterson also considers the practical constraints of media production and how that impacts what we may then perceive as an Indigenous aesthetic. “Even with a Native director, there is no one Native ‘voice,’ and it is virtually impossible to involve large numbers of community participants due to logistical and financial constraints of filmmaking. Likewise it is neither feasible nor warranted to exclude all non-Native filmmakers from indigenous topics” (Peterson 2014:261).

Nevertheless, some Indigenous filmmakers balk at the idea of having to have “something in common” with other Indigenous filmmakers, even of the same tribal nation, and some eschew the term “Native filmmaker” altogether as too limiting. Poet
Duane Niatum has said that anyone claiming a universal Indigenous aesthetic “encourages a conventional and prescriptive response from both Native Americans and those of other cultures” (Todd 2005:106).

In summation, the debate rages on even among Indigenous people. “Is there even an Aboriginal aesthetic in the film and video Aboriginal people make? Some have answered that last question, saying ‘there is no specific Aboriginal aesthetic,’ and others have said, ‘yes, there is a way – an Indian way’” (Todd 2005:106).

However, while there may be no consensus on what an Indigenous aesthetic is (or if one exists at all), or what it signifies to take on the mantle of “Native artist,” due to the shared experiences Indigenous North American people have undergone under similar colonial programs, three identifiable major goals have repeatedly emerged across North American Indigenous films, specifically. While digital media may serve different functions than film and through a different medium, understanding the major themes and creative desires of Indigenous film creators is instructive, as similar themes and struggles do emerge in the digital media environment.

**Common Indigenous Film Themes**

**Resisting Stereotypes**

Most Indigenous films necessarily resist stereotypes. Some films choose to comment on stereotypes of Native people directly. *Smoke Signals* (1998), for example, repeatedly returns to the issue of stereotypical behavior and whether the peaceful “Dancing with Wolves” image Thomas projects is more or less stereotypical and inauthentic than the angry “warrior” image that Victor projects. One of the earliest
Indigenous films in the U.S. (or, without an Indigenous director, at least a heavily-influenced and Indigenous-embraced film), *Powwow Highway* (1989) used humor to address stereotypes. For instance, Gary Farmer’s character replaced traditional “warrior” images with modern, far less impressive images (such as his so-called “pony,” which is actually a busted car). Shelley Niro’s short film *Overweight with Crooked Teeth* (1997) is based off of a poem directly confronting stereotypes. Even Graham Greene’s portrayal of a heavy drinker in Chris Eyre’s *Skins* (2002) is complicated by his understanding of traditional ways, knowledge of tribal history, and strong community relations compared with the bitterness and vigilantism of his sober brother.

Other films address stereotypes indirectly, by presenting images of Indigenous people that conflict with what mainstream society might envision. *Christmas in the Clouds* (2001) presents viewers with highly normative, middle class Indigenous hotel management and staff. The offbeat but community-oriented characters of the experimental film *Honey Moccasin* from Shelley Niro (1998) defy clear categorization, as does the film itself. The drug use in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* from Jeff Barnaby (2013) has been criticized for displaying stereotypes of Indigenous inebriation, but one could hardly say that of its self-possessed, drug-mixing, gas-mask-wearing, Walter White-esque young female protagonist. The titular character in *The Doe Boy* from Randy Redroad (2001) is a hemophiliac mixed-blood living through the 1980s AIDS crisis, and presents the audience with a storyline that integrates Cherokee linguistic and cultural symbols without making these the sole focus or gimmick (or indeed, even fully explaining them). Dustinn Craig’s short film *4wheelwarpony* (2008) introduces the world to Indigenous skateboarders, juxtaposing their video with images of traditional Apache
leaders. These are just a few examples from Indigenous films across time that indirectly challenge stereotypical depictions of Native people.

The overwhelming presence of “Indian” stereotypes across North America, whether “positive” or “negative,” mean that Indigenous people and representations of Indigenous people are rarely understood on their own beyond their originating communities; when they enter the dominant culture, they are filtered through these earlier and often ingrained sets of Native imagery. Debates can then emerge about whether certain filmic representations fit into stereotypes, use stereotypes partially, or resist stereotypes. Much of the critical acclaim of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) appeared to revolve around how authentic and non-stereotypical the movie’s characters and settings were (Bessire 2003; Ginsburg 2003). At best, this praise stems from seeing traditional practices as well as the community-oriented nature of the film’s production; at worst, it is an exotifying fascination with pre-contact culture, read by viewers as a more “authentic” vision of Inuit culture. On the other hand, even though *Smoke Signals* directly addressed modern stereotypes and how its characters interacted with them, it has been criticized for depicting alcoholism - despite the fact that by the film’s end, not a single Indigenous character has persisted in drinking alcohol. Mihelich has argued that stereotypes are so ingrained that when a representation appears to come close to stereotypical imagery, even if it then tries to subvert it, dominant audiences recall the stereotype more than the subversion (Mihelich 2001). Therefore, any Indigenous film that enters the mainstream confronts these dominant images and understandings, and many films choose to address them directly.

**Education on Indigenous Issues**
Intimately tied to the position of Indigenous films in relation to dominant stereotypes is the ability of Indigenous films to educate. By overturning or addressing stereotypes - which Indigenous films largely do compared to non-Indigenous films featuring Native people - these films educate Indigenous people from different areas and, especially, non-Indigenous audiences. Many Indigenous feature films, even those with fantastical plots, are careful to include accurate details about the Native nation depicted in the film. *Clearcut* (1991) features Anishinaabe language, as well as references to traditional stories associated with the aquatic underworld that only Indigenous viewers are likely to recognize immediately. Despite its melodramatic plot, *Grand Avenue* (1996) attempts to educate viewers through Tantoo Cardinal’s grandmother character, and laid atop of *Naturally Native’s* (1998) main plot are several subthreads meant to educate viewers about issues as diverse as appropriation, tribal jurisdiction, stereotypes, exotification of Native women, blood quantum, and adoption. Though not an Indigenous film, *Dead Man* (1995) was one of the first films to use non-subtitled conversations in an Indigenous language (Cree), and pairs its historically accurate depictions of Makah villages with highly exaggerated caricatures of western life, an inversion of historical Hollywood “othering” of Indigenous life.

Of course, the documentary genre is frequently used to raise awareness and educate audiences about an issue that the filmmakers find important. As noted in the introduction of the dissertation, *Nanook of the North* was created by an Inuit film crew and is often labeled not only the first ethnographic film but “the first documentary” ever, starting an ongoing relationship between Native people and documentary films (Fienup-Riordan 1995). For many decades, documentary films such as *The Exiles* (1961) and
ethnographic films like the Netsilik Eskimo Series were directed by non-Indigenous people with Indigenous subjects (Fienup-Riordan 1995). The first popular Indigenous filmmakers were documentarians, though they often challenged traditional ethnographic film conventions and added in elements from other genres (Raheja 2013; Gauthier 2013). Groundbreaking work done by Alanis Obomsawin, Loretta Todd, and Sandra Osawa beginning in the 1980s established an Indigenous documentary tradition and were critical in advancing later feature length fiction films. Building on this legacy, Indigenous-created documentary films from the late 1990s and 2000s, as well as the Indigenous company Vision Maker Media, continue to add not only an Indigenous perspective but well-researched historical information into popular and academic narratives about the role of Indigenous people in media. Reel Injun (2009), for example, has been shown in classrooms across the United States and Canada, bringing widespread attention to the works of Indigenous artists like James Young Deer, as well as the presence of dominant stereotypes frequently proffered by non-Indigenous filmmakers.

Given the intentionally disadvantageous positions that Indigenous peoples were put in socially, legally, and psychologically, the prominence of documentary films within the realm of Indigenous film can be attributed to the political desire to improve circumstances by garnering the attention and sympathy of film-going audiences. Indigenous documentary filmmakers themselves echo this ethical motivation. In an interview conducted by her daughter, Sandra Osawa stated that “you have to be filled with a powerful mission basically to right the wrongs that have been done to us, as Indian people, in the media. When you do this and when you have this powerful feeling, then you can call yourself an American Indian filmmaker. Until then, I don’t think you have
that right” (Osawa 2013:321). In this case, the moral imperative to educate, undo stereotypes, and contribute to tribal and cultural continuance is framed as the only legitimate path to earning the title of Indigenous filmmaker. Filmmaker Victor Masayesva has written about the urgent need for Indigenous filmmakers to reassert an “Indigenous aesthetic” that includes language transmission (Masayesva 2005:167).

Similarly, Greg Young-ing asserts that “Indigenous peoples have a distinct ethos based on a unique identity that stems from their history, cultures, and traditions” (Young-ing 2005:183). However, some recent Indigenous directors have shown hesitation at taking on the title and associated responsibilities (and attendant film themes) of the “Indigenous filmmaker” (Hearne & Schlachter 2013). Debate about whether Indigenous creators have shared responsibilities, goals, or aesthetics - or should - continue to take place in academia as well as Indigenous communities.

**Assertion and Celebration of Indigenous Identities**

Finally, the previous two trends of addressing stereotypes and educating audiences are primarily aimed at non-Indigenous audiences watching Native-created films. The final major trend appearing in a majority of Indigenous films (particularly from the late 1980s to today), is the assertion of identity, primarily aimed at Indigenous people (either conceived quite narrowly, for one band or nation, or at a national or continental level, or for worldwide Indigenous populations). Several filmmakers have voiced the desire to have more accurate and authentic Indigenous characters who are reflective of themselves and their own family members and friends, who are fully dimensional human beings with the attendant full range of emotions, fears, possibilities, talents, failures, and flaws. In non-Indigenous media that has featured Indigenous
characters, this sense of realism and “insider knowledge” has frequently gone missing. Hence, the responsibility largely fell on Indigenous people to direct the kinds of movies about Indigenous people that they were hoping to see. The recent trend among Indigenous directors, of putting non-professional family members into their films as actors, likely evidences this desire to have recognizably Indigenous faces and personalities on the screen. Both Sterlin Harjo and Blackhorse Lowe have used family members and community members in their films, as did early experimental director Jean Rouch, and feature homages to local places and stories (MacDougall 1969-1970, Hearne and Shlachter 2013).

These portrayals, as well as those of professional Indigenous actors hired by Indigenous directors, are meant to realistically depict Indigenous people, especially those living in recent times as opposed to the 19th or early 20th centuries. Realistic portrayals of Indigenous people include mundane interactions with mainstream American culture, as well as having flaws. As Shelley Niro’s film Overweight with Crooked Teeth cheekily demonstrates, Indigenous people can defy features that fall into both positive stereotypes (like the Native naturalist) and negative stereotypes (such as the bloodthirsty “savage”). Tired of the “buckskin roles” which place Indigenous characters in the 19th century (or have them dress and act like 19th century Indigenous people in a 21st century setting), many Indigenous creators in all areas of film are pursuing roles and characters who seem like the Native people they know personally.

In creating such characters, these films necessarily resist stereotypes and educate the public, but they also give Indigenous people an affirmative vision of themselves and their cultural practices. These motivating factors are also present in digital and social
media, as Indigenous users represent themselves and local happenings to other community members as well as the wider world.

**Conclusion: Contemporary Indigenous Media Interventions**

In an attempt to show Indigenous peoples’ historical interactions with film, television, and radio, recent Indigenous-created content focused on a more nuanced view of such past interactions, exemplified by *Tonto Plays Himself* (2010) and *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* (1991), continue to be produced, along with an array of digital media products.

The ongoing narrative of media being “introduced” to Indigenous peoples, while true in some cases, largely ignores the crucial historical role of Indigenous technological innovators and early adopters, Indigenous creators in popular culture, interventions Indigenous people have made in pop culture, and also the ways that many Indigenous people have quickly fit new technologies into traditional value systems (Young-ing 2005:179-180). Work in Indigenous media studies might fruitfully begin with the acknowledgement that “the first documentary” was indeed co-created by Indigenous people working with such temperamental and (for its time) cutting-edge technology that most of the American public would not have even known how to properly pick it up – certainly a case of “Indians in unexpected places” in media history (Deloria 2004).

The dominant narratives of “primitive” to “modern” seem to invite erasure just as the move from rural to city was meant to dissolve Indigenous cultures and community bonds. “The movement of Native peoples from reservations to urban areas is seen as a one-way journey to assimilation and despair, if not disappearance from meaningful life
and political community” (Simpson & Smith 2014:11-12). Instead of being shocked upon finding Indigenous people engaging with modernity or its associated products, in accounting for these interactions with “new” or “introduced” technologies, it might be more prudent instead to see Indigenous people as helping shape and create them from their inception. This viewpoint further breaks down the long-held association of media and modernity, as well as the association of “Indigenous” and “primitive.”

Andrea Smith, in addressing the often-asked question of whether the master’s tools can be used to dismantle the master’s house, reminds us that the master’s house is built on land that is not nor will ever belong to the master (Smith 2014). In spite of the controversy surrounding her, her point is well taken. To this I would add that the master’s house is also quite frequently built with labor that is not the master’s, and with a skill set that is not the master’s, and that these contributions are rarely acknowledged. Artist Justin Beatty extended these ideas to a global scale, noting that “anywhere you go in the world, you can go there because of whatever Indigenous people in those places went through” (personal interview, 2019). As Phil Deloria’s work also illustrates, Indigenous people have always been at the forefront of modernity, so that the “master’s tools” are, upon further inspection, co-creations or co-opted tools that Indigenous people may choose to continue engaging (Deloria 2004).

This dissertation continues this line of theorizing, arguing that Indigenous people were and are integral to the creation of the mediasphere that exists today. After all, if Flaherty’s Nanook of the North can be acknowledged as the first ethnographic film or the first documentary film, it must also be acknowledged that the first documentary film crew was entirely Indigenous (Inuit), and the filmic conventions they invented during the
filming are, at least in part, their intellectual creations. I hope that my research will further break down the notion that Indigenous people are not as savvy with the trappings of modernity as other peoples, and in fact I argue that much like the work of Flaherty’s uncredited Inuit film crew, the ways in which Native people are using digital media to educate, strengthen identity, and call for activist efforts will be instructive for many communities on a much broader scale in the future.
CHAPTER 3

IDENTITY EXPRESSIONS

Introduction: Visual Sovereignty

While mainstream culture often dismisses critiques of media from underrepresented or misrepresented groups as histrionic, stating that they are “just movies,” “just TV shows,” “just commercials,” scholarly works on how media acts as a socializing force and can have measurable impacts on health and wellness contradict this glib dismissal (Yasui et al. 2015). In addition to their distance from real interactions with Native people, media depictions of Indigeneity (the majority of which are created by non-Indigenous people) have almost certainly skewed public perceptions of Native Americans. “Social cognitive theory… addresses the potential for individuals to hold erroneous perceptions of reality based on media observation” (Lee et al. 2009:96).

In traditional media forms such as television and film, Indigenous people have struggled with their portrayals. When featured, they often acted in supporting roles or as stereotypical characters, in spite of their desire for more nuanced roles. Prominent First Nations and Native American actors like Tantoo Cardinal, Graham Greene, Adam Beach, and Wes Studi have discussed their frustration at the number of “buckskin roles” that are offered them, compared to contemporary, three-dimensional roles. Scholars have suggested that oppressed groups must act within recognizable stereotypes of their own people in order to be recognized (Spivak 1988; Jacobs 2017). This was certainly true in the past, evinced by Northeastern Indigenous people needing to appropriate Plains cultural symbolism in earlier decades order to be recognized as Native Americans and
thus be granted their legitimate legal rights. However, in our new mediascape, it is somewhat easier for Indigenous people to produce their own media and reach a significant audience, without relying on the previous all-important Hollywood networks to facilitate these opportunities. There is the potential that “online media may overcome the silencing of dissenting Indigenous voices” (Burrows 2016:1). “New media technology is revolutionary in that it enables people to take greater control of their own knowledge and representation” (Rekhari 2009:175).

One general shared feature of Indigenous nations and communities is an emphasis on the importance of storytelling as a method of transmitting historical information and cultural values. Stories are seen as essential mechanisms for cultural strength and continuance into the future. “To govern ourselves means to govern our stories and our ways of telling stories” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:208). They are also considered personally and communally necessary for wellbeing. “For many Indigenous cultures, storytelling and oral tradition is understood as a ‘medicinal practice and form of traditional knowledge” (Beltran & Begun 2014, 169; quote from Gonzales, 2012:39).

Although it may seem contradictory for those unfamiliar with Indigenous oral traditions, stories can exhibit a high degree of accuracy over time. Take, for instance, the discovery of the Erebus ship whose final location, approximately 10 meters from the coast of King William Island, was maintained by local Inuit oral tradition through generations for 168 years (ICT Staff 2017). Stories can also subtly shift in meaning and retellings to address specific audiences, political circumstances, or personal artistic choices on the part of the storyteller. Stories exemplify the idea that “change is an inherent part of tradition” (Hopkins 2005: 128).
Though we think of stories as oral tradition, a visual component is always inherent to storytelling. In addition to the images placed into our imaginations through descriptive language, Indigenous artists have long incorporated mythical characters into their artwork. For instance, Mississippian images of a spider with a cross on its back seem to clearly portray a spider character that also appears in contemporary Southeastern Indigenous tales about how fire was captured. Who has the cultural authority and legal right to use this image is a key question, and can quickly illuminate differences in the governing of images between western legal and cultural systems and Indigenous ones.

“What is at stake here is not how the image is presented (aesthetics aside), but who controls it… film is indeed a ‘place,’ and a site of power.” (Loft 2005:66) It is also a way to impact the future through our descendants. “What a prime position,” noted podcast creator Minty LongEarth, “to tell the stories we wish people were telling when we were kids” (personal interview, 2019).

In *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja describes visual sovereignty as a reading practice whereby we can think about “the space between resistance and compliance wherein Indigenous filmmakers and actors revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, while at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions” (Raheja 2010:193). Given the emphasis on governmental sovereignty within Indigenous communities, the term has increasingly incorporated power dynamics associated with self-representations and limiting the appropriative images created and operationalized by non-Native people (particularly, those used for profit). As Mohawk artist and educator
Steven Loft writes, “for Native people, justice resides chiefly in the assertion of the right to self-determination. Unambiguous and immutable. Thus, our stories become more than a consumable, communal property. They become a part of the collective assertion of who we are as people.” (Loft 2005: 64) This collective assertion also includes an aspect of ownership (or guardianship) over designs and images.

Twenty years ago, Indigenous people were more likely to accept and even be excited for Indigenous imagery on products with no affiliations to Indigenous creators. Now, however, Native “inspired” products are targets for Indigenous criticism, especially online. Advertised over Facebook, the Mikisa clothing store, for instance, creates dresses at a low price point with Indigenous designs, reminiscent of Pendleton blankets. Their Facebook posts show multiple inquiries about whether they are Indigenous owned or work with Indigenous designers, with one woman posting multiple times a day “Is this Native-made?” – a question that went conspicuously unanswered as other questions received official responses. The emphasis on buying Indigenous is laudable, and in line with current understandings of visual sovereignty. Of course, there are some issues; several Indigenous companies sell high-end products, which many Native people cannot afford, and there are culturally competent and community recognized Indigenous people who are not tribally enrolled, and are therefore legally prohibited from calling their work “Native-made” lest they fall on the wrong side of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990. However, the overall push to buy ethically from Indigenous artists is a move in the right direction and will support Indigenous sovereignty both in terms of economic gains, as well as the right to depict Indigenous symbolism and innovate Indigenous art forms in ways Indigenous people themselves see as appropriate.
As a growing social movement, visual sovereignty is increasingly emphasizing allowing Indigenous people to tell their own stories, whether that be through film, television, fashion design, textile production, website content creation, or any other form of expression and representation. “When members of a community assert control over their own lives and culture, politically, socially, and artistically, they go beyond oppression. Thus, control of our ‘image’ becomes not only an act of subversion, but of resistance, and ultimately, liberation” (Loft 2005:66). Within this context, “control” can be considered a group’s ability to guide either a particular form of technology or public discourse more broadly, toward specific principles, uses, moralities, and values.

Visual sovereignty, in addition to insisting that Indigenous and other underrepresented groups have the power to choose their own representations, also has areas of overlap with the NAGPRA act and repatriation. Visual repatriation involves the return or sharing of visual documentation of Indigenous peoples of the past with their contemporary relatives and communities. In some cases, Indigenous people in turn share their knowledge with the institutions that are involved in these repatriation acts, and “through this act [of describing photographs] they are reclaiming native memory” (Smith 2008:6). Whether this should be an expectation placed on Indigenous communities – their knowledge in exchange for the return of images that ethically belong in their hands anyway – is a question that taps into the power dynamics inherent between academic institutions and Indigenous people.

Cooperation, Not Competition

Métis Cree Canadian filmmaker Loretta Todd once famously said “it’s not about me, it’s about community” (Claxton 2005:19). This statement “would have a great effect
on Aboriginal arts in Canada” (Claxton 2005:19). That same spirit of community was exhibited by most of the Indigenous artists with whom I spoke, and was specifically mentioned by several individuals. Although art is often considered a competitive and, at times, even cut-throat industry, these artists were enthusiastic about more art being produced by Indigenous people, in their immediate area and across the country and the world.

“Because there’s so few Native people being able to tell their stories, the more podcasts and more shows, the more media platforms, the better. I don’t feel anyone is our competition… we just think great, there’s another one! And there’s another one! And I hope that as other Native people and other Indigenous folks anywhere get a platform that they also will not silo, trying to be the only one or the best one. We’ve just got to get people talking” (Minty LongEarth, personal interview, 2019).

Touching on the same notion but within the literary community, Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac said “that's one of the great things to me about the contemporary community of Native American writers, that we tend to be very supportive of each other and encouraging of each other. And that's something that I think is very traditional” (personal interview, 2021).

Encouragement for other artists could be found through Indigenous communities, as well as non-Indigenous ones that focus on new digital mediums. An Indigenous digital artist I spoke to at a local event emphasized his early beginnings as a member of a Photoshopping online community in the late 1990s, and how digital artists of all backgrounds shared tips, tricks, and methods for creating realistic Photoshopped images. Likewise, Labrador Inuk poet, artist, and educator Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz (whose
background also includes experience and degrees in childhood education and journalism, as well as an MFA in nonfiction writing), found a supportive community of poets with a wide range of backgrounds in a 10-week writing program hosted by Attack Bear Press in early 2020, which resulted in the chapbook *Locating Me*. Poets read excerpts from the book in its virtual launch on December 5th, 2020, an event which was widely advertised in local and state calendars. Ella went on to have digital artwork featured in online galleries that circulated in the Northeast and around the world, as well as art displayed in physical locations in the U.S. and Canada.

Lamenting the lack of powwows in 2020, Justin Beatty created the first annual Odenong Powwow, a digital event on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms in 2021. The Odenong Facebook page explains that “Odenong is an Ojibwe word for community, that roughly translates to “Where Hearts Gather” (Odenong Powwow 2021). While a sense of community and support could be found in digital artist spaces, for Indigenous artists this focus on community, tribe, or nation, or other Indigenous people in general, also upholds the political goal of visual sovereignty – of Indigenous people having the power and agency to craft their own representations both individually (as pieces could be crafted during lockdown) and in a collective context (as pieces could be shared, viewed, and discussed).

These artists certainly give credence to the idea that “participation in, and awareness of the arts are significant contributors to the development of innovation, leadership, community engagement, critical thinking, self-discipline, self-motivated learning, teamwork, and self-esteem” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:193). In spite of some blips of negativity – Indigenous people critiquing the authenticity of other communities
or individuals over social media sites, based on their skin tones, for instance – the responses to community events, whether online or in person, were largely positive and supportive.

**Art and Expression**

Although some artists interviewed felt that there was some pressure on them to be traditional artists due to their Indigenous identity, they nevertheless espoused support for nontraditional artistic forms and participated in these themselves, often alongside traditional arts, practices, or beliefs. Similar pressures to espouse tradition, presented as “authenticity,” have been placed on Indigenous filmmakers as well. “This seemingly subtle expectation about what *should* be important – traditional beliefs and spirituality – illustrates how expectations of a Native filmmaker’s voice affect both the production of a film and the indexical meanings audiences glean” (Peterson 2014:254).

At the same time, everyone was firm in their stance that Indigenous artists should not be limited to traditional forms, or even presumed to be traditional artists. Rather, they felt that contemporary art forms should be celebrated. “If we’ve taught you to fish, if we’ve taught you to bead, if we taught you to sing and dance, to learn your language, why aren’t we also lifting you up for expressing your modern, contemporary art and culture and writings and teachings?” (Minty LongEarth, personal interview, 2019).

This celebration of a range of art forms was also supported with economic opportunities. The Mashantucket Pequot Museum did not put restrictions on its artists to make only traditional art. If the artists chose to engage in new art forms, according to a museum spokesperson, “that’s just the art taking a new shape” (personal interview, 2019).
Justin Beatty’s artwork has sold both online and at powwows, and he noted that while many people (especially non-Indigenous customers) were initially bewildered by his art, its difference also drew people to it. Native people in particular were excited to see images of contemporary Indigenous people in modern settings, which are regular features of Beatty’s art.

Although their artwork may not be in traditional mediums, these artists can still fulfill traditional storytelling purposes. Their art brings out “the primacy of storytelling in the transfer of indigenous knowledge, where story functions as ceremony to preserve tradition – specifically, proper custom and practice” (Dillon 2007:24). These customs and practices include values and our relationships to others, and not habits that must be conducted as they were in the 1700s or 1800s. Indigenous artists may gain a sense of purpose and identity from their ability to fulfill this traditional role for their communities, even through digital and other “non-traditional” art forms.

By expressing their own individual journeys and experiences, Indigenous artists are also contributing to new articulations of what it means to be Indigenous (or, rather, the many varied ways that one can be Indigenous). “The transformation or ‘rearticulation’ of AI [American Indian] identities is dependent on the ability of people – including AIs – to (re)imagine themselves in the twenty-first century. Strategies for accomplishing this shift in thinking must reconfigure what it means to be authentically Indian in ways that incorporate multiracial Indians and Indians living in cities” (Jacobs 2017:585). Indigenous artists in the Northeast are indeed contributing to these reconfigurations. Consider Beatty’s digital prints that show Indigenous people in full regalia in highly urban locations, or Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz’s digital art print.
“Pulâvutik” (pronounced Poo-laa-vue-tick, Inuttitut for “we two are visiting”), which depicts two Indigenous people visiting with face masks on during the Covid-19 pandemic, wearing glasses and contemporary clothing (Easthampton City Arts). These pieces of art center Indigenous people in the here and now, part of contemporary happenings.

As artists who must often work against stereotypes, Indigenous artists and allies sometimes face confusion, disinterest, or even push-back against the non-stereotypical images that they produce. An emotion that came up repeatedly was standing by one’s work, whether it was profitable or not. Speaking about his photography work with Indigenous subjects in historically accurate reenactment events, Randall Steele noted that “if they don’t sell, I don’t care. I just love doing it and letting other people see it” (personal interview, 2019). Artist Casey Figueroa said “I’d be glad to sell it, but I’m not really worried about cultivating collectors or anything like that. I’m much more engaged with just making art” (personal interview, 2019).

Buffy Sainte-Marie, who is an Indigenous author, songwriter, and artist originally from Canada but adopted by parents of Mi'kmaq descent in Wakefield, Massachusetts, has particular resonance for many Native people in the Northeastern United States. A graduate of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, her image hangs in the university’s iconic Du Bois Library and she has returned to the campus for concerts and visits. She is also one of the earliest adopters of digital technology in her music, far ahead of the music industry as a whole. Speaking on the subject, Sainte-Marie has said “We make art on computers for the same reasons that Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Mozart made art with their available tools: because we love to… To me, a Macintosh is a natural and easy to learn
tool, and it belongs in the hands of our bead workers and powwow singers, our linguists, our historians” (Claxton 2005:35).

Indigenous artists in other parts of the United States and Canada have echoed these sentiments about the authenticity of Indigenous new media art. VR artist and painter Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun of Canada has been quoted as commenting “‘I have been told by ethnologists, “Well this isn’t Indian art.” As if they have the right to determine what Indian Art is! I can advance my culture freely in the directions that I choose’” (Claxton 2005:36).

Of course, the idea of artistic freedom is not a straightforward or uncomplicated one for Indigenous artists. Although an increasing number of personal narratives can contribute to a multifaceted understanding of the variety of the Indigenous experience, there are still lingering questions about ownership over story and potentially problematic content issues. To what degree does my individual story, as an Indigenous person, reflect on my clan, my tribal nation, my local community, and Native Americans in general? If it may reaffirm stereotypes or negative images of Indigenous people, do I have a right to tell it? Though American social norms and legal codes provide a resounding “yes” to these inquiries, the ethical questions behind them are more complex.

Visual sovereignty also appears, through the use of the term “sovereignty,” to emphasize community governance over individualistic concerns, which are more closely related to western cultural norms. However, many Indigenous scholars see sovereignty as extending to one’s personhood, and self-representation of one’s own individual story being a right. “As an area of Smith’s (1999) indigenous inquiry, representing and self-representation is a ‘fundamental right,’ and ‘spans both the notion of representation as a political concept
and representation as a form of voice and expression” (Willox & Harper 2012:136). Yet this is a particularly thorny issue when an individual’s story has the potential to reaffirm dominant stereotypes and play into audience members’ confirmation biases. In discussing true stories that align with stereotypical narratives, a few critical questions are: “Do they further perpetuate stereotypes? Or give voice to silenced peoples and issues? Is it justified to consciously leave out stories that have the potential to be ‘used against’ the community? Will some stories contribute to collective misunderstandings?” (Willox, Harper, & Edge 2012:141).

There are also ongoing discussions about the work that art does in terms of both self-esteem for Indigenous people and for how non-Indigenous people view us. One conversation that appeared on my own Facebook page questioned what the balance should be between focusing on historical tragedies, and highlighting acts of resistance and survivance. Some Indigenous social media users focus their personal Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts solely on historical tragedies, and have even challenged other people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who question the effects of highlighting only trauma, with at least one user suggesting that their critics wanted to silence them and thus silence these histories. Yet an Indigenous Elder with whom I spoke personally said “all the sad things are important, but I’m Indigenous and I don’t always want to hear about the all the trauma all day, every day – we need happy things too.”

This sense of needing joyful stories is a key component of the concept of survivance, and what differentiates itself from mere survival. There is perhaps a fear that stories about Indigenous people that feature happiness will detract, for non-Indigenous viewers, from the harsh ongoing truths of colonization and the collective guilt that has
been proven to benefit allyship efforts. While this is a notable worry, it nevertheless places non-Indigenous viewers as the primary and most important audience.

By contrast, many Indigenous storytellers today are interested in telling stories that target Indigenous audiences as primary, and non-Indigenous audiences as either secondary or perhaps equally important – but not more important. This projection of Indigenous viewership powerfully centers Indigenous audience needs and understandings, and thus changes ideas of what the audience needs to hear and see. It also seems to shift portrayals to more three dimensional representations that show a full range of emotion. “There is growing empirical evidence that various aspects of culture and cultural identity help moderate the effects of life stressors on health outcomes in Indigenous communities” (Beltran & Begun 2014:161). Cultural identity support systems that can mediate the stresses that accompany colonization may be local and in person, but they might also be diffuse and virtual. Certainly in both cases, these interventions may involve affirmative storytelling. “Recent Indigenous scholarship is pointing to the power of narrative in disrupting the transmission of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous populations” (Beltran and Begun 2014:162).

Mainstream Indigenous directors from international communities have also taken up the idea that Indigenous storytelling can embrace both the historical trauma of the past and the stories or moments that express “a humorous, joyful love of life” (Kral 2011:11). Taika Waititi has commented on the need for more light-hearted Indigenous films after decades of films that either use exaggerated stereotypes or focus more on cultural exoticism or historical trauma (Muzyka 2019). Furthermore, portraying a thriving Indigenous community answers “Tuck’s (2009a) call to ‘refuse to be complicit in our
further categorization as only damaged, as only broken’ (p. 422)” (Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi 2014:67).

In addition to the sense of hope that stories of Indigenous joy and survivance can provide to contemporary Indigenous people, there is the additional benefit of breaking both the “tragic Indian” and “stoic Indian” stereotypes for non-Indigenous viewers. Speaking about the documentaries produced by Vision Maker Media, which has produced several films in the Northeastern United States, Shirley Sneve said that “many Native-themed documentaries are ‘stories that are angry, sad, and mad and blaming of the White Man for all of the Native American’s problems. And I think that programmers think that anything we’re going to produce is going to be like that, because that’s a stereotypical view that they have of Native American documentary film… but we’re not’” (Peterson 2014:252).

In both literature and film, there is an increasing cautiousness around images of trauma that could be consumed as “poverty porn” or “trauma porn,” and a move toward incorporating images of hope and love. Speaking on women’s stories, Emerance Baker declares that “our stories in fact bear witness and give presence to our ‘survivance’ which Vizenor declares is a state in which we are moving beyond our basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal… more and more Native women writers are telling stories of being Native in the here and now that fix a loving gaze on being Indian today” (Baker 2005:111).

**Mascots**
It would be impossible to discuss Indigenous aesthetics and representations in the Northeast without discussing the mascot issue. While this is a nationwide issue, Indigenous communities across the Northeast have also mobilized strongly around on this issue. United American Indians of New England and the North American Indian Center of Boston (NAICOB), along with Massachusetts Peace Action, Mass. Mascot Coalition, Massachusetts Indigenous Agenda, Network for Social Justice, Change the Mass Flag, the Traprock Center for Peace and Justice, New England Peace Pagoda, and the Enviro Show helped organize an in-person protest event against Native American mascots in July 2020 on the steps of the Massachusetts Statehouse (Massachusetts Peace Action; CBS Boston 2020; Van Buskirk 2020). The Ohketeau cultural center and Double Edge Theater has co-hosted “A Native Community Conversation Regarding Mascots, Imagery, and Cultural Appropriation” with panelists Larry Spotted Crow Mann, Anthony Melting Tallow, Annowan Weeden, Brittany Wolley, Jamie Morrison, Laurel Davis Delano, Maulian Dana, Melissa Ferreti, and Shawna Newcomb. The event was later posted online to NAICOB’s Facebook page (North American Indian Center Of Boston). Brittany Wolley was there as the Nipmuc anti-mascot tribal representative, and her work against mascots was featured on the Facebook event page. The University of Massachusetts Amherst hosted the event “Conversation: We Are Not Your Mascot” in November 2020 with guest speakers Rhonda Anderson and Joseph P. Gone via Zoom. Every few months, it seems, new events and movements around the subject of Indigenous mascots take place.

This movement contributed to legislative redress. Massachusetts bill S.247/H.443/S.2593 was designed to restrict schools from having Native American
mascots, and the Massachusetts Indigenous Legislative Agenda called for support of this bill as well as a change to the Massachusetts state seal. Smaller efforts included local petitions to change mascots (for instance, a Change.org petition for removing the Turners Falls, MA, “Indians”), as well as virtual webinars. These efforts were rewarded in January 2021, when Massachusetts Governor Baker set a commission comprised of lawmakers and Massachusetts tribal members to offer recommendations for reworking the seal.

The mascot issue, especially as it began to heat up in Massachusetts around the state flag and seal and in the small town of Turners Falls around 2017, “may have also raised interest in Native people more widely,” driving people to both the Nipmuc Nation website and the annual powwow, which experienced a record turnout in 2017 (Cheryl Toney Holley, personal interview, 2017). Although the term “visual sovereignty” is not generally used by the mainstream public, the idea that Indigenous people should not be stereotyped and should control their own representations may be contributing to a general increase in interest in Indigenous issues. When Harvard hosted its Warner Free Lecture in January 2021, with the Arm in Arm organization, it chose Nipmuc storyteller Larry Spotted Crow Mann as its guest. The lecture, entitled “We are the Story, We are the Land: A Journey into Nipmuc Land,” was so popular that their format had to be retooled to accommodate the guests – almost 300 guests attended, and registration had to be halted ahead of time due to the overwhelming interest.

Recent legal movements around Native American mascot bans are explored more in Chapter Seven, and will likely continue to unfold over the next several years.

**Naming Practices**
What’s in a name? In the case of Indigenous peoples of the Americas, several centuries of history and politics underlie specific naming practices. As a general rule of thumb, using tribal nation names (and specifically, the names that these groups called themselves as opposed to names given to them by colonizing forces), is the most respectful way to address a group or individual’s heritage. However, there are times when it is expedient to discuss, for instance, all Indigenous people within the United States, who have different cultures and particular histories but are nevertheless linked together through some common experiences of colonization. What follows is a contemporary overview of how tribal nations and individuals are mobilizing specific terms and naming practices for whole groups and for individuals.

As times have changed, so have the connotations that accompany particular names for Indigenous communities. In examining community and museum websites, I was interested in finding what the preferred terms appear to be in digital media created by tribal nations themselves. To gain an understanding of commonly used monikers, I coded the websites of 10 nations and communities, and 2 prominent museums (the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, https://www.pequotmuseum.org/, and the Tomaquag Museum, https://www.tomaquagmuseum.org/), all of which are listed in Appendix A. I looked for three group naming practices: the use of “Indian” or “American Indian,” the use of “Indigenous,” and the use of “Native” or “Native American.” If a term was repeated multiple times within a paragraph or section, it was coded only once. Actual term coding numbers are below:
The findings are interesting in that “Indian” is still widely used, and “Native” or “Native American” is also frequently used. One mitigating factor for the term “Indian” is that some laws, like the Indian Child Welfare Act, may have been coded under this term but do not necessarily mean that the tribal community is representing itself as “Indian.” Still, casual website visitors may not draw that conclusion, and may merely see the word “Indian” on the webpage, so it was coded. And in fact, the word “Indian” is still in use on these websites as a term, which may be shocking to many viewers. However, while many young Native Americans do not use the word “Indian” to directly refer to themselves, it can still be heard in informal in-group conversations as well as in use by older generations. In fact, featured quotes across these websites, often highlighting the words of Elders or ancestors, used the term “tribal” most frequently at 21 times, and “Indian” second most frequently at 14 times. Removal of these quotes to expunge the term
“Indian” would serve to erase these Elders’ voices, and altering them to suit more current feelings about the word could be seen as historically disingenuous as well.

The real surprise is the rather low usage of the term “Indigenous.” The term Indigenous has gained ground to identify communities across the world, particularly those who have faced colonization or pressure from other, often industrialized, populations. The word “Indigenous” “internationalizes the experiences, the issues, and the struggles of some of the world’s colonized peoples” (Smith 1999:6). It is more widely used in Canada, where the word “Indian” and “Native” are now seen as offensive, compared to the United States, where “Native” is generally the preferred general term (apart from addressing people by specific tribal nation) and “Indian” is usually acceptable only for Native Americans to say (although the term “Indian Country” is still acceptable for non-Native people). “Indigenous” is also heavily used in academic settings, in the Northeastern United States and across the country. Most national academic associations and programs utilized the word “Indigenous,” sometimes alongside “Native,” “Native American,” or, rarely, “American Indian.” Despite having gained ground in Canada and in the academic realm of Native American and Indigenous Studies in the United States, and in spite of a seemingly substantial amount of respect for and interaction with institutions of higher education, the term “Indigenous” does not seem to have entered non-academic self-representations in the Northeast. Only one website predominantly used “Indigenous,” and this website (the Tomaquag Museum) is an educational institution itself, with many academic partnerships and connections.

One might be tempted to read this disconnect in terminology between academia and communities as an aversion to higher education, especially given the traumatic
influences of the residential/boarding school era on this part of the country. However, every website discussed higher education and often lauded members with degrees, encouraged high school students to apply for scholarships and visit colleges, and celebrated partnerships with universities and other institutions. Only three websites mentioned the boarding school legacy at the time of analysis in 2019. Overall, tribal communities’ views on higher education for Native people today seem positive and encouraging. Therefore, the lack of prominence for the term “Indigenous” cannot be attributed to any rejection of academia, but is more likely to historical patterns of self-identification and higher levels of comfort with the terms “Indian” and “Native,” which many acquaintances have admitted are the terms they grew up with or that have special positive meanings for them.

Another set of terms examined were “sovereign/sovereignty,” “nation,” and “tribe/tribal.” It should be noted that these terms were only coded when referring to an Indigenous group; a line that reads “we are a top national destination for golf,” for instance, would not have been coded since it is referring to the United States as the nation in question. The potential confusion of using “nation” alternately to refer to the United States, the tribe in question, and even other tribal entities (especially by non-Indigenous viewers who may be unaccustomed to seeing Indigenous communities referred to as “nations”) may contribute to its low usage. The coding occurrences for these are summarized below:
The popularity of the term “tribal” is clear from its predominant usage. In this case, however, the situation is more complicated since each of these terms would often be used with each other to form a phrase like “sovereign nation.” This is especially the case with “sovereignty,” which was used in conjunction with the words: tribe (30 times), Indian (19 times), nation (14 times), and recognition (11 times). The word “nation” was also used with the word “tribe” 102 times. This may have been done in an attempt to minimize confusion over the application of the word “nation” to Native American governing bodies and communities. Most non-Native Americans have little familiarity with the political histories of tribal communities (Davis-Delano et. al. 2020). Gaming rights, for instance, are often viewed as ethnic favoritism rather than a question of legal jurisdiction related to tribal, state, and federal governance. The word “tribal” is familiar to most non-Native viewers, and this is likely the cause for its common usage in reference to Indigenous peoples on the websites examined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>&quot;Tribe/tribal&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Nation&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Sovereign&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquinnah Wampanoag</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanatsiohareke Mohawk</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashantucket Pequot</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee Wampanoag</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohegan</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narragansett</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nipmuc</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nulhegan Abenaki</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penobscot</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Regis Mohawk</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>574</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Coded count of “tribe/tribal,” “Nation,” and “sovereign.”
One upcoming and notable set of terminology are the words “first” and “original.” Coded for as a set because of their very similar meanings, one or both of these words appeared on more than half of the tribal websites examined, with the Mashpee using these words most frequently:

![Figure 3: Spread of the words “first” or “original.”](image)

The use of “first” or “original” by the Mashpee Wampanoag likely has to do with their famous history of interaction with the Pilgrims, and may also have been a political strategy to bolster their land claims, which were under attack during the Trump administration.

Words that were present on every website examined included: ancestor/s/y, chief, and tribe.

Naming practices for individuals, too, are subject to change over time and must strike a balance between appearing potentially stereotypical and embracing meaningful cultural practices. Across Northeastern tribal community websites, the word “chief” was
used by several groups to denote leadership, although it’s important to note that mainstream American culture also uses “chief” as a title for police personnel, inspectors, and justices of the peace, so the word appears a bit more frequently than in its Native-only usage. Indigenous websites might mention a “police chief” on one page, and a tribal “chief” on another, for instance.

Tribally-given or non-Westernized names for individuals appeared infrequently across these sites, and applied to historic figures more frequently than modern persons. These appeared in history sections, alongside old photographs, and with the words “tribal,” “Indian,” and “chief” most frequently.

As noted above, in terms of individuals’ tribal designations, nearly every person I spoke with preferred to be identified by their specific tribal/national names rather than more general terms like “Native,” “Indigenous,” or “Indian.” However, there was a general acknowledgment that a general term can be useful for describing the very experience of being grouped together and subjected to similar policies across United States colonial history (and, in cases like the boarding/residential schools, across multiple colonial nations).

There were also moments of conflict or discomfort. For instance, two highly educated study participants strongly preferred the term “Indian,” because it links Native American people as a population to the Constitution, but another young person of Indigenous descent with whom I spoke informally is currently rallying against that same term. While creating their segment on the Brothertown Band, non-Indigenous podcasters Ana Gonzalez and Alex Nunes were somewhat taken aback when an Indigenous guest speaker used the term “Indian,” since they had already become more comfortable with
“Native” as the most widely used term. Yet the podcasters attempted in every segment to lean toward more specific tribal nation names as their best practice. “We try to be as specific as possible. And it was also equally important when talking about the different colonists to refer them as English colonists, not Americans, to try and get the complexity of the situation, because it is very complex on all sides” (Ana Gonzalez, personal interview, 2019).

The way that Indigenous people are portrayed on tribal nation and educational institute websites provides valuable insights on how Indigenous people may want to portray themselves, and may feel pressured to portray themselves. “Issues of identity, politics, religion, culture, language, and enrollment can come into play in looking at Indian Web sites, as they can in just about every other area of Native American life today” (Mitten 2003:443).

**Beyond Tribe and Nation**

According to arts scholar and founding director of the Multicultural Center at Ohio State University Christine Ballengee-Morris, “Native arts are created and presented from a personal identity, as well as collective identity and its relationship with personal identities within a parallel time construct that includes colonial histories and (post) colonial complexities” (Ballengee-Morris 2008:31-32). Indeed, the Indigenous artists I spoke to were well aware of these complications and how they related to their artistic creations. Inherent in visual sovereignty is the question of who can lay claim to certain images, critique certain images, and speak for themselves and their communities. Simply being of Indigenous descent does not provide a clear set of answers to these questions; in
fact, Indigenous individuals are often hyper aware of the complications associated with their personal identities and positionalities.

While viewing the websites of some Indigenous Northeastern nations, you might be surprised to find headdresses, also called war bonnets, worn by chiefs through the 1900s. These meaningful and spiritually significant pieces of adornment were originally from Plains cultures, and were not originally found in the Northeast. However, with the film industry tying this icon so closely together with Indigenous identity, Northeastern Indigenous leaders found that they were dismissed as inauthentic if they were not dressed in Plains regalia. Ironically, they had to dress inauthentically (relative to their own Indigenous culture) in order for mainstream society to see them as authentically Native.

“There’s a picture of my father from the early 1900s… and he’s about 23, 24 years old, but he has a full headdress, a full war bonnet on. We didn’t have those around here, but at the time that’s what people knew. So that’s what he had to do” (Darius Coombs, personal interview, 2019).

Fortunately, there appears to be a desire from the more progressive elements of mainstream society to understand local Indigenous customs on a more nuanced level, and at the same time, a refusal from this generation of Indigenous artists to utilize stereotypical imagery. In fact, a highly thoughtful approach to symbol use, which takes into account cultural protocols, personal relationships, national/tribal and even clan relationships, was used by the Indigenous artists with whom I spoke.

An inherent aspect of visual sovereignty is its specificity; each tribal nation has rights over its own communally created stories, images, and practices. Casey Figueroa noted that even if you are an Indigenous artist, if you are not from a community but are
using their symbolism “and you haven’t been given permission and you know, gone through all the protocol… are you really considering what it means to honor that?” (personal interview, 2019). Poet and artist Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz, an Inuit transplant to the Northeast who has been active in her local Native community, echoed similar sentiments, saying “I don't know what it's like to be Cherokee or Métis or Blackfeet because I only have my culture to speak for me” (personal interview, 2021). Justin Beatty also described similar considerations that he thinks about, noting an instance where he removed a symbol that was meaningful to an Indigenous group, but one to which he did not belong. It altered the meaning of the work and, he admits, may have made his piece more opaque than he would have ideally liked, but he emphasized the ethical need to step away from that symbol given his status as someone outside of the group, despite being another Indigenous person.

Reflecting on the stories that he has told, renowned Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac described “at least a dozen books that I could have written that I was asked to write that I said, ‘no, not me, this person should do it.’ And they did it another Indigenous person” (personal interview, 2021). Expanding on the traditional rights to tell a story, he said “as a storyteller, I have been gifted, given permission by Elders in many parts of the world – not just here, but also from Europe as well – to tell their stories properly. But I've also been given stories that I've been told ‘these are yours to keep, but not to tell,’ or ‘here's a story to only tell in a certain point at a certain place’” (personal interview, 2021). Furthermore, telling a story comes with certain responsibilities and ties to the communities involved in the piece. Bruchac added “I'm human, I sometimes forget, but I always try to remember to acknowledge properly, to give thanks properly and to make
sure that things are done in the proper way… and that's really a very important thing. I think that's who I need to be. That integrity is more important than fame or monetary gain” (personal interview, 2021). The consideration of not just legal permissions but traditional permissions, and the ongoing relationship to the artistic work and any communities implicated in it, seem to set the work of Indigenous creators apart from many western artists.

Several Indigenous artists grappled with their own identities – whether because they were mixed race, tribally connected or disconnected, enrolled or unenrolled, adopted out or raised within their natal family, living in their Indigenous lands or relocated and living on others’ ancestral lands. While I will choose not to dive into the details of those personal considerations, I will note that Indigenous people are well aware of the colonialist background to many of these questions. “In other countries, like Australia… somebody says they’re Aboriginal, and nobody, nobody gets an attack on what that’s supposed to look like” (Minty LongEarth, personal interview, 2019).

In conducting interviews, it became immediately apparent that very few stories were straightforward in terms of someone having clear-cut ties to family, tribe, and land all at the same time (i.e., someone’s family has lived on the same land for thousands of years, they’ve never moved, they’ve only intermarried within our own tribal nation, they were brought into the United States legal system with clear paperwork, and their tribe has consistently been recognized by their non-Indigenous neighbors and the U.S. government). Instead, many families had stories of moving away and returning, or moving to the Northeast from another area (or out of the Northeast). Intermarriage between tribal nations has been common from precolonial times, and most Indigenous
nations in the Northeastern U.S. did not historically take issue with marrying people of European, African, or other descent groups. Federal recognition has been a lengthy and challenging process for many groups, particularly Algonquian cultural communities whose structures are typically more fluid than the United States government can conceptualize.

Given these histories, and “the institutionalization of legitimacy criteria,” there are now “contested meanings of being indigenous to the United States, which leads to an unrelenting debate about authentic indigeneity among indigenous peoples and between indigenous communities” (McKay 2021:12). Each content creator with whom I spoke was exceptionally thoughtful about their own positionality and what topics they felt they had the personal sovereignty to speak on, what topics they could speak on only with permission from others, and what topics ones would best be left for others to represent.

Several non-Indigenous creators I spoke with also had a laudable emphasis on gaining permission from tribal nations and communities, a valuable adherence to the principles of cultural sovereignty. For instance, Public Radio’s Ana Gonzalez and Alex Nunes reached out to the Brothertown Band before constructing a segment on their history. “The Brothertown really wanted their story known more widely. When I contacted them, they were really excited that someone was taking an interest in it. So when the stories came out, they spread them out a lot” (personal interview, 2019).

By comparison, Indigenous artists often had a heightened attentiveness to not only disclosing their own and others’ tribal nation or community, but clan as well. Writing about Indigenous identity, Christine Ballengee-Morris writes that “an individual relates to the group or clan” (Ballangee-Morris 2008:32, emphasis added). Echoing this,
Nipmuc storyteller Larry Spotted Crow Mann stated that it is very important for Native people to identify both their people and their clan (Warner Free Lecture event 2021).

Several Indigenous artists showed deference to the visual sovereignty of not only tribal nations but clans. Clans are units within a tribe who are considered related, and children usually receive their clans through their mother. Clans are fixed and as a general rule cannot change; they do not change upon marriage, for instance, and most Indigenous groups traditionally forbid marriages within a clan. Clan relationships stretch across tribal nations and species; a Mohawk Deer Clan member is considered related to a Mashpee Wampanoag Deer Clan member, despite being from different tribal nations and even potentially speaking different languages from entirely different language families. They would also both be considered relatives to deer in a sense, and thus have specific actions that they may take with deer that other clans do not have permission to do.

Clan relations are a little-known aspect of Indigenous life, yet they are extremely important for determining one’s relationships to others. In his digital art, Justin Beatty deeply considers the use of animals in his artwork, and what clans those animals might represent, in some cases having conversations with friends who are members of that clan. While noting that animal symbolism “is pretty much open to everybody,” Casey Figueroa also emphasized his personal ethic as an artist to deeply consider all iconography and how it is positioned against other iconography – although he was careful to note that he would never dictate to any Indigenous artists how they should approach their own art and what iconography to use.

Overall, identification with various generalizing terms such as Indian, Native, or Indigenous, tribal nation specific names, and clans changed from platform to platform
and depending upon the topic being discussed and the presumed audience. This clearly demonstrates Joane Nagel’s constructivist identity theory, which states that people choose identifiers dependent upon social context, and that someone who may identify as Mohawk Wolf Clan may, in another instance, only say “Mohawk,” or may simply say “Native American,” depending on how they are situating their identity in relation to the subject being discussed and depending on the presumed knowledge of the person with whom they are speaking (Nagel 1997). Every time an Indigenous person identifies themselves, they do a split-second calculation of how to articulate their identity in a way that highlights their own internal sense of self while also being clear and meaningful to those around them.

**Voice and Silence**

Visual sovereignty, like governmental sovereignty, is concerned with authority and the just administration of control over stories and images. That means that it is not simply concerned with the creation and spread of stories from an Indigenous perspective, but also involves the right to withhold stories and information.

Western societies have long emphasized the right to a voice in the public sphere as a necessary right. It is undeniable that being able to tell our own stories and have representation in local, state, and federal matters is extremely important. Scholarship, too, has reflected the need for an increase in Indigenous and minority voices in artistic fields (Beltran & Begun 2014; Peterson 2014; Russell 2018). When Indigenous youth enter the public domain, their presence there and their comfort with having attention placed upon them is generally celebrated by other Indigenous people (Hull & Stornaiuolo 2010; Kral 2011).
Several of the artists I interviewed emphasized the importance of having particular voices highlighted in their works. Speaking about highlighting Indigenous participants, Ana Gonzalez and Alex Nunes of Public Radio stated “we really wanted to make sure that it wasn’t our voice and our interpretation of things. We wanted to hear directly from people from these tribes” (personal interview, 2019).

It is also necessary to highlight the diversity of Indigenous perspectives, even within tribal nations and clans. Disagreement and conflicting stories were not only accepted, but celebrated by many of the Indigenous creators with whom I spoke, as long as disagreement led to respectful and well-informed conversations. In his 2006 study of Native American journalism, George Daniels found that “traditional advocacy or criticism appeared to have been less important than reflecting as many different stories as could be either generated locally by the printed products or filtered from mainstream media,” further suggesting that many Indigenous media creators value a multiplicity of voices (Daniels 2006 336-337).

Part of the emphasis on Indigenous voices and visibility is, of course, a reaction to over a century of purposeful erasure and stereotyping of Indigenous people in mainstream media. Native Americans are rarely represented across many media forms, including news, film, TV shows, and advertising (Fitzgerald, 2014; Fryberg, 2002; Greenberg & Worrell, 2007; Larson, 2006; Moore & Lanthorn, 2017; Poindexter et al., 2003; Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Weston, 1996). Native languages, too, have frequently been excluded, incorrect (i.e., using one nation’s language for a completely different nation and language), or even made up with the use of gibberish sounds substituting for actual words. “As is often the case, Native languages are not a significant concern for non-
Native media professionals” (Peterson 2014:259). Even when speaking in English, Indigenous characters have been given limited dialogue and relegated to “Tonto speak,” a phenomenon that has been well covered in academic works (Meek 2006).

Yet the act of silencing can differ from a state of silence itself. Silence has played traditional roles within numerous Native communities. One striking public example took place at the National NAGPRA Review Committee meeting held at UMass Amherst from March 3-4, 2015, when committee member Shannon Keller O’Loughlin (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma citizen) abstained from speaking or voting on an issue. In explaining her decision, even when pressed by other Indigenous panelists, she described being raised with the value that when one is not passionately moved in one way or another on a particular issue, or is not as informed on it as they would like to be, it is best to step aside so that others who have a stronger point of view can be heard. This is not apathy, but rather a form of participatory democracy – and participatory democracy is a lengthy process that would only be made unwieldy by the addition of unnecessary commentary. This same principle has been discussed by Mohawk Bear Clan Elder Tom Porter, describing the process of group decision making within Haudenosaunee nations. It is a familiar principle to Indigenous people in both the Northeastern and Southeastern United States.

Silence can also be a message, a subtle one, in and of itself. Historical accounts have noted many Indigenous groups’ hesitation to directly insult or refuse the advances and ideas of others. Even today, it is noticeable that some Indigenous people may be circumscribe about their feelings on others. Power imbalances in many institutions, where Indigenous people may be a minority or in non-leadership roles, can exacerbate
this tendency. This is a facet of working with Indigenous people that non-Indigenous academics in particular should note.

The loudest individuals are not always leaders, as many westerners may presume. In discussing who he attempts to interview for his documentary films, Indigenous creator Sterlin Harjo has noted the tendency for quiet individuals to be the ones in leadership roles or who have the most in-depth knowledge on a subject. “My biggest advice is to never interview the people that are trying to get in front of the camera” (Wissot 2017). Silence can thus be seen as an act of cultural humility. Harjo referenced this feature in the same 2017 interview, noting that “Humility is built into our cultures—so the people you really want to talk to are the ones not trying to be on TV… the way indigenous people live and carry themselves is very different from non-indigenous worlds. You need to learn those rhythms, and you have to learn when something isn't appropriate—something as simple as asking a question. Or talking” (Wissot 2017, emphasis added).

Silence might be employed as a strategic political move, and a refusal of appropriation. Historically, Indigenous groups have found success preserving traditional practices by removing them from the sight of colonizing forces. In an early work on silence, Susan Gal writes that “silence is generally deplored” in many western circles “because it is taken to be a result and a symbol of passivity and powerlessness… but silence can also be a strategic defense against the powerful, as when Western Apache men use it to baffle, disconcert and exclude white outsiders” (Gal 1989:1). In British Colombia, “studies indicated that the Heiltsuk succeeded in preserving and continuing their traditions by veiling them from European scrutiny” (Dillon 2007:227). Some traditions were hybridized with mainstream holidays and Christian celebrations in order
to continue “in plain sight” and at least tolerated by Indian Agents and non-Indigenous neighbors. Diné/Navajo Yeibichai dancers, performing for Edward S. Curtis, did their ceremonial dance in reverse (counterclockwise, with rattles in their left rather than right hands), and only did a partial dance rather than the complete one in order to preserve, out of sight, the complete dance and its spiritual energy, which the camera might have captured rather than having it travel on to do its intended work; and similarly, when Curtis asked to join a Hopi snake society, the leader was simply silent in response (Jurkoic et. al. 2000).

In a similar vein, artists might self-silence as a strategic move. Discussing some of her more explicitly indignant works of art and poetry, Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz pointed out that in addition to the negative reception that angry works from Indigenous creators often receive, “I don't want to fulfill the stereotypical… Oh, she's angry! I don't want that label put on me” (personal interview, 2021).

Modern authors and artists have expressed a desire to occasionally invite non-Indigenous into their works “while remaining obscure” (Dillon 2007:234). Some authors focus on their concerns over what they have depicted; Grace Dillon writes for instance, that Eden Robinson, author of “Terminal Avenue,” “admits to having revealed too much about the potlatch ceremony” (Dillon 2007:234). Other artists are more challenging in their unwillingness to open Indigenous cultures for outsider viewing. “Townsend-Gault has described how… Native artists have used Native languages in their work and purposefully withheld translations into English” (Gagnon 2005:76). Some of the work of Jimmie Durham (a proclaimed Cherokee artist, though his claims have notably been disputed) overtly resists being made accessible to non-Cherokee people (and even
illiterate Cherokee people) through its use of untranslated Cherokee language. “Jimmie Durham’s response to an interviewer’s query about the limited viewer access to his use of Cherokee in a sculptural assemblage: ‘What I want them to know is that they can’t know that. That’s what I want them to know’” (Gagnon 2005:77).

This resistance to absolutely open sharing is present in the Northeast as well. Language lessons, and even videos where interviewees speak about traditions, are sometimes purposefully withheld from tribal nations’ websites. Jennifer Weston, a Standing Rock Sioux tribal member and Director of the Language Department for the Mashpee Wampanoag, noted that “when teaching a language class or offering learning materials online, some tribes do not choose to share that information broadly with non-tribal citizens” (personal interview, 2017). The fact that digital artifacts are particularly “spreadable” – able to quickly and easily reach a high degree of circulation – make these concerns particularly strongly felt. Chief Cheryll Toney Holley, of the Nipmuc, pointed out that “even with protections, anyone can copy and send something” (personal interview, 2017). These quotes illustrate concerns in Northeastern Indigenous communities about “confidentiality within the currently unbounded complexity of web and social networking sites in particular. Access and dissemination through web-based platforms remains an unknown and often unregulated territory and as web-based interfaces continue to develop and change, it is crucial for scholars and communities to engage in dialogues about keeping Indigenous stories safe” (Beltran & Begun 2014:175).

A few websites I visited (the St. Regis Mohawk, the Nulhegan Abenaki, and the Penobscot; and more recently after dissertation coding was completed, the Aquinnah Wampanoag) had private portals, which may act to help protect personal and cultural
information, but through conversations with many Indigenous people at events throughout the Northeast, it is clear that there is a concern over both identity theft and cultural appropriation given the many data leaks we have all seen from even major corporations over the last several decades.

Some topics are also traditionally too sacred to be discussed openly. Describing how these are approached by Plimoth Patuxet Museums’ educationally driven Interwoven Podcast, host and Director of Education & Community Outreach for the Plimoth Patuxet Museums Hilary Goodnow states that, “particularly when I'm working with my Native colleagues I want to make sure that they are comfortable with the material that we're sharing and they have full veto rights to say if there's something that they don't want to talk about that is culturally sensitive, of course, and we respect that 100%” (personal interview, 2019). These sentiments were echoed by Plimoth Patuxet Museums’ Institutional Giving Manager and podcast co-host Tom Begley. While Goodnow and Begley are not Indigenous themselves, they were careful to respect cultural boundaries, and because Interwoven is part of the Plimoth Patuxet Museums’ educational mission, a strongly ethical approach to the podcast may also strengthen good relations for Plimoth Patuxet Museums more broadly.

A refusal to “share” Indigenous cultures might, at times, be seen as selfish or antithetical to academia and scholarship. In fact, it is an acknowledgment of ongoing power imbalances and implies an acknowledgment that Native people can put their lives and their descendants’ lives before the lives of colonizing people, a radical act of anti-colonialism and self-love. “Sharing implies equality and sovereignty at a time when sovereignty issues shape core aspects of Indigenous identity, even from the cradle”
Similarly, “Iseke reminds us that the sharing of knowledge is a gift” from one group or individual, to others (Iseke & Moore 2011:31). Therefore, any implication in academia or pop culture that Indigenous people should share their knowledges openly and freely is rooted in the colonialisst expectation and presumption that colonial desires come first, and that everything that Indigenous people have from physical property to intellectual property should be handed over to westerners.

Finally, silence can be an act of witnessing. In the Breakdances with Wolves podcast, a few episodes that focused on Indigenous women’s issues stated clearly at the beginning that two of the usual co-hosts who identify as male, Gyasi Ross and Wesley Roach, would be present in the studio but silently standing around the women speaking on that podcast episode. When asked why they made that choice, Minty LongEarth noted that “they’re conditioned to center their voice and they know that they can speak up, and they’re going to have the right to an opinion. And so what we wanted was to see, what does it look like for men to step back and still remain engaged and present?” (personal interview, 2019). The conversation between the women was also for their benefit, she notes, and they wanted to create a structure where they did not simply walk away from a women’s group and “check out.” She also added that their white male assistant had been asked to shy away from chiming in on Native issues, and “how difficult it has been for him, not to say anything” (personal interview, 2019). This idea of one gendered group standing attentively and supportively in witness of another is reminiscent of several traditional dances that can be seen at intertribal powwows today where one gender may stand around the dancing area and observe another gender’s dance, often raising fans or other regalia to honor the performers.
Given these varied uses for silence, a clear distinction must be made between silencing, an act that involves one person or group enacting power on another, and the state of silence itself, a choice with its own personal and political power dynamics at play. Western societies frequently conflate these, and groups or individuals who won’t talk have been considered shy, unconfident, antisocial, or even “dumb.” A Marxist argument, drawing additionally from the work of Guy Debord, could certainly be made that western societies have been capitalistic for so long that accumulation and filling – a building up of property, belongings, words, even airspace and the attention of other people – is considered an inherent good. We should always want more – we should want more televisions, more of our loved ones’ attention, more land, more words than those around us. “Western culture seems to want everything, to go everywhere” (Todd 2005:157). Companies certainly appear to embody this insatiable hunger, as they fight each other within the “attention economy” to ensure that they fill up our eyes and ears before other companies do.

Likewise, filming as a practice has long focused on “capturing” footage, a fairly colonialist attitude toward art. Speaking on the colonial underpinnings of film, Sterlin Harjo said “the biggest problem I see is when non-Native people come into Native communities with this idea that they are the first ones to ever look at this community with a camera—as if they have ‘uncovered’ or ‘discovered’ something. I mean, that mentality was there from the moment Columbus stepped foot on the Santa Maria. This arrogance of, ‘Whatever you have, we want to capture it, then show it to our people back home.’ Since the beginning of cinema, people have been pointing cameras at our people and our culture, and from the beginning they have been fucking it up” (Wissot 2017). Digital
media is certainly in danger of accelerating the attention economy; “the digital environment opens up the possibilities and challenges of media abundance, raising a range of key questions about listening” (Waller et al. 2015:63).

Visual sovereignty is thus not an overall push for more representations, but a statement that Indigenous communities and individuals should be able to craft their own images, to share what they choose and in the fashion they wish, and to have the power to refuse to provide fodder for others’ entertainment as well. Certainly, when Indigenous individuals and nations do speak, “refusals to listen” should be seen as an act of disrespect; but the expectation that they should provide details about themselves can be equally problematic (Waller et al 2015:57).

**Audience**

As discussed in Chapter 2, many Indigenous artists choose to incorporate Native praxis into their art in ways that may not be obvious to non-Native audiences. These techniques may be recognized by fellow tribal citizens or other Indigenous people, but are unlikely to be recognized at all by non-Native viewers, leading to a situation where Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences derive different meanings from a piece and may even disagree about classifying it as “Indigenous art.”

Houston Wood attempted to create a working definition for Native film in his book on the subject (2008). Wood took into account the film leadership (leaning toward Indigenous individuals in director positions being critical), Indigenous values incorporated into film production, Indigenous subjects being covered, and audience reception. However, there are multiple cases that complicate these components. Take, for
instance, Taika Waititi’s Marvel directorial debut, *Thor: Ragnarok*. While not a Northeastern film, it was celebrated by Native Americans and moreover, for our purposes here, is a perfect example of the difficulties of labeling a film “Native.” Ostensibly, there is very little to mark the film as Indigenous apart from Waititi in the director’s chair. However, Vika Mana, a Black and Pasifika reviewer, identified it as “a very Indigenous film” and proceeded to support this claim throughout her review, noting its use of Maori-influenced humor, Indigenous actors used in the film, the body paint used on the planet Sakaar, comparisons between Indigenous historical trauma and coping mechanisms to Valkyrie’s backstory, the replacement of Valkyrie’s name with the moniker “scrapper 142,” the speech that Odin gives about “home” as he passes away in Earth’s Norway (an actual place of origin for these mythological characters), and Valkyrie’s spaceship displaying the Tino Rangatiratanga flag colours (Mana 2017). To these points, I would add that Waititi was committed to honoring local Indigenous customs where they filmed in Australia, and ensured that young Indigenous filmmakers were trained on the set, ensuring that some of Disney’s massive filmmaking budget would provide training in media for young people who might otherwise not have that opportunity (Jasper 2017). Yet many of these aspects were not obvious to non-Indigenous, or even non-Pacifika, viewers. So is *Thor: Ragnarok* an Indigenous film? The answer seems to rely heavily on the person watching it and their experience of the film.

Indigenous artists, authors, and filmmakers in the 1990s in the United States seemed to gear their works toward non-Indigenous audiences in an attempt to educate and gain allies. Given the absolute dearth of correct educational resources on Indigenous cultures, this was an understandable and necessary use of media forms. It still has a
strong place in Indigenous creators’ reasons for creating certain pieces. Yet this puts
Indigenous creators in a fairly constrained and possibly uncomfortable position. Colin
Thomas Johnson, an Indigenous Australian author who wrote under the name
Mudrooroo, noted that “it is a curious fate to write for a people not one’s own, and
stranger still to write for the conquerors of one’s people” (Dillon 2007:232). Now, there
is more of an ability to write for Indigenous or mixed audiences, even to create pieces
like Thor: Ragnarok that can purposefully be read in multiple ways.

A particularly heartening trend of Indigenous media creators across the United
States is an enhanced ability to refuse projects that are stereotypical or appropriative. At
the National Indian Education Association Convention & Tradeshows in Hartford,
Connecticut in 2018, filmmaker Sterlin Harjo stated that he would no longer work on
Hollywood films unless he was able to take on writing duties. Expanding on this, he
pointed out the trend of being asked to join as a “cultural consultant,” only to have his
name used as a badge of authenticity while his suggestions were generally ignored. Harjo
has gone on to develop the television show Reservation Dogs, in collaboration with
longtime friend Taika Waititi. Across the country, Minty LongEarth likewise commented
that the Breakdances with Wolves podcast hosts had received offers to go on much larger
TV shows and platforms, and have frequently turned them down, preferring to broadcast
to a primarily Native audience. “What matters to us is Indian Country and who’s living in
Indian Country… that’s home and you’ve got to answer to everybody. And so we don’t
care whether CNN likes us… we do care whether Indian Country loves us” (personal
interview, 2019).
It is possible that the rise of digital media, and the ability to make money from digital productions (through sites like Patreon, fundraising campaigns on GoFundMe or Kickstarter, or online downloads and sales), have given creators the sense of freedom to turn away work that tokenizes them or exploits their cultural knowledge in service of harmful representations.

Tribal nation websites, unlike personal appearances or artistic creations, do have more complex relationships to audiences as they function as: cultural teaching sites for schools and those interested in that tribal nation’s history, news portals for local readers (including tribal members), sources of tribal history and traditional practices for tribal members, and outreach methods for building political and cultural ties to neighboring groups. Given the misunderstandings over issues such as Indigenous individuals’ fishing rights and tribal nations’ ability to enact gaming, webpages may be especially useful to explain these rights and assure non-Indigenous neighbors of a tribal nation’s willingness to work alongside them. Websites may thus demonstrate “the multiple ways that Native American interests align with the interests of non-Native people” and “could help to debunk perceived conflicts of interest,” which many of the websites examined in this study clearly attempted to do. (Davis-Delano et al. 2020:73).

**Website Analysis**

Of the tribal nation webpages that I reviewed in 2019, the Aquinnah Wampanoag had the most explicit references to outside groups, with 42.4% of all coded references to outside entities from the websites studied in this dissertation belonging to their page. The Aquinnah Wampanoag website features partnerships with other towns in areas such as environmental preservation efforts and emergency response teams that serve the entire
island. As the Aquinnah Wampanoag are a small group located on Martha’s Vineyard, an
island that has become increasingly gentrified over the last 50 years, it may be paramount
that they prioritize and clearly demonstrate their willingness and ability to work alongside
their neighbors. Working specifically with the media, the Aquinnah Tribe’s Media
Partners page states that “our media partners are welcome to reach out to us at any time
for information pertaining to happenings within the Tribe,” and invites media networks to
join their list of Media Partners. While using highly inviting language, this form of
cooperation also ultimately gives the Aquinnah Wampanoag more control over how non-
Indigenous media portray them, thus underlining their visual sovereignty over how they
are portrayed. And, it is also important to note that this group’s webpage also had one of
the highest number of references to in-group activities or programs. In addition to having
one of the most robust websites, this demonstrates both their willingness to work with
outside entities and their commitment to their own membership’s needs.

A 2007 survey found that “when tribal homepages focused on serving outsiders,
they tended to portray Indians in the image of the White man’s Indian while websites
intended for tribal members portrayed Indians in everyday modern life” (Cuillier & Ross
2007:201). This was not the case with the tribal nation websites studied in this
dissertation, which tended to blend traditional and contemporary imagery and often
addressed in-group and out-group members on the same web page. Cuillier and Ross
would refer to the webpages studied here as “voiced participant” pages, as they “included
portrayals of modern life in the tribe and described a community that has emerged from
the mythical past to function within mainstream society” (Cuillier & Ross 2007:204). The
three dimensional portrayal of contemporary Indigenous life on the webpages studied for
this dissertation may also be due to the fact that (apart from the two museum sites), these are tribally specific sites, rather than sites providing general information about Native Americans. Seikel (2016) asserted that “websites directed toward a broader audience use more stereotypical images of Native Americans, whereas sites used by a particular native community emphasize a more specific tribal identity” (Seikel 2016).

The Cuillier and Ross study from 2007 mentioned above particularly highlighted the Mashantucket Pequot tribal page as relying on stereotypical imagery in order to appeal to outsiders. Since this dissertation also examined the Mashantucket Pequot tribal webpage (at https://www.mptn-nsn.gov/default.aspx), this provides an opportunity to see how representational strategies have changed over time. While this was possibly an early strategy to legitimize their cultural connections, which had been attacked by non-Native people using racist arguments about blood quantum and purity, it seems that such a strategic use of recognizable symbols is no longer needed. For instance, on the current Mashantucket Pequot nation site, the tribal symbol is featured (bearing a tree, a fox, and the written symbol of 1600s Pequot leader Robin Cassasinnamon). The largest image is a nature photo of a fox, which ties into the Pequot’s historic identity as “the fox people” – a title unexplained on the home page but unpacked on the site’s Tribal History page (Tribal History 2021). The only other images on the nation’s home page are a wampum belt at the top of the webpage, and images associated with a downloadable 2019 economic impact survey. These images demonstrate a wide range of representations: a woman in regalia raises an American flag; a child poses in traditional regalia; a group of young adults play outside in contemporary clothing; the Pequot Museum stands outside; a teen in contemporary clothing works on a basket; and a wide range of tribal members pose on
home grounds. This collection of images encompasses traditional imagery and contemporary imagery, and includes symbols that may be confusing for outsiders (such as the fox image, or the juxtaposition of traditionalism and the American flag, which touches on the complex nature of Indigenous relations with the U.S. government and military service).

The Mashantucket Pequot tribal museum, as well, balances traditional imagery with exhibits that discuss 20th century movements within the tribe, with non-stereotypical images. In 2019, a major exhibit by photographer Matika Wilbur was housed in the museum and incorporated portraits of several well-known Northeastern Indigenous leaders, thus highlighting contemporary Native people. These different findings from the 2007 study suggest one of two processes. First, what may be seen as “stereotypical” may be interpreted differently between these two studies, and this dissertation may see historic images as traditional rather than stereotypical. Alternately, the tribal website may have shifted in the way it portrays its own cultural background and history. This speaks to the idea that even if a website seems to address outsiders, it may still seek to challenge stereotypes as an educational exercise and to encourage authentic self-representations. Websites, even directed primarily at the outside world, can impact the way that tribal members “think of themselves” (Qureshi & Trumbly-Lamsam 2008:8).

Other tribal nation sites, such as the St. Regis Mohawk, had pieces that were quite clearly targeting Mohawk community members. News stories, both related to Indigenous issues and not specific to Indigenous people (such as new traffic ordinances), was almost entirely local. Similarly, the Mashpee Wampanoag page often held information on events
taking place on Cape Cod, as well as local job opportunities, many of which would be open to anyone living in the area.

In their 2007 study, Cuillier and Ross also found that many tribal nation webpages acted as a source of information for tribal members. Their assessment was that these pages neither reinforce nor actively combat stereotypical imagery, with most being text only and simply listing “tribal officers or programs, or provid[ing] basic demographic facts” (Cuillier & Ross 2007:205). While that is true of a few tribal nation websites in the Northeast today, most of the ones examined in this dissertation were indeed more visual and did seem to counter dominant stereotypes.

For this dissertation, images across the 12 websites examined were also coded for visual cues. Three such cues were clothing type: traditional (full) regalia, regalia accessories (such as wampum earrings, a bone choker, or even a t-shirt with visible Indigenous symbolism), and non-regalia clothing (contemporary clothing with no obvious signifiers of Indigeneity). Images were also coded based on the apparent ages of the people within them. Middle-aged people (broadly defined as anyone older than a teenager and younger than approximately 65 years old) were featured most frequently (likely due to the wide age range for the category), with 484 appearances. Of those 484 images featuring one or more middle-aged persons, 411 showed people in non-regalia clothing, 112 showed people in regalia accessories, and 156 showed people in full regalia. (In some cases, 1 photo may have counted in several of these categories if, for instance, two middle aged people were photographed together, one in full traditional regalia and the other in non-regalia clothing.) Obviously, contemporary, non-regalia
clothing was featured far more heavily than clothing that would register to the public as “Indigenous.”

A look at the other age categories of photographed people shows a similar pattern. Of 239 images that seemed to picture at least one Elder, 208 of these featured people in contemporary clothing, 90 wearing regalia accessories, and 84 in full regalia. For children and young adults, there were 166 total images; of these, 139 showed people in contemporary non-regalia clothing, 21 showed regalia accessories being worn by youth, and 70 showed full traditional regalia being worn. The fact that young people were more frequently shown in full regalia at higher rates than other age groups is interesting, and may suggest a hopefulness and sense of pride in Indigenous cultures continuing through ongoing generations.

These findings – that there was such a high amount of images (1240 across the 10 tribal nation and two museum websites), and that they relied more on contemporary settings and clothing styles than obviously “Native” ones – may suggest that as social media becomes more dominant, and as web design becomes more accessible, tribal nation webpages are incorporating more visuals, as there were large numbers of photographs. It may also suggest that when visuals are incorporated, there is careful thought, perhaps a clear intention to overturn stereotypes.

Michele Seikel, looking at a wide range of Native American websites in 2016, determined that “both clearly recent and older photos were found on the sites, and these were not dated, but sometimes they were captioned with names of tribal historical figures or scenes” (Seikel 2016:41). This juxtaposition is present in the websites studied here as well. For instance, the Mohegan Nation’s web page on Mohegan Chiefs of the 20th
Century features some early 20th century leaders wearing stereotypical items like headdresses (an affectation that was often adopted out of necessity for recognition), alongside chiefs wearing baseball caps and fedoras (Mohegan Chiefs of the 20th Century 2017). These images may be educational to outsiders, but they are likely also deeply meaningful for tribal members, who may be pictured on the pages or who may have relatives and ancestors pictured on them. Mitten, in 2003, had predicted that increasingly, Native American sites would be “created by Indians, rather than about them, and with the interests and needs of Indian people in mind” (Mitten 2003: 443).

Communities with the most references to in-group activities or programs included the Mashpee Wampanoag, the Aquinnah Wampanoag, and the Penobscot (in that order). Topics that were most often directed at tribal members in particular were: genealogy and enrollment practices (with 46 co-occurrences with the tag “audience: tribal members”), legal issues and voting (34 co-occurrences), educational opportunities and scholarships (22), appearances in photographs (pictured individuals were listed explicitly as tribal members 24 times), Native community actions or activism (18), and assistance programs (17).

In addition to these topics directed specifically at tribal members, a few websites had hidden components that only tribal members could access. This is a fairly recent development. In 2004, Gina Matesic noted only one website (The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America) had areas that required special access (Matesic 2004). In 2007, Cuillier and Ross noted that casino tribes in particular had the ability to hire staff to construct websites, and in particular password-protected members-only Intranet sites (213). In 2016, Michele Seikel noted member log-in areas designed so that
websites could “address multiple audiences” appropriately (42). With ever reducing costs in web development, several tribal nations today have members-only portals. These websites, in particular the St. Regis Mohawk, the Nulhegan Abenaki, and the Penobscot, and more recently the Aquinnah Wampanoag, featured portals that called for a username and/or password and made it clear that these were issued to tribal members only. In some cases, it was clear that these were spaces where tribal citizens could upload important documents and forms and receive personal information. Yet other tribal nations utilize other platforms to maintain members-only areas of the Internet. The Nipmuc Nation, for instance, utilizes a private Facebook group that only admits tribal members. Speaking about the Nipmuc online presence, Chief Cheryll Toney Holley said that eventually, more will be geared to outsiders, but there is a greater need for materials suited for tribal members. “We have to fix things in our own communities, before helping others” (personal interview, 2017). The Nipmuc maintain many closed online communities, including Nipmuc email listservs in addition to the private Facebook pages. (While not a substitute for a tribal nation website, as Seikel theorized in 2016, this social media page is a clever substitute for an exclusive intranet, which would be somewhat technical in nature and more costly to maintain.)

However, beyond the innovative uses of technology, it’s also interesting to consider what such a marked digital space does as a declaration of Indigenous sovereignty. These in-group only sites maintain tribal nations’ visual sovereignty by denying outsiders the right to oversight. They resist “visual imperialism, the ‘‘overseeing gaze’ of encapsulating politics and transnational corporations” (Srinivasan 2006:504). A visitor to the websites that have private portals is clearly and instantly marked as
“outsider” or “insider,” and outsiders cannot access all information. Perhaps there is very little of interest in those intranet spaces – just paperwork and sensitive personal information that would mean little to most people. Yet perhaps there are things that might be of great interest – traditional stories, or images of tribal members who have passed on. What’s important is that as outsiders, we cannot know what is there. This level of privacy, marked and notable as it is, refutes the colonialist notion that Indigenous people must and should want to open their personal lives and physical spaces to those outside of their communities. These private spaces thus challenge the supposedly open nature of not only the internet, but the marketplace and academia as well. These spaces “invite reflection on the acquisition and maintenance of cultural property, as communal and at times confidential knowledge, in the age of ‘digital democracy’” (Brown & Nicholas 2012:308).

Indigenous self-representation in the digital realm serves important functions for Indigenous individuals themselves as well as for mainstream non-Native people. Just as “televised images may eventually appear to be authentic in the eyes of the viewer,” so too can digital sources be interpreted as legitimate (Lee et al. 2009:98). While this poses the now ever-present issue of misinformation, it also allows for Indigenous people to represent themselves at a scale not previously seen in media forms controlled by elite creators. Social media also allows for non-Native people to make personal connections with Indigenous content creators and whole social networks through sites like Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. In the past, forming personal relationships with Indigenous people may have been difficult in certain areas, or may have been intimidating if it involved appearing at a powwow or other cultural event with little prior
knowledge. This lack of personal interaction, in fact, heightened the mainstream media’s impact on non-Native people’s ideas about Indigenous people. “For some people with limited direct contact with other ethnic groups in social settings, television becomes a tool with which to observe minority groups and form subsequent opinions” (Lee et al. 2009:98). One potentially game-changing aspect of the internet is that personal relationships can be formed and exchanges of ideas held between Indigenous people and other Indigenous people, as well as between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. Websites and social media can invite “kids (and adults) from other parts of the globe to come over and visit and experience ‘Other’ cultural practices” (Rekhari 2009:178).

Perhaps the biggest threat to this new potential relationship among Indigenous people and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is the emergence of the attention economy. With so much data and entertainment being produced, there is now an abundance of information to be consumed. Content producers now struggle to be seen in the huge amount of information traffic, and algorithms may propel certain, already-popular or majority-group users to greater exposure over newer or minority users (an issue discussed in more detail in Chapter Five) (Heilweil 2020). Operating beyond monolithic media corporations allows for independent productions, but those productions may still be in competition with the productions of media companies who have more funding to advertise and promote their products.

Furthermore, as audiences splinter into more and more niche segments, one wonders if there will be a significant non-Native audience, or even a significant enough Native audience, to adequately support Indigenous social media, TV shows, and films,
given the “continuing fragmentation of media audiences” (Daniels 2006:321). When asked if attention spans were shortening with upcoming generations, a fear that has circulated in popular culture, Justin Beatty commented “I don’t, I think there’s a difference between not actually having the attention span and just indifference, because the stuff that people are actually into they’ll spend hours and hours and hours doing” (personal interview, 2019). The hope is that Indigenous people gain more attention, and less apathy, from mainstream industries and audiences over digital media and more mainstream forms of media production.

As critical as the question of audience is for many artists and communities, knowing exactly who their audience is was a challenge for every Indigenous and non-Indigenous creator with whom I spoke. A few were able to get direct feedback via comments, emails, or direct messages on various social media sites, and a few podcasts had access to data tracking service that showed a general physical location for their downloads, but this was a broad look at their audiences. Certainly, it was nearly impossible to tell (apart from word of mouth) whether an audience was primarily Indigenous or non-Indigenous, calling into question how to frame issues for the audience and bringing up uncertainty around, for instance, how much of a website or artistic piece should utilize recognizable icons of Indigeneity, or to what degree a production should seek to educate on Indigenous histories and cultures.

Conversations

In spite of some uncertainty around who the audience may be, several creators discussed having online discussions about their art. In general, there was a sense of satisfaction gained from meaningful conversations, whether these were with other
Indigenous people or non-Indigenous people who were genuinely interested and somewhat aware of Indigenous issues (at least, enough to avoid obviously offensive questions and statements). It has been theorized that digital and social media in particular support “shifting relations between media producers and their audiences” that “transfor[m] the concept of meaningful participation,” due to users’ “awareness of their potential capacity to participate” (Jenkins 2013:153,159).

Casey Figueroa mentioned the comments he receives on his abstract art, where “this person thinks this, or this person sees this, or this person sees this… everyone sees their own things in it” and posts their responses (personal interview, 2019). Seeing the different interpretations of his art often breathed new life into it for him. He acknowledges that there is no “wrong” way to see his art, even if people are reading into it something he didn’t consciously imbue into the piece. Digital artist and musician Justin Beatty likewise felt that the purpose of most of his art was to make viewers feel and think deeply, to move them in some way, and that multiple interpretations of a piece are not confusing but rather, welcomed.

Minty LongEarth from Breakdances with Wolves particularly relished the opportunity for growth and conversation provided by social media. She welcomes feedback from both Native listeners and non-Native listeners who disagree with her or her co-hosts’ views. She recounted one instance where a white woman messaged her and expressed that she felt her call in to the show had been misunderstood and misrepresented. “And I was so glad that she felt that she could really say, this is how I feel… but I also didn’t take it personally because I realized that I am a voice in a podcast that carries weight and has a platform” (personal interview, 2019). Minty and her cohosts
have also had disagreements with each other, which they publish. In some cases, these have led to growth, but this can take time. Minty feels strongly that cancel culture should be replaced with a culture where we can call each other out for problematic views, but also allow for learning and growth, which takes patience. “Hopefully, we all evolve” (personal interview, 2019).

Plimoth Patuxet Museums Director for Education & Community Outreach and Interwoven Podcast host Hilary Goodnow said that although they received generally positive reviews on their Facebook page, “the social media conversation is something we would like to grow… we don’t necessarily have a lot of conversations that take place over social media” (personal interview, 2019). However, the Interwoven team did note that people tended to personally connect with episodes focused on family histories, even posting about their own family trees and history in the area. The Interwoven Podcast was particularly interested in having conversations, both online and in person at their home site at Plimoth Patuxet Museums, that spurred on new ideas for episodes and addressed topics or questions about which people want to learn more. Several discussions with representatives working for Plimoth Patuxet, drawn from interactions with visitors, have been incorporated into the Podcast as full episodes.

The emphasis placed on multiple readings of art, or on allowing people outside of the creator role to offer ideas, stands in contrast to the western conception of the “lone,” “isolated,” or “reclusive” artist myth that has romantically (if somewhat inaccurately) been applied to European artists and artists in general for hundreds of years (Charney & Jaša 2020). Instead, community and communal relations are placed as primary in the creation, interpretation, and pleasure of art.
Identity Expressed through Place

While a digital media study may seem an odd space to discuss physical locations, there is a great deal of overlap between the physical and digital. Digital devices are installed into physical spaces like the Pequot Museum, and visitors to powwows carry digital devices with them and interact with them throughout the event. Place names are mapped into GPS systems and thus become more commonly recognized and used in digital and in-person contexts. We are constantly pinging between digital and physical spaces. In the course of researching the many ways that Indigenous artists, educators, community leaders and community members use digital forums and methods of communication, there were many instances where the digital and the physical coincided or had unexpected impacts on one another.

One of the most unique overlaps of the physical and the digital was through the artwork of Penobscot artist Christiana Becker. In a fascinating project, Christiana went on hikes in Maine and took pictures in places associated with the Penobscot story of the first moose hunt. Taking digital photos at these locations (Isleboro, Mt. Kineo, Big Spencer, Goose Falls Cape Rosier, Dice Head Castine), she then printed the images on fabric. The fabrics were woven together into a quilt, and the entire process was documented on a dedicated Instagram site, Venturing.Place.Names. This project, she noted, also connected her to her great grandmothers, who were quilters (personal communication, 2021). Hopefully, more of Becker’s work will be viewable online, including her stunning oral tradition woodblock series and her beadwork series (where twenty-three beadings, one for every state that has a BIE school, were beaded using roughly the same amount of
beads as the amount of Native American students that attend the BIE schools within each specific state).

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum is another highly visible example where the digital and the physical interact, as visitors approach welded-in computers that display digital information such as videos, interactive guides to plants and animals, and moving diagrams. In deciding what information to present to visitors, there was an emphasis on user interactivity and hearing Indigenous voices from Indigenous people of all backgrounds, as opposed to filtered through the research or experiences of non-Indigenous academics. This contrasts, a museum representative noted, with colonial institutions where implicit biases may lead to a more stale presentation that implies that Native people and cultures are dead and gone. Speaking about one of the gallery exhibits featuring contemporary tribal members, he added that “now they’re telling their own story” and that seeing these stories through videos rather than through items behind display cases is impactful for visitors’ perceptions of Native people as living (personal interview, 2019).

Careful consideration was similarly put into the physical spaces of the museum, down to architectural details. Speaking on this subject, a representative said that “there’s a lot of Native culture built into the architecture, even, that you would not necessarily notice. So most of the way through, there are no straight hallways, there are uneven floors. You know, the artists presented the artifacts… as how it would be used and therefore in its context” (personal interview, 2019).

Reflecting the earlier emphasis on community participation, many artists preferred some level of in-person interaction with art. When creating the Public Radio
podcast episodes focused on the Brothertown Band, in addition to in-person settings providing a better sound quality for capturing voices and drumming, the visits added a personal element. “I feel like I get a better sense of people and their story and where they’re coming from” (Alex Nunes, personal interview, 2019). Although the podcasts hosts are not Indigenous, they wanted to bring the gravity of historical places and acts into the present day through physical visits.

Another fascinating interaction between the digital and the physical is how certain spaces became preferred for social media posts. Every year, the Nipmuc powwow is held on the same grounds - the Hassanamisco Reservation and Cisco Homestead in Grafton, Massachusetts. This land base, the final piece of Nipmuc land in Grafton, Massachusetts, is also “a symbol of the continued presence of the Nipmuc people” (Gould 2010). The grounds themselves are unique in that they seem practically hand crafted for powwows, even as the increasing amount of visitors and tribal members over the generations makes for less elbow room each year. The grounds feature a circular depression where the fire is maintained and the dances conducted, and the surrounding grounds where spectators lay blankets or post chairs slowly rise, for a fine approximation of stadium seating. One area rises a bit higher than the rest, providing the literal high point of the powwow and the best view of the ceremony.

At the 2017 powwow, I observed that the foot traffic on this small hill had increased from previous years, and quickly saw why: people were walking up this hill just to take a few pictures (sometimes selfies) of the activities below, and quickly walking down again. Rarely did they take in the scene without seeing it through a smartphone. As a photo destination, the hill became so popular that at one point, a line
formed along the hill with people politely taking turns getting their photo and descending again. Many of these pictures would later appear featured on Facebook pages, proof of attendance and perhaps, a sign of cultural connectedness. Seen through the lens of a social media photo opportunity, this small hill became a desirable site for the views it could offer, and many visitors used it as an ideal “selfie” spot. Physical evidence of the spot’s popularity became apparent as, after just a few hours, a noticeably more well-worn path had been laid into the grass and dirt. While this is a much smaller “environmental impact” from selfies than other widely known tourist destinations have experienced, it is interesting to consider that such moments can happen even in local habitats.

Finally, it is worth briefly discussing the importance of Indigenous place names. Several websites seek to educate visitors about the Indigenous place names that have persisted, including the Middlebury site network, the Abenaki collective known as N'dakinna, Bates, and a CBC article (Middlebury site network, Harris 2020, Bates, CBC News 2015). Pointing out these names not only has educational value, but can politically link tribal nations to their ancestral lands. For instance, Narragansett man Randy Noka established this link in an interview where he said “the Narragansett Indian Tribe owns no coastal property, despite many of the roads that lead to Rhode Island’s shore bearing names taken from his tribe’s language. Many of the state’s shoreline villages also have Indigenous names. One of the state’s most popular coastal communities and its popular town beach are actually named Narragansett” (Carini 2021). These arguments can be leveraged in legal circumstances or to sway public opinion in favor of legitimizing Indigenous claims to access these areas.
There is also a growing movement to remove stereotypical names, and reclaim traditional place names. An effort launched in 2000 in Maine sought to rename places with the typically offensive term “squaw” in them, and succeeded in 2011. Similar movements against the word “squaw” in particular are taking place across the country, with many states and businesses voluntarily changing their names – though often after considerable education and pressure from Indigenous activists, and with some notable individual holdouts even within the state of Maine (Mossburg 2020; Winchester 2020; Jakobs 2021).

Signage in Indigenous languages – both physical and digital – are one way that Northeastern tribal groups are reasserting traditional place names. The Seneca, Onondaga and Tuscarora Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) tribal nations have road signs that are written in English and their own languages, all unique but within the Iroquoian language family. “‘Language is integral to Native culture, history and future. Signage is one facet or tool in preserving language as well as to educate the public and acknowledge Tribe's connection to the land as well as their sovereignty as nations across the country,’ said Jessica Robinson, deputy director of the Seneca Nation of Indians Department of Transportation” (Figura 2016).

H.880 (Act 174), an act in the state of Vermont, seeks to similarly add Abenaki place names alongside colonial English names. In outlining the legislative intent of the act, representative Brian Cina argues that it will “recognize that the State of Vermont exists on territory originally and currently inhabited by Abenaki people, increase visibility and awareness of the Abenaki people and culture, preserve and promote the Abenaki language, and honor the history, significance, and spirit of places” (Cina 2020). The bill was approved by the governor of Vermont in October 2020. The
Mashpee Wampanoag have signs that, while not in the Wôpanâak language, do alert visitors that they are entering Wampanoag lands.

These efforts seek to make Indigenous communities in the Northeast more visible and to firmly underscore their identities, relationship to the land, and status as contemporary sovereign nations. Discussing a mile marker erected near the Standing Rock Sioux homelands, Corachán says that “the post highlights the value of overlapping places, Native territories, epistemologies, and concerns, while intertribal coalition building, solidarity, and the urgent vindication of sovereignty through visual resignification gain center stage” (2017:69). These assertions of place are making their way online, as Google began showing tribal boundaries on Google Maps in 2020 (Smith 2020). The place names erected online and in person throughout the Northeast similarly establish a connection between Indigenous communities and traditional homelands, and assert their right to take leadership in representing this relationship.

**Conclusion: A Break with Stereotypes**

Visual sovereignty (and cultural sovereignty more broadly) is exercised by Indigenous individuals as well as tribal nations and communities in the Northeastern United States through the production of such digital creations as official websites, blogs, podcasts, music sharing sites, and social media posts. Leighton Peterson has written that “visual sovereignty is a broad concept encompassing specific acts of self-representation by indigenous media producers in a variety of political, economic, and cultural contexts, where contemporary media practices are in dialogue with the past, leading to cultural healing,” and that visual sovereignty “puts the focus on acts of agency by indigenous producers” (Peterson 2014:251). While artistic productions created by Indigenous people
obviously fall under this definition and “provide opportunities for self-representation through uploading stories, sounds, and images,” so too do websites, and these may have the additional impact of being acknowledged by Native and non-Native viewers alike as authentic educational resources as well (Waller et al. 2015:61).

Some scholars have suggested that Indigenous groups have been complicit in stereotyping themselves by using hackneyed imagery in their own creations (Cuillier & Ross 2007; Schwarz 2013). However, this examination of digital art and web sites from the Northeast shows a thoughtful and nuanced set of representations. Traditional imagery is juxtaposed with contemporary imagery, usually on the same web page or within the same picture. For instance, tribal members were often photographed wearing a blend of traditional regalia (buckskin, wampum jewelry, beadwork, feathers, etc) alongside contemporary mainstream clothing such as jeans, t-shirts, and business suits, as discussed above. Lisa Mitten wrote in 2003 that “Indians have embraced the Internet and the opportunity to tell the world who we are on our own terms in a big way,” and in the Northeastern United States, it seems that this has only become more true with time (Mitten 2003:443). One aspect of tribal nation websites that has stayed the same over the last two decades appears to be general topics: “genealogy, tribal history, native language, employment opportunities, community events, tribal government structure and contacts, health services, economic development, and support for members of the military” (Anderson 2003:451).

Increasingly, Indigenous people are seeing the benefits of presenting their own stories and images, exercising visual sovereignty. Indeed, if the trends observed in this dissertation continue, allowing Indigenous people to control their own representations
will reduce stereotypical imagery and misrepresentations. The ability to easily create tribal nation websites, not to mention Twitter accounts, Tiktok channels, Facebook pages, and more, will increasingly provide “community members the opportunity for authentic self-representation in media which can work to counter negative stereotypes often portrayed in mainstream media outlets (Pack, 2000)” (Beltran & Begun 2014:162). “The downside to this expanding mediasphere is the pressure it places on Indigenous media producers, whether they produce traditional or user-generated content, in relation to workloads and funding” as well as capturing user attention (Burrows 2016:10). Having a wider range of Native content creators, which is feasible as technology becomes simpler to operate, can help alleviate this pressure and allow for a wider variety of Indigenous voices to be heard (though, of course, some disagreement may be produced, and could produce claims that are contentious or confusing to outsiders).

The ability for more people to post about Indigenous issues also opens the question of what to do about non-Indigenous people who wish to discuss Native issues or portray not only Indigenous characters in their works – which (if done accurately and sensitively) is generally lauded by Native people – but Indigenous stories, including traditional mythological tales. Speaking about non-Indigenous artists, Minty LongEarth argued that “I think it’s time to step aside. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with collaborating in terms of perhaps providing capital or you know, access. But I think that there are plenty of stories that non-Natives can tell about their own world. And there are tons and tons and tons of stories that Native people can tell from a Native perspective. Just because you are fascinated with Native people doesn’t mean that you get to come in and put your stamp on Native stories and Native life and Native culture” (personal
Other authors have pointed out, similarly, that there was perhaps once a time and place where such works were valuable in the overall struggle for Indigenous visibility. Speaking of non-Indigenous authors Greg Young-Ing, who helped establish what is now the older Indigenous publishing company in Canada (Theytus Books) and wrote the first comprehensive guide on Indigenous editing style best practices, wrote that “some of these writers must be credited with increasing public awareness; however, while much of this body of work has observational and analytical value, it cannot express Indigenous cultures and worldviews, nor can it express Indigenous peoples’ unique internal perspective on historical and contemporary, political and cultural issues” (Young-Ing 2005:181). In an interview with William Lempert, filmmaker Sterlin Harjo, a Seminole Nation citizen with Muskogee heritage, emphasized the importance of Indigenous people in main creative roles: ‘There are a lot of dangerous things that happen when someone is not telling their own story. In a sense, Indians just become props in the films’” (Lempert 2012:23). Nearly everyone with whom I spoke agrees that, apart from allies’ ability to support and spread awareness of pressing social issues, now is the time for Indigenous people to be given priority when it comes to telling Indigenous stories.

At the same time, Minty was quite welcoming to allies who truly wanted to collaborate meaningfully. “I’ve seen people doing things in a really, really good way that are non-Native community members who have, you know, served as educators and contributors in all kinds of different ways, in wonderful ways, and haven’t needed to appropriate anything” (personal interview, 2019). Every Indigenous person who I know feels similarly – that while they may be somewhat rare or hard to find, there are genuine non-Indigenous allies who are often embraced by whole Indigenous communities.
Storytelling allows for survival, of individuals and communities. “Storytellers and artists must express their visions for the people to see. Then we will make history, not be history” (Beaucage 2005:141). Seeing someone like yourself represented in media “gives you permission to tell your story, but also to love yourself, to accept yourself and to not isolate yourself” (Minty LongEarth, personal interview, 2019). Nipmuc storyteller and activist Larry Spotted Crow Mann, in his Warner Free Lecture sponsored by Harvard University, expressed concern about the stories young Native people have internalized: “what story do we tell ourselves? we’re nobody, we don’t belong,” he said, noting that the antidote to these disheartening stories is a return to traditional values and stories to see how they can contribute to our lives today (2021, We Are The Story, We Are The Land). As Indigenous people reassert their right to tell stories about themselves, to themselves and to others, they are simultaneously bolstering their sense of self and declaring their sovereignty within the powerful realm of visual and audible representations.
CHAPTER 4

EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL: A SPIRALING MODEL OF EDUCATION

Introduction: Challenges to Answer

Indigenous individuals and communities in the United States are, according to nearly every assessment, severely misunderstood by their non-Indigenous neighbors. Misunderstandings and stereotypes emerge from institutional education in public and private school systems as well as mainstream representations of Indigenous people, including digital representations. In response, Indigenous creators frequently endeavor to intervene in these stereotypical depictions and create their own more culturally accurate depictions, for outsiders and for themselves, that also place them in a contemporary context. In this chapter, I will outline some of the ways that Indigenous media creators are endeavoring to rise to these challenges, then provide an expanded framework for understanding how digital media contributes to educational goals using Aquinnah Wampanoag educator Linda Coomb’s spiraling model of education as a guide.

In Canada, “almost no non-Aboriginal institution of higher learning requires knowledge of Aboriginal culture or history for the acquisition of professional credentials for mainstream cultural practice” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:195). The situation is much the same in the United States; what education exists largely focuses on Indigenous people in the past, and either subtly or expressly paints a picture of Indigenous people as extinct (Shadowwalker 2012). It is little wonder that a representative from the Mashantucket Pequot Museum commented that when children ask questions, even to Indigenous guides, they often begin with “back when the Indians lived,” despite their tour guide being an
Indigenous person who stated their identity at the beginning of the tour (personal interview, 2019). Clearly, once the concept of Indigenous people as belonging to the past takes hold, it is difficult for individuals to overcome this even when face to face with a Native American person. Indigenous people therefore constantly come into contact with non-Native people who presume them extinct, which can be a demoralizing experience. On top of that, an Indigenous individual may feel that it is then their responsibility to educate the person on Indigenous persistence, even if they have no time, inclination, or background in teaching methods.

In addition to creating an uninformed non-Indigenous population, formal educational programs that either ignore or proffer stereotypes of Indigenous people – two processes that Fryberg and Eason describe as “omissions” and “commissions” that colonial populations use to justify colonization – also harm Indigenous students in the classroom (Fryberg & Eason 2017). Omissions have been shown to reduce a sense of belonging for Indigenous students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Speaking about the history taught in both school classrooms, Chief Cheryll Toney Holley commented that “in history books, usually the history of this area begins with the Pilgrims, but we’ve been here for thousands of years before that and usually only get a brief mention” (personal interview, 2017). Nipmuc storyteller Larry Spotted Crow Mann, recalling his own childhood during an online public event, noted that in his school the curriculum skipped over a rich local Indigenous history and thus made him feel that Native people had never accomplished anything or did anything of note. He remembers how this portrayal of history made him feel like “a hapless bystander, benefitting from proximity” to white people (2021, We Are The Story, We Are The Land, Warner Free Lecture). If “it
is history that creates identity,” then having access to histories that reflect ourselves is

The messages that children receive within the school system are reinforced by
mainstream media, ranging from news reports to TV to films. The omission of
Indigenous characters is glaring, with any sighting of an Indigenous character being a
rarity on mainstream TV. “Whereas Native people make up 1.5 percent of the total U.S.
population, they constitute only 0.3 percent of all entertainment characters, two-thirds of
whom are supporting or background characters” (Kopacz & Lawton 2011:243). Native
Americans are particularly absent from contemporary-set television shows and films.
Native Americans are also virtually invisible on mainstream news outlets. Even when
local news channels have relatively substantial numbers of Native Americans living in
their coverage area, American news stations rarely cover Native individuals or issues
(Poindexter et at 2003). Even an event as momentous in Indian Country as the Standing
Rock Water Protection gained little national coverage until social media outlets and the
spread of the issue by Native Americans online forced attention to it. “Some blame the
news media for failing to report fair, accurately and timely reports about what is really
going on in Indian country… In his survey of Native American journalism presented at a
symposium in the early 1980s, Murphy argued that the Native American press often were
the only ‘alternative to white ignorance, neglect and stereotype of Indian people’”
(Daniels 2006:326,330). This erasure of Indigenous issues perpetuates the idea that
Indigenous people no longer exist in any meaningful way, which reduces possibilities for
allyship and understanding, as well as a sense of belonging for Indigenous people. It also
centers the voices of non-Indigenous, often colonial populations over the voices of the
first peoples of this land. “The historical narratives and stereotypes of indigenous peoples circulated by mainstream producers in a range of media, including television, contribute to the erasure of indigenous views and voices in history, perpetuating colonial narratives” (Peterson 2014:247).

When Indigenous people do appear on screen, for instance, in television shows and films, they frequently appear in stereotypical ways (Berkhofer 1978; Stedman 1982; Bird 1996). A study by Lee et al. also found that heavy television viewing appeared to result in more negative ethnic perceptions, including for Native Americans (Lee et al. 2009). A recent study of television shows and films commonly recalled by non-Native members of the public likewise found that both media forms had high levels of stereotypical behavior and phenotypes for Indigenous characters, downplayed the importance of Indigenous women by largely excluding Indigenous female characters, and rarely offered any direct challenges to stereotypes (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). “Serving as key sources of information about Native Americans for most people, media messages perpetuate distorted beliefs about this group and contribute to real-world discrimination” (Kopacz & Lawton 2011:241).

The possibility that digital media, particularly media shared over the internet, may correct these false representations is a hopeful one, and certainly a goal to which many tribal nations are aspiring. For instance, 2011 study of YouTube videos featuring Native Americans found notable departures from the stereotypical aspects of mainstream media portrayals of Indigenous people, including videos that made Native characters central, placed them in a contemporary context and attire, affirmed the existence of racial
discrimination, and maintained neutral or positive attitudes toward Native characters (Kopacz & Lawton 2011).

At the same time, such videos and detailed tribal nation websites are in conflict with websites that proffer conflicting, false information. “Information about American Indians posted on non-Indian websites can reflect erroneous information and repeat the history of misinformation and falsehoods” (Filippi et al. 2013:487). Many websites reproduce stereotypical and inaccurate information simply because the website creators themselves are misinformed. “Web developers reproduce discourses evident in broader society about culture within their web sites. Users of web sites encounter these discourses” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:198). This is an important point for consideration, as some scholars put faith in the structure of the Internet itself to help correct years of highly socialized beliefs about Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people. Just as correct information can spread online, so can misinformation – perhaps even more easily, since misinformation and stereotypes are likely to trigger a confirmation bias in many viewers, and since social media and search algorithms tend to present results based on a user’s previous online activity. Even when the process is hailed as entirely democratic, this may result in the vast majority of non-Indigenous audiences choosing unreliable sources that confirm their stereotypical viewpoints. The fact that online, “the audience determines whether the perspectives presented are of value or not,” can be a dangerous and frustrating reality for Indigenous people (Burrows 2016:11). For instance, in 2013 Nancy Parezo found that “a search on ‘American Indian’ and ‘image’ on the Internet will reveal the classic stereotypes as well as images of real people,”
perhaps entrenching the stereotypes as valid, since they are seen alongside accurate images (Parezo 2013:341).

One way of countering this trend might be a partnership with educators. Since both education and mainstream media forms help create ignorance, ideally they could also work in tandem to offer more accurate information about Indigenous peoples. If teachers emphasize students using Indigenous-created sites and academic sources for their research, rather than sites and scholarly works written about Indigenous people by non-Indigenous authors, this would start pushing students toward Indigenous sources in spite of algorithms and biases that would otherwise push them away from those sources. “Surely the most direct and accurate information about Native Americans is that obtained from Indian people themselves” (Mitten 2006:1342). Of course, this presumes that teachers are allowed to teach anything about Indigenous people at all – an issue over which they typically have little control. Thus, it is imperative that teachers, students, parents, and anyone interested in a more informed citizenry politically support teachers’ ability to address subjects like Indigenous cultures, the history of colonization, and environmental issues.

There is also the question of audience desire and how this drives algorithms. If upcoming generations consciously acknowledge their biases and work to push through them, hungry for non-stereotypical depictions of Indigenous people, they will find them online from Indigenous creators. Ideally, Indigenous creators will be sought online in this organic way, and through either direct, explicit challenges to stereotypes or by simply being contemporary, complex Indigenous people, will help educate their followers.
Some of these online entertainers may, in time, receive some support from mainstream media. For instance, fans of Seminole and Muscogee Creek director Sterlin Harjo may have seen him in the 1491s YouTube skits and may also follow his mainstream television productions, *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs*. Mainstream directors may also use social media as educational tools. Taika Waititi, of Maori descent, who is also involved in *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs*, as well as major Disney-associated productions (Star Wars and Marvel), is also active on Twitter with 1.4 million followers (as of September 2021). In addition to humorous posts, he has used his online presence to share information about Indigenous stereotypes and people, share new academic discoveries verifying Indigenous histories, and lend support to Indigenous movements like Standing Rock.

In sum, there are many “overt, institutionalized, systemic, and subliminal messages that maintain the image of Aboriginal culture as an unwelcome, uncooperative, and disabled other – if they get any messages about Aboriginal people at all” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:194). These messages translate into real world effects. “There is considerable evidence that being stereotyped hurts groups and individuals,” in part by “placing them on the outskirts of society and stripping them of political power and social significance in their homelands” (Parezo 2013; Kopacz & Lawton 2011:244). If we choose to look, “we can see their effects in Supreme Court decisions, standardized educational test results, how people are treated in stores, when Native peoples are denied equitable access to institutions or are labeled deficient in some way owing to their assumed nature (Deloria & Wildcat 2001; DesJarlait 1993; Fryberg et al. 2008; Mihesuah 1996; Pewewardy 1998; Williams 2005, 2012)” (Parezo 2013:318).
Responses to Stereotypes and the Historical Record

Because of these overarching negative messages (and the overwhelming lack of Indigenous representations), Indigenous tribal nation, community, and museum websites have a range of educational goals that they seek to achieve. They must correct the misinformation that proliferates in some formal educational settings, in traditional forms such as newspapers, television, and film, and in new/digital media such as websites.

“ Websites provide Indian nations the opportunity to communicate to millions of people – in their own words and images – how they want to be viewed, potentially dispelling negative stereotypes and combating centuries of prejudice” (Cuillier & Ross 2007:198).

This may be one reason why Indigenous websites have appeared to proliferate over time. Lisa Mitten found only a few dozen websites in her 1995 study, but today, every tribal nation in the Northeast has their own website, and frequently also have presences on social media sites (Mitten 1995).

Official websites, especially those with a sleek graphic design, also help confer cultural and political legitimacy to tribal nations and their governing structures. With this in mind, these webpages bear a heightened responsibility for how they represent Indigeneity. “As official tribal websites, the information is afforded extra credibility” (Cuillier & Ross 2007: 212). Tribal nations may thus feel additional pressure to create professional-looking websites, and even to provide educational resources on them as part of a larger effort to improve Indigenous studies in schools. The Mohegan tribal nation website, for instance, offers ready-made lesson plans for teachers, and notes that in addition to these free lesson plans, “the Mohegan Cultural Outreach department can present material in the classroom” (Native American Lesson Plans 2017). The Mohegan
have also regularly hosted the Teacher of the Year reception, an event where teachers are honored and then “learn to incorporate Mohegan history and culture into their curriculum in a Professional Development session,” and have offered Mohegan Tribe Challenge Grants to teachers willing to incorporate themes relevant to the Mohegan Museum into their teaching. The Mashpee, as well, offer lists of Indigenous-created films and the grade levels for which they are appropriate (demonstrating a spiraling method of building awareness of Indigenous histories, discussed more below), as well as optional screenings with a knowledgeable tribal member.

Indigenous websites analyzed for this study explicitly discussed tribal histories, which is a trend that was observed even ten years ago (Fish 2011). For the 10 tribal nation websites analyzed (listed in Appendix A), each had a history section, sometimes with multiple pages or outside links. In the below chart, the number of historical references per website is detailed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aquinnah Wampanoag</th>
<th>Kanatsiohareke Mohawk</th>
<th>Meshkontucket Pequot</th>
<th>Meshpee Wampanoag</th>
<th>Mohegan</th>
<th>Narragansett</th>
<th>Nipmuc</th>
<th>Nulhegan Abenaki</th>
<th>Penobscot</th>
<th>St. Regis Mohawk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Indigenous History and Education</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th century and older</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th century</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th century</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st century</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Historical encounters</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European/Turner American Historical encounters</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total historical references</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total coded sections for entire website</td>
<td>1553</td>
<td>1352</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>2230</td>
<td>1606</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>1589</td>
<td>2434</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of website devoted to history</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Charted historical references by website.

When coding for historical references, if a reference discussed a particular time period, it was only coded for that time period. When the reference was not specific to a
time period – such as a mention of harvesting as a “historical practice” – then the “General Indigenous History and Education” code was applied. Thus, the General Indigenous History and Education code would never be applied along with a particular time period code (the time periods being 18th century and older, 19th century, 20th century, and 21st century). In addition to specific time periods, I also coded for encounters with African descent people and European descent people. These codes frequently were combined with time period codes. Codes were applied to whole history pages, but also to mentions of history in other areas of tribal nation websites. Total number of code applications for the entire websites are provided below, which allows us to determine what percentage history as a subject takes up for each community’s site. It should be noted that the Nipmuc website at the time had several sections under construction, which likely impacts its numbers, and that the Narragansett had additional history located on the Tomaquag Museum website, which is associated with the tribe.

When addressing tribal history, Indigenous websites in the Northeast are careful to present a range of time periods including 21st century history, which is often ignored by mainstream histories. Additionally, as charts show below, time periods were fairly evenly distributed by tribal nation, although the Mohegan simply had a greater amount of history on their webpage, for every time period.
Figure 5: Spread of 18th century and older references across websites.

Figure 6: Spread of 19th century references across websites.
Area museums, and their digital outreach, also consciously grapple with inaccurate histories and pop culture understandings of Indigenous people in the Northeast. The Tomaquag Museum, in addition to in-person and (after the pandemic)
virtual tours, also provides free curriculum resources. On its history page, the Tomaquag Museum states its mission is “to educate the public and promote thoughtful dialogue regarding Indigenous history, culture, arts, and Mother Earth and connect to Native issues of today” and to move into the future as “an Indigenous Cultural Education destination that engages visitors in thoughtful dialogue that promotes understanding and strives to create experiences that transform people's lives by broadening their perspectives, attitudes, and knowledge of Indigenous Cultures and the interrelationship with the wider world” (History). The museum has a friendly historical relationship with formal education and anthropology in particular (which is notable). The museum began in 1958 as a collaboration between Mary E. Glasko, also known as Princess Red Wing, and her friend and anthropologist Eva Butler (History n.d.). It would move places several times and have several periods of partial programming, but has persisted to today. The Tomaquag Museum also acted as a source for the Public Radio series on Samson Occom, discussed more below. The connection between this podcast and the museum further emphasizes the interconnected nature of Indigenous media producers and the Indigenous scholarship community within the Northeast, as major institutions such as Tomaquag and the individuals who staff it are extremely well known entities.

One fascinating aspect of museum practice at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum is their early and ongoing melding of digital technology and physical spaces. To begin with, the physical space of the museum diverts from the typical colonial museum shape of square rooms; according to a museum representative, the Mashantucket Pequot Museum was designed instead to have “Native culture built into the architecture… most of the way through, there are no straight hallways, there are uneven floors… so that the
historical art is cast as if it’s living, and how it would be used in its context” (museum representative, personal interview, 2019). Speaking with the same museum representative about the early development of the exhibits, I was told that the creators “really wanted to add just about everything to the experience that they could… the thinking with the exhibits was to make them as immersive and as interactive as possible and in a very permanent fashion” (personal interview, 2019). This desire was born from an educational standpoint as well as from the traditional practice of valuing elders.

From the educational perspective, it was pointed out to me by museum staff that the computer displays were added so that “someone could spend up to an hour at just one of these computers, really digging into the detail… some people are that inquisitive” (personal interview, 2019). For the headsets, multiple languages are included to allow for the inclusion of as many people as possible. Yet despite the innovative use of physical space and digital supplements, it was paramount to the museum that every aspect of the space be extremely handicap accessible, going beyond what is required by state or federal laws and making the experience truly equitable for visitors of all abilities. Stated one representative, “they thought about the elders, the grandmas coming through here… we wanted to make sure that people that were disabled in any shape or fashion would have the opportunity to immerse themselves, and make sure that they’re not being excluded” (personal interview, 2019). Similar considerations for people who do not speak English as a first language or who have sight issues were noted as part of a digital repatriation project, Ara Irititja, in Australia (Ginsburg 2016:587).

This thoughtful interplay between the physical space of the museums and their digital spaces, each of which visitors can choose to visit, is an early case study
underscoring the contention that “increasingly, our built and natural environments are becoming hybrids of real and digital entities where objects, buildings and landscapes are linked online in websites, blogs and texts” (Marques et al. 2019:193). This space also exhibits in practice the creation of a “media cosmology” that “embraces an Indigenous view of media and its attendant processes that incorporates language, culture, technology, land, spirituality, and histories” (Loft 2014:xvi). Many people will only visit the Tomaquag or Mashantucket Pequot Museums’ websites, some will only visit these institutions in person, and some will visit both. Therefore, both spaces must work to combat stereotypes and educate visitors and, ideally, give an entry point for understanding an Indigenous point of view.

“For museum professionals, one way to fight stereotyping’s cultural blindness, logical fallacies, and erroneous assumptions was to show people ‘real’ indigenous art and material culture – tangible items that could be seen if not touched” (Parezo 2013:324). While the Mashantucket Pequot Museum does intend to counter misinformation with facts, it goes a step further and asks visitors to consider both the past and the future – and even allows in-person guests to reach out and touch several exhibits. This museum has recently been looking into virtual reality tours of the museum, to allow for international outreach and, ideally, make teachers and students more interested in visiting in-person. Again, the museum is looking to the future in terms of museum outreach and technology. “Employing augmented reality (AR), a new relationship can be created through the re-introduction of narratives using visual and aural elements that simulate people’s imagination of a hidden past” (Marques et al. 2019:194).
However, as with many non-Indigenous museums, funding has a profound effect on digital outreach, especially as the digital scene changes so quickly. When posts are provided through main museum websites, they do often rack up views; for instance, a 2015 video on making a mishoon canoe from the Mashantucket Pequot Museum garnered over 4,000 views, while a video produced by Scholastic and filmed in part at Plimoth Patuxet called *The Wampanoag Way*, shown in many classrooms, now has 892,250 views on YouTube (as of September 2021). This video stems from an over 20-year collaboration between Plimoth Patuxet and Scholastic, which has produced popular children’s books, videos, and virtual field trips. “The partnership now reaches one in three elementary school students through Scholastic’s news magazine and free online resources. Scholastic estimates that 31 million school children have seen Plimoth Patuxet’s electronic field trips since 2009, while the Museum’s short films made with Scholastic have been seen by roughly 4 million children” (Hilary Goodnow, personal communication 2021).

Additionally, because of their commitment to education on Indigenous issues, many museum staff members’ identities have become tied into the museums for which they work. Mashantucket Pequot museum workers confirmed that when friends and community members are trying to get information on an event, they will reach out to personal email and social media accounts nearly as frequently as museum accounts – and the museum staff graciously respond, even during their down time, seeing it as fulfilling a higher purpose. While this is extremely laudable, it is also a reminder to all researchers working with Indigenous people that Indigenous individuals often have more demands on
their time due to their unpaid service to their communities, whether that be through cultural arts, activist efforts, or education of non-Indigenous people (Atalay 2012).

Podcasts

Official tribal nation and museum websites, and university sites, are not the only Indigenous-created content aiming to center Indigenous voices and overturn stereotypes. Several Northeastern podcasts (as well as podcasts that are generated outside the U.S. Northeast but have gained popularity here due to communal ties) seek to drive home the point that Indigenous peoples are still here, were never primitive or savage, and are a diverse assemblage of cultures, languages, and practices.

One of the most prominent podcasts, due to being hosted by Plimoth Patuxet Museums, is Interwoven, hosted by Plimoth Patuxet Museums Director for Education & Community Outreach Hilary Goodnow with production assistance from Plimoth Patuxet Museums Institutional Giving Manager Tom Begley. The podcast began in 2015 as a supplement to a larger living history event at Plimoth Patuxet, a recreation of the wedding of William and Alice Bradford in 1623, so that visitors and listeners could understand the underlying academic processes behind researching and recreating such an event. Since then, the podcast has expanded to cover happenings at Plimoth Patuxet as well as local tribal events, cutting edge Indigenous academic research, and national and international Indigenous concerns alongside more general colonial histories. Listeners might hear “conversations about Mayflower Compact, 17th-century agriculture, Elizabethan political drama, Mayflower II's restoration, or comparing women's roles and lives in Wampanoag and 17th-century English communities alongside commentary about Wampanoag diplomacy and wampum” (Hilary Goodnow, personal communication
2021). Although Goodnow and Begley are not members of any Indigenous community, the podcast serves to incorporate Indigenous people into colonial history, rather than have Indigenous histories relegated as a footnote. The podcast’s goals, outlined on iTunes and SoundCloud, include “exploring the ways stories weave through generations, communities, and cultures to inform our contemporary lives. Rooted deep in the 17th century, Interwoven expands beyond the relationships between the Wampanoag people and the Pilgrims to discuss larger cross-cultural interactions of the varied people who lived along these shores of change.”

One aspect of the in-person Wampanoag home site at Plimoth Patuxet, as well as all of the site’s traditional and living history exhibits, that was intentionally carried over into the podcast was a willingness to discuss all topics, including acts of genocide that occurred (for instance, military engagements during King Philip’s War in the late 1600s). Mashpee Wampanoag tribal member Darius Coombs, who managed the Wampanoag Indigenous Program at Plimoth Plantation from 1992-2015 before being appointed Director of Wampanoag and Eastern Woodlands Interpretation and Training, acknowledged that this is a task that not everyone, including not all Indigenous individuals, are necessarily up to: “It’s a big responsibility, especially if it’s the first time that they know of that they’ve ever seen or talk to a Native person, and you have to be able to talk about these subjects without getting upset… some people say ‘I can’t do that,’ and that’s fine. The reason they can’t do that is that it’s still an open wound today” (personal interview, 2019). Darius Coombs has been an exhibits consultant for the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center and the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian, as well as a historical adviser and on-camera expert for PBS,
History Channel, and Smithsonian Channel productions. Given his experience, Mr. Coombs has an in-depth understanding of the emotional work that Indigenous educational initiatives involve. Underscoring this, on the topic of teaching past stereotypes, Joseph Bruchac said “it is still out there. It's something we still have to deal with. We still have to be… I think we have to be kind. We have to be calm. We also have to be strong. And those three things will take you a long way. And then fourth thing is patience” (personal interview, 2021).

The Interwoven podcast, the Plimoth Patuxet physical site managed by Plimoth Patuxet Museums, and area universities are strongly connected. Many of the podcast’s guests are local scholars on Indigenous history and/or colonial history, and the podcast itself is part of Plimoth Patuxet’s educational initiatives. Says podcast host Hilary Goodnow, “if we don’t know the scholar already, usually we know someone who does, so we can reach out to them through our friends in different universities” (personal interview, 2019). Furthermore, when some scholars visit the famous physical site – a 129-acre campus that features traditional indoor museum exhibits as well as outdoor living history exhibits – for their own research purposes and engage in talks with the staff, they may then be tapped to be part of the series, especially the podcast’s Modern Native Voices feature. Some of these podcast guests are from tribal nations in the western United States, and there is often an emphasis on sharing innovative strategies for strengthening Indigenous cultural systems through these discussions.

When I asked what some of the key takeaways from the Interwoven podcast would be, podcast host Hilary Goodnow answered that her hope was that “we help our listeners and our visitors to the museum fully grasp the idea that Indigenous people are
part of our present as much as they are part of our past – that these cultures and communities and people still exist and they evolve and adapt and change over time, as any culture and society does” (personal interview, 2019).

Although not dedicated to Indigenous issues, The Public’s Radio out of Providence, Rhode Island commenced an extensive series focused on Samson Occom and the history of the Brothertown Indian Nation. The non-Indigenous creators of this podcast, Ana Gonzalez and Alex Nunes, initially began with a look at immigration, but felt that their series must necessarily begin with a focus on Indigenous peoples.

Both Interwoven and Public Radio heavily rely on Indigenous academics in the Northeastern area and beyond for their series (including, for Interwoven, Plimoth Patuxet’s own staff cultural experts and historians). Other local podcasts that are not focused on Native themes or even educational themes will occasionally make space for local Indigenous issues; for instance, Soft Serve podcast, hosted in Belchertown, Massachusetts, generously allowed me to be a guest to speak about the Belchertown Racial Justice Collaborative’s iSHAPE Massachusetts project and encouraged all listeners to take part.

In addition to these and other local podcasts, many Indigenous people listen to a broader array of podcasts. The nature of digital media is that it is extremely spreadable, and with increasingly global connections between Indigenous communities and individuals, personal connections to podcasts being broadcast over 2,000 miles away can be formed. “The accessibility of podcast is worldwide” (Goldman 2018:9). Such is the case for Breakdances with Wolves; after co-host Gyasi Ross visited the Northeast many times for educational functions, his co-created podcast hosted in Seattle caught on with
many Northeastern podcast listeners and thus was included in the dissertation despite being hosted in the Pacific Northwest.

Breakdances with Wolves, unlike the previous two podcasts, is focused solely on contemporary Indigenous concerns. However, like the other podcasts, they heavily rely on informal and academic networks of Indigenous people to create their guest lists. Co-host Minty LongEarth explained to me, “a lot of people are people we’ve known for years, that we’ve just been excited to have come on and tell their story” (personal interview, 2019).

Although podcasts were not necessarily conceived as educational tools, there is a growing interest in using them in formal educational settings. Ana Gonzalez and Alex Nunes of Public Radio mentioned that several professors have mentioned that their series on Samson Occom should be taught in schools. In fact, a summer program at Brown University had students listen to the first three episodes of the series as part of their education on Northeastern Indigenous history. Even more personal podcasts can be “a digital learning tool with practical value in classroom environments” (Goldman 2018:3). As this practice continues, we may see a growing body of media made to purposefully fit into an “edutainment” model.

Social Media and Websites

Many communities are also turning to social media, in both informal and formal ways. As of August 2021, the Mashpee TV channel on Youtube has 1.12 thousand subscribers, and covers both local happenings in general, videos geared toward Indigenous audiences such as interviews with tribal Elders, and educational videos about
Indigenous issues for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, such as “The Breakdown: Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Land in Trust,” posted in February 2020. While this video is still likely aimed at educating an Indigenous audience (based on the comment “as we should all know, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe was federally recognized in 2007”), it also has great potential for educating non-Mashpee viewers as well.

I analyzed comments under the video and found that this helped make clear the larger range of viewers; one commenter noted that they attended Mashpee High School in the 1990s and still had respect for the tribe; another asked why they had to fight for land that was originally theirs anyway; and yet another railed against the ridiculousness of a tribe having to be recognized by the federal government. (Note that I summarize comments to help protect commenters’ identities, even though they are public comments.) The comments as a whole peaked in March 2020, as shown in the chart below, and had a heavy emphasis on the Mashpee as an Indigenous tribe, as shown by the following word frequency chart.
Figure 9: Comment history on “The Breakdown: Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Land in Trust” YouTube video.

Figure 10: Word frequency chart for “The Breakdown: Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Land in Trust” YouTube video.
The comments seem to indicate that several local allies watched the video. Disappointingly, some comments also made sexist, harassing remarks about the appearance of the young Indigenous woman who hosted the segment. The existence of these videos focusing on Indigenous issues is largely the product of Talia Landry, a Mashpee Wampanoag citizen who “helped create a partnership between the tribe and television station so tribal events are documented by video to be broadcasted and then saved in the tribal archives” (Mashpee Wampanoag Community Development Corporation). Another Mashpee Wampanoag citizen, Savannah Maher, who also originally worked in local media, has gone on to report for Wyoming Public Radio, paying particular attention to Indigenous issues there (Wyoming Public Radio 2020).

Despite being an older website at this point, the Four Directions Teachings site still provides valuable and vetted information, and comments from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers showed appreciation for its content. Non-Indigenous users in particular seemed relieved to have a reliable source of cultural information, and to be able to access it without the risk of saying something inappropriate or sounding uninformed in the presence of a Native American person (Wemigwans 2008:36).

There are also activist attempts throughout the Northeastern United States that lie outside of formal educational initiatives, which are nevertheless aimed at creating change in educational policies and addressing commonly held misconceptions about Indigenous people. These are led by both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous allies intent on raising awareness of local tribal nation issues and broader Native American issues through targeted educational initiatives. There are too many of these to list exhaustively, but I can gesture to several notable examples. These include the March 4th 2020 panel on
intergenerational trauma hosted by The Truth School, an activist group that trains social justice leaders to actualize movements. There is also the Northeast Indigenous Climate Resilience Network, which supports tribal sovereignty and the rights of tribes to utilize climate change resources in order to preserve their ecologies and support their traditional practices (Northeast Indigenous Climate Resilience Network 2021). The United American Indians of New England generally fights for Native issues but is most well-known for their involvement in the Day of Mourning (held on Thanksgiving each year) and for challenging “the racism of the Pilgrim mythology perpetuated in Plymouth” (Who We Are 2021). Some of these groups and events seek to educate non-Native allies; others, like Gedakina and Ohketeau, focus on teaching Native youth; and other programs have cultural and historical information useful to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

I was personally pleased to get involved with the Belchertown Racial Justice Collaborative’s iSHAPE Massachusetts project, along with poet, journalist, and artist Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz. The goal of the iSHAPE Massachusetts project was to create a set of learning resources for a variety of topics, geared toward several distinct age levels. This set of resources could be used by parents and teachers, particularly during the remote learning period of fall 2020. Learners could check off items that they had completed (reading a book, watching an educational video, etc) and then use these for raffle tickets to win prizes. The prizes were Indigenous made and purchased primarily from local vendors, with the exception of a few gift cards from more widespread Indigenous sites like The NTVS and Beyond Buckskin. Schools across the state of
Massachusetts, as well as in Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire were alerted to the project, and several teachers used the recommendations that we provided.

A similar “21-Day Racial Equity Indigenous Challenge” was created by the Massachusetts Center for Native American Awareness, recommending readings, podcasts, websites, music, videos, apps, and hashtags to follow, along with meaningful acts of support and allyship that participants can complete (MCNAA 2020). Several Indigenous people and scholar allies are also involved in the Reclaiming Native Truth Project, and have helped spread its materials which aim to “counter discrimination, invisibility and the dominant narratives” (Reclaiming Native Truth: A Project to Dispel America’s Myths and Misconceptions 2021).

Indigenous educators are therefore embracing “the ability to create a text that is multidimensional, so you can provide links to images, to videos, you can provide links to alternative texts, you can provide commentary right there in the text, in a way which was very difficult to do before. You can stabilize the text within the text itself. . . . These are all tools that, as Indigenous people, we’re very interested in, because for the most part the canonical texts don’t handle our histories very well. They’re either very thin or they’re incorrect” (Smyth 2016).

While formal and activist educational initiatives are certainly important, equally meaningful is the increasing number of more casual interactions taking place across social media and through digital art creations. Although there are significant microaggressions against Indigenous creators online, most Indigenous people who I personally know still engage in online conversations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, both friends and strangers, about Indigenous issues (Clark et al. 2011). While
most of the people I spoke with are artists and educators and thus willing to share their knowledge even in their personal time, it is worth noting that the burden should not fall on Indigenous people to continually educate non-Indigenous people, especially as more accurate and vetted information becomes readily available online on websites and on social media. But since many Indigenous creators are taking part in online conversations and posting public materials, it is possible that young non-Native people who are immersed in social media will be more likely to have direct interactions with Native users, and to hear Indigenous opinion pieces that are made by Indigenous people rather than mediated by non-Native filmmakers and news outlets.

Speaking in 2020 over Zoom to a non-Indigenous high school student in Fremont, California who was authoring a school paper on Indigenous issues, I asked how she became interested in Indigenous history and rights in the Northeast. Her answer? She follows several Indigenous content creators on TikTok, who had opened her eyes to more accurate histories around Thanksgiving and Columbus Day, as well as current Indigenous issues. The student, who had never visited the Northeast in person, was remarkably well informed on local cultures and histories. In a classroom study, Iseke-Barnes and Sakai found that “learning about Indigenous peoples from a distance through a website and a novel are difficult ways to engage cultural discussions” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:220). However, they further argued that “since Indigenous knowledges are experiential, a website cannot provide the experiences necessary or real learning to take place” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:214). Yet social media differs from website viewing in that direct communication can take place with content creators. Critiques can also be aired through commentary. Someone viewing a social media post can act as a “lurker,”
never posting themselves, and become educated about a multiplicity of views on an Indigenous issue by simply reading through the arguments, feedback, and critiques in the comment section.

Some individual digital artists have seen their works circulate online, and become incorporated into teaching tools. Although not Indigenous himself, digital photographer and graphic artist Randall Steele’s work focuses on historical reenactments, where (with permission) he photographs both Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors in historically accurate regalia, and uses digital means to ensure that the final image is both visually pleasing and accurate to the time period. He has had school teachers reach out to him directly to ask permission to use his works in their classroom presentations (personal interview, 2019). While he frequently gives permission to use his images in educational contexts, like many other artists with works placed online, he found it frustrating when his art was used without permission and especially in contexts where inaccurate or stereotypical information was being proffered. This kind of spreading of images can be particularly dangerous, as some studies have found that “students do not challenge the text and images but believe what they see and reinforce their stereotypic understandings through what they see” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:227). While Steele is happy that his work has found an audience online, he does believe that for educational purposes, the live demonstrations and historical reenactments pull younger students into learning about history more effectively than textbooks or even digital resources.

Another Indigenous digital artist who I met online through mutual interests surprised me by sharing that one of his pieces had been circulated so much online, that a tribal museum reached out and licensed it for one of their exhibits. In this case, the
museum was more concerned with following legal procedures than the artist himself, who was of mixed descent and was happy that his work connected with the entire Indigenous community whose traditional stories had inspired his art (although the community was not his own).

Thus, the distinction between “educational” materials (podcasts, art, etc) and “entertainment” such as Tiktok videos is becoming blurred, with many podcasts being brought into classes as learning tools and videos that high schoolers watch in their spare time giving them a more accurate education on Indigenous issues and histories than their formal school curriculum.

Given these relatively new types of online interactions, there may have been some good reason to hope that “the relatively ‘democratic’ nature of the Internet may provide some hope for rectifying the multitude of misrepresentations and inhuman stereotypes so clearly articulated by many Indigenous scholars” (Wemigwans 2008:33). As noted earlier, Kopacz and Lawton’s 2011 study of YouTube videos found that while some stereotypical aspects of Native Americans were favored by audiences, many counterstereotypical aspects were as well (Kopacz & Lawton 2011). The contact theory suggests that people who have less frequent interactions with a given group will harbor more negative stereotypes about that group. Although this theory was formally named by Gordon Allport, its essence was described far earlier, in the 1930s, by Mohegan anthropologist Gladys Tantaquidgeon (Allport 1958). In fact, the Mohegan tribal website currently has her quote posted: “You can't hate someone that you know a lot about” (Medicine Woman Gladys Tantaquidgeon 2017). In the absence of in-person contact, “it is conceivable that… videos” – and I would add, other more interactive forms of social
media – “could serve as significant points of vicarious intergroup contact and be instrumental in improving societal perceptions of Native Americans” (Kopacz & Lawton 2011:252-253). “Popular media is, in many cases, the only exposure some people have to members of other groups” (Leavitt et al. 2015:42).

Although “anthropologists have long considered it part of their moral agenda to replace the cultural misinformation and overgeneralizations that ground stereotypes with culturally accurate information in order to eliminate prejudice, discrimination, and assumptions,” it is apparent that Indigenous people themselves, either through their own involvement in academia, through activism, or through personal interactions, are increasingly overturning stereotypes themselves (Parezo 2013:317). It is quite likely that future non-Indigenous peoples’ views of Indigenous communities will be formed less by professional anthropologists and historians, and more by Indigenous artists and their allies. “They say that we are the carriers of history; that storytellers and artists must express their visions for the people to see. Then we will make history, not be history” (Beaucage 2005:141). Of course, there may still be value in the types of tools of analysis that anthropology, communication, and film and media studies have produced.

**Language Education**

Language is a major point of concern for most Indigenous communities. The majority of language programs among Indigenous nations in the Northeast intend to specifically target tribal members. Perhaps the most striking example of this in-group preference is in the Mashpee Wampanoag’s Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project community classes, which are open only to tribal members and their family members (for instance, non-Indigenous mothers whose children are Mashpee tribal members), with the
intention of bringing the language into household usage. Speaking with Jennifer Weston, she commented that she prefers face to face instruction and that “direct communication is critical when involving language instruction – particularly for those Indigenous languages that are tonal and rely on subtle inflections to change meaning” (personal interview, 2017). Although the tribal nation receives requests from linguists, students, and citizens of other tribal nations, they examine these requests on a case by case basis, generally allowing access to Indigenous people from other tribal nations, especially those whose ancestral languages are in the same (Algonquian) language family.

The preference for tribal members and their relatives has been attributed by the Mashpee Wampanoag as ensuring that descent populations are able to access the language before, for instance, professional anthropologists or college students. This further speaks to an ethos of who the language is for, and who has some right or claim to be included in a language’s knowledge set. Language is often linked to other identity markers and can be politicized as well. “Projects of language revitalization are often linked to claims of ethnolinguistic recognition” (Eisenlohr 2004:21).

Of course, as with any issue, there are a variety of perspectives on the subject of language learning. Larry Spotted Crow Mann, in his virtual Warner Free Lecture from Harvard University, acknowledged that many other groups don’t allow cultural outsiders to learn their ancestral language, but that he and several other Nipmuc people had different feelings on the subject. “Not every tribe does that, they don’t necessarily allow non-Natives to learn. But we’d like everyone to speak Nipmuc, wouldn’t that be wonderful?” (2021, We Are The Story, We Are The Land).
In addition to concerns over the ways in which language is used, and considerations of who has the right to access language (especially when spaces in face-to-face classes are limited), there are spiritual considerations at play as well. In discussing the multiple Indigenous languages with which she was worked, Jennifer Weston noted that “many of the tribal elders and communities I’ve worked for over the past decade have emphasized the ‘breath to breath’ nature of language learning as essential to conveying the spiritual meaning and practice embedded in our Native languages, which deepen their experience far beyond vocabulary lists or grammar lessons” (personal interview, 2017). Larry Spotted Crow Mann further underscored this emphasis on breath, stating that “the breath, which produces the words, is the life force” (2021, We Are The Story, We Are The Land, Warner Free Lecture). These spiritual associations with language are rarely centered in academic discourses, which tend to focus on the efficacy of digital technologies.

Finally, as with many aspects of tribal nation decision-making, there are also financial considerations in developing online language programs and software. Jennifer Weston pointed out that “often, high quality learning environments or platforms are much more expensive to develop and maintain, and possibly less effective, than paying for quality teachers’ time” (personal interview, 2017). Eisenlohr has similarly pointed out that “the use and availability of such technologies often depend on support from state institutions, nongovernmental organizations, or a local middle class willing to use its economic and political resources to protect a language” (2004:26).

This is not to say that each Northeastern tribal nation completely eschews digital language-learning tools. The Nipmuc tribe had, for a short time, audio lessons in their
language posted to their site (developed with the assistance of graduate student Caren Brendror from UMass Amherst around 2014 as part of a tribal outreach program sponsored by the Certificate Program in Native American and Indigenous Studies). Even the Mashpee Wampanoag Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, with its generally guarded nature, has supplemental resources in the form of videos and presentations housed online, and has developed a presence on social media to spread the word about the revitalization of the Wôpanâak language. In a 2016 study of various Native American websites, Michele Seikel found that “twenty-one percent include cultural materials related to native languages, such as language lessons, vocabulary lists, dictionaries, alphabets, and even online games and apps” (2016:44).

Language maintenance was clearly an issue for the Indigenous nations and communities whose websites were analyzed within this dissertation. Nearly every group discussed the importance of language preservation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Discussion of Language(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquinnah</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanatsiohareke</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashantucket</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohegan</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narragansett</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nipmuc</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nulhegan Aberaki</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penobscot</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Regis Mohawk</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Spread of language references across websites.
Furthermore, nearly every Indigenous website also actually featured their ancestral language on at least one page, often on several pages.

![Indigenous Language Used](image)

**Figure 12:** Spread of Indigenous language use across websites.

It should be noted that the Nipmuc site was undergoing some construction when its pages were pulled in 2019 for analysis; having previously posted phrases and greetings in the Nipmuc language, it is safe to say that they do not necessarily reject the use of digital technologies for language learning, despite what the previous charts may seem to suggest.

Certainly, recent developments like the addition of Navajo (Diné) language to the Duolingo app, or the inclusion of the Cherokee syllabary to Google’s list of languages, have been celebrated by many Indigenous people, and distance learning may have a growing importance as tribal membership becomes more globalized and diasporic, and as individuals separated from their communities by earlier colonial practices attempt to connect to their own heritage. For those lacking access to learning in their home communities or on their ancestral lands, digital media may be the only way of connecting
with traditional knowledge (Wemigwans 2008:32). “Pessimistic perspectives on the relationship between the reproduction of linguistic diversity and electronic mass media” have compared it to “cultural nerve gas” and a “neutron bomb” destroying Indigenous languages; but “in contrast, recent work on minority language broadcasting has stressed the potentially helpful effects of using electronic mediation for the maintenance and renewal of such languages” (Eisenlohr 2004:23-24).

The work of preserving Indigenous languages is ongoing and bears a range of meanings. For descent individuals, it’s often a deeply meaningful and spiritual connection to their ancestors. Consider Mashpee Wampanoag language revivalist Jessie Little Doe Baird’s experience of hearing her ancestors speak to her in the Wôpanâak language through her dreams (Makepeace 2010). For the larger world, language use may index authenticity and thus lend support to tribal recognition and rights. Learning Indigenous languages through digital means may help pull them into the modern era for non-Indigenous people. Studies have shown that lesser-used languages “and the people indexed by it are backward, inferior, or otherwise unfit for modernity” in the eyes of mainstream individuals (Eisenlohr 2004:32). This is likely particularly true for Indigenous communities who are already marked as historical rather than contemporary. Therefore, increased practice and visibility of Northeastern Indigenous languages, particularly in hyper-modern digital environments, pushes back against these stereotypes and enhances tribes’ authority. Digital technologies can assist in language learning efforts and enhance Indigenous language visibility, and may therefore be useful to tribal nations as long as they are also careful to avoid a “fetishization of technology” that locates the
“agency to ‘save’ their language in technology instead of in themselves” (Eisenlohr 2004:36).

**Preservation Efforts**

Many of the Indigenous digital creations I observed, especially through tribal nation and museum websites, discussed issues surrounding the concepts of preservation, restoration, and revitalization. Digital preservation is one tool, albeit not an entirely ideal one, in preservation. As digital technology has now become readily available to most tribal citizens and organizations, there is the somewhat recent possibility of recording a range of culturally meaningful moments, from Elders telling stories to powwow performances, native language speakers reciting phrases, or environmental processes. Several tribal nations, including the Mashpee Wampanoag, are beginning to collect interviews from Elders, beginning in the 1980s and especially accelerating in the 2000s. When I visited the tribal headquarters in 2014, one tribal official noted that digitizing older interviews was a job that they knew was looming in the future, and would need to be done sooner rather than later so that the integrity of older recordings would be intact. The ability to upload such videos directly to sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, or Google Drive make preservation attempts faster and easier. Uploading videos to multiple sites also acts as a safeguard against issues with sites eventually closing, or potentially shutting down user accounts.

In addition to preserving language and other intangible cultural practices, many Indigenous-crafted websites, podcasts, and social media posts focused on preserving physical items. The most visible references to preservation on tribal nation and museum websites focus on artifacts and physical sites, such as the major restoration project taking
place for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Museum or the Old Indian Meeting House, which the Mashpee Wampanoag Historical Preservation Department works to preserve and maintain. Some tribal nations, like the Mashpee Wampanoag, work with media to highlight their preservation efforts. For instance, the tribal nation page noted a segment on WGBH Channel 2 in Boston. Speaking about being included in a news segment, tribal member Trish Keliinui said that “the WGBH Foundation’s overall focus is on arts and education in Massachusetts, therefore they felt it very fitting to include members of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe as a community where their foundation is based on preserving history.”

However, occasionally there were references to the preservation of nontangible heritage. For instance, the Nulhegan Abenaki site stated that “the revitalization, preservation, and protection of our cultural, historic, and physical values and resources is the foundation upon which we stand. Teaching our young ones the skills and customs of our ancestors keeps our heritage alive.”

Another issue of primary concern is the repatriation of Indigenous ancestors. The unethical collection and use of Indigenous bodies – often taken from the sites of massacres or robbed from official burials – led directly to one of the most contentious pieces of legislation regarding Native American and Indigenous populations in the United States; namely, NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. The act ensures that Indigenous remains and sacred items, often held by museums, be repatriated to the closest identifiable living tribal communities who may care for those ancestors and items in whatever way they see fit, including reinternment.
Although tribal websites often explained NAGPRA, they did not necessarily describe the specifics of their efforts, likely due to the sensitive nature of the subject. In fact, when ancestral remains are transferred back to Indigenous communities, it is preceded by all the necessary paperwork but the transfer itself is often done quietly and with few participants. Attending events such as the National NAGPRA Review Committee meeting held at UMass Amherst from March 3-4, 2015 offered me a more candid discussion of how NAGPRA efforts are going, and which universities and museums appear to be complying (as well as which ones appear to be intentionally unwilling to work with tribal officials).

Recently, the push to repatriate Indigenous remains has heightened after the 2021 discovery in Canada of 215 previously unknown child burials at Kamloops, a residential boarding school. Following this discovery, boarding schools across Canada and the United States continued to unearth the remains of Indigenous children, and there is ongoing work to identify them so that they can be returned to their tribal communities. Social media pages following the discovery at Kamloops were flooded with both calls for repatriation of these and all child victims of the boarding schools in the U.S., Canada, and Australia, as well as a great outpouring of mourning which included personal thoughts, shared reflections from others, and moving pieces of art. Some Indigenous people shared personal accounts and images of relatives who were in the boarding schools. National pan-Indigenous organizations in the United States and Canada posted explanations of the boarding schools and their generational impacts. Even non-Indigenous allies frequently posted supportive images, such as the members of the Canadian sketch group The Kids in the Hall wearing orange shirts in honor of residential school victims and survivors. With
continued, sustained public support, it may be more possible to continue repatriating the children currently located at residential boarding schools.

Archaeological projects and artifacts were frequently mentioned across tribal nation websites, and some tribal nations or tribal museums now work with archaeologists on current projects in addition to working to repatriate human remains and sacred items.

![Figure 13: Spread of archaeological references across websites.](image)

Another common practice among many Indigenous-created websites was the posting of historical images. Unlike more stereotypical depictions of Indigenous persons existing in the past, these images often contained no obviously recognizable symbols of Indigeneity, or contained a mix of Indigenous items and practices alongside clothing, homes, or other aspects of mainstream American life at the time the image was taken. Furthermore, explanations nearly always accompany such pictures to contextualize them.

It is somewhat expected that Indigenous tribal nation website and museum websites would host historical images with expository text alongside them. However,
what is extremely interesting is that many Indigenous individuals’ social media accounts also posted historical pictures with educational information. This is a marked difference from most non-Indigenous users’ Facebook and Twitter accounts. While most cases were witnessed through a personal Facebook account, making such posts semi-public and semi-private) and thus questionable to share in a dissertation, a few notable examples from recent memory are a before/after image of boarding school attendees, a shared post of a pair of moccasins in a museum with a caption that says “Arctic America?” and an explanation of the problematic collection practices (and current identification practices that usually rely on free Indigenous labor and cultural knowledge), and local images of powwows from the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, Indigenous people are working with mainstream preservation entities like Plimoth Patuxet Museums. The Interwoven Podcast is produced by Plimoth Patuxet Museum staff and podcast guests, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, working together to provide a better education on Wampanoag and 17th-century colonial English shared histories. Relatedly, the 400 year celebration of the Pilgrims’ landing in Cape Cod occurred in November 2020. While much of the planned fanfare was cancelled due to the pandemic, Indigenous educators had been working with the programming all along (in spite of some conversations among Elders about whether it would be fruitful to participate or not). Paula Peters, a filmmaker who often works with digital film, and her media company SmokeSygnals, crafted short films to be viewed as stand-alone items or in physical museum exhibits (Waxman 2020).

In one such short film produced in partnership with Plymouth 400, Inc., titled *Chapter 2: The Messenger Runner*, a young man in traditional regalia and a pre-colonial...
appearing village is called (we are told through title card) by the sachem at Marshpaug to deliver a message 40 miles to Patuxet. The message appears to be a deerskin piece of cloth that he is handed. We follow this messenger’s run through woods and fields and beaches, with slow motion scenes and dramatic music in the background. When he arrives at his destination, he reaches into the deerskin pouch and pulls out a modern smartphone, with the message “WE ARE STILL HERE!” written on its screen, gleefully flashing it directly into the camera and confronting viewers directly. The film freeze frames and ends with this message, after nearly three minutes of employing stereotypical signifiers of historical Indian-ness which allow audience biases to set in, only to subvert them and show that the traditional and the contemporary can and do co-exist.

This short film, produced by Paula Peters, directly speaks back to an experience she had as a young girl: “When Paula Peters was in second grade in Philadelphia in the mid-1960s, listening to a teacher talk about Plymouth colony and the Mayflower, a student asked what happened to the Native Americans who helped the Pilgrims settle, the Wampanoag. The teacher said they were all dead. ‘When she mentioned we’re all dead, that was devastating,’ Peters, 61, recalled… ‘I raised my hand, and I said no that’s not true, I’m a Wampanoag, and I’m still here. I didn’t know enough then as a second grader that I could challenge her, but I think that I’ve challenged that second-grade teacher ever since. Part of my everyday being is telling people that we’re still here’” (Waxman 2020).

Although museums have historically had contentious relationships with Indigenous people, due to the holding of ancestral remains (with many now being repatriated, sometimes willingly and sometimes begrudgingly, under NAGPRA), Indigenous people have established their own museums and have worked with other
institutions’ museums as well. This dissertation examined the web pages for the
Mashantucket Pequot Museum and the Tomaquag Museum, because at the time of the
dissertation’s start these museums had the most well-developed websites. However, there
is also the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian Museum, the Aquinnah Wampanoag Indian
Museum, the Penobscot Nation Museum, the Hassanamisco Indian Museum, and the Mt.
Kearsarge Indian Museum (which hosts an annual powwow), as well as several other
local museums.

An possible area for future research would be using digital technologies to infuse
Northeastern Indigenous voices into existing collections (as has been attempted with the
University of Hawaii Library’s *Traditional Micronesian Navigation Collection* and
Library and Archives Canada and the Inuit’s *Project Naming* (Smith 2008). The
Peabody Museum, in recognition of the 400th anniversary of the colonization of New
England, launched just such an attempt with “Listening to Wampanoag Voices: Beyond
1620” (Peabody Museum). On this web page, items from the Peabody’s collection are
contextualized by audio tracks provided by prominent Mashpee and Aquinnah
Wampanoag tribal members. For instance, Mashpee Wampanoag tribal member Zoë
Harris, once a student in the Massachusetts-based Native Tribal Scholars Program who
now works with youth herself in the tribe’s language programs, provided a discussion on
two splint baskets from the early 1900s. The Plimoth Patuxet Museums have recently
added a digital exhibit, *Echoes of the Ancestors: Transformations of Wampanoag Life
from the Paleoindian Period through the Colonial Era*, based on the Eel River
Archaeological Site, and working with FableVision Studios, developed an interactive
game *You Are the Historian: Investigating the First Thanksgiving*, which allows players
to see “archaeological artifacts from the museum’s collections, primary source documents, and oral stories told from generation to generation” (You Are the Historian Game 2021). Ideally, programs like this continue to make Indigenous collections more accessible to Indigenous researchers and knowledge keepers, a goal other museums are beginning to realize in the U.S. and Canada (Douglas & Hayes 2019:1261).

Preservation efforts have varied relationships to digital media. Digital media may spread word of preservation and repatriation efforts, garnering support for their funding. Digital media may preserve copies of older records through high quality scans, and may likewise make them more accessible, as the Mohegan have attempted to do with the “Artifacts” section of their website. Indigenous voices have been preserved through online video, both by Indigenous community members and non-Indigenous allies, and through both formal programs and informal family videos.

**Indigenous People and Formal Education**

Many of the Indigenous digital media being produced in the Northeast has some ties to academic institutions, either through direct involvement with universities and colleges, or through ties to professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students. College is generally viewed in a positive light, in spite of challenges that Native students still face in having their heritage seen, respected, and valued by large institutions.

Most area websites reference scholarship opportunities for tribal students. The Penobscot discussed the Higher Education Grant Program (HEGP) for assistance in pursuing bachelor’s degrees; the Nulhegan Abenaki listed several scholarships of potential interest to their youth; the Narragansett posted the Native Student Professional
Development Program from the Wildlife Society; the Mashpee have hosted multiple college and career prep programs; the Mashantucket posted two opportunities relevant to their youth (the Society of American Indian Government Employees Youth Program and the Jean Grennell Brennan Memorial Scholarship Fund). Many Indigenous nation websites also highlight the academic connections and scholarly accomplishments of individual tribal members on several pages.

Generally, academia and Indigenous scholarship in particular are seen as potentially liberatory for individuals and communities. At the very least, academic spaces can be considered safer and more ideal than unregulated youth activity. For instance, we can look to the Native Tribal Scholars summer camp for Massachusetts state Indigenous high school residents that ran from 2012 to 2015, a grant funded program first administrated by the University of Massachusetts Boston and then directly by the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe. This program was viewed by the parents of attending children as both a fantastic resume-builder for students who were already set on going to college, or a way to keep kids in a structured and supervised environment. Although the program ended in 2015, it did have a strong success rate in meeting its stated goal of having students gain an interest in finishing high school and attending college. The Facebook group page is still active, with former students, teachers, and staff posting occasional job opportunities and scholarships.

This program also highlighted the degree to which young people were interested in and adept at producing digital media. Several instructors in the program, including myself, “tapped into digital media as a way of engaging young people in learning and meaningful, productive activity” (Kral 2011:5). By asking students to produce a video on
some historic or cultural topic, they were much more engaged in learning Indigenous histories, and several chose to interview adults in the program, family members, or tribal members back home. “First, students learn filmmaking skills while making these indigenous films. Second… the work increases students’ indigenous knowledge and enhances their understanding of the political issues important to their nations” (Iseke & Moore 2011:26).

From my own informal observations, digital media was preferred over learning from lectures or textbooks, possibly because those methods of instruction emphasize western hierarchical systems of knowing rather than relational education. They may have further connected to digital methods because “the multimodal nature of youth media is blurring the boundary between orality and literacy” (Kral 2011:10). In collecting interviews for their videos, students not only gleaned information but made personal connections with those whom they interviewed. They were able to personally contribute to the history of the area. In addition to being hosted online through Vimeo and YouTube, the videos they produced were shared with the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, and at least for some time, downloaded and stored in the tribal headquarters building.

This is not to say that every university has maintained positive relationships with Indigenous people. Some universities have never engaged with Indigenous communities to a satisfactory level, while others that once maintained vibrant Indigenous studies programs and communities are now seen as flagging. It is, however, to assert that gaining a higher education is still seen as a positive advancement that will be beneficial to young people. There is also an emphasis on interacting with Indigenous theories and scholarship as students.
Artist Casey Figueroa, who was a transplant to the Northeast for many years and involved in Native communities around Massachusetts, draws from Indigenous theory to inspire his artwork. Studying Shawn Wilson’s *Research as Ceremony*, Casey states that he is inspired to envision “how to do my work in a way that reflects that I’m approaching it in an Indigenous fashion… that reflects the process of creating” (personal interview, 2019). At the same time, education was not seen as a limiting factor. Digital visual artist and musician Justin Beatty explained to me that “with me making music digitally and whatnot, I don’t feel constrained by music theory saying, you have to do it this way. Same thing with art and color theory, that you have to have these colors go together. It’s all subjective anyway” (personal interview, 2019).

One might expect a more guarded approach to education from older generations, whose experiences with the boarding schools may have led to a far more dismal view of academic institutions. Mohawk Bear Clan Elder Tom Porter, for instance, travels the Northeast discussing the impact that the residential boarding school system had on his family. However, many of these talks are given directly to college classes, and undergraduate students are often moved by his stories in a way that traditional lectures cannot match.

Academic research has indicated strong differences between traditional Indigenous forms of learning and western academic praxis. Indigenous knowledge is generally posited as relational, embedded in environmental and spiritual practices, and learned through collaboration and teamwork rather than individual competition (Brown 1980). “Indigenous knowledges are experiential… Aboriginal knowledge is qualitative and subjective” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:214,204). Furthermore, academic theories
have often disregarded Indigenous oral tradition as inherently inaccurate, and has challenged Indigenous histories, like the long-term (pre-Bering Strait land bridge) occupation of the Americas.

However, academia also frequently supports Indigenous theories as well. New findings that bolster Indigenous claims, such as evidence that supports a longer occupation of the Americas, are shared on social media and seen as triumphs of Indigenous oral tradition. The legitimacy offered by these new research findings are, themselves, produced through academic scholarship, and thus continue to bolster some sense of validity to academic research. Several Indigenous friends on Facebook, for example, posted an NBC News article discussing footprints which “show humans in North America more than 21,000 years ago,” predating the Bering Strait land bridge (Metcalfe 2021). It was also shared by the Facebook group Imagining Indigenous Futurisms, with the caption “(Western) science slowly catching up with Indigenous histories...” (Imagining Indigenous Futurisms 2021). In spite of one person cheekily adding the comment “no shit, Sherlock,” posting academic research that overturns earlier academic research in favor of a position that aligns more closely with Indigenous beliefs does nevertheless show some support for the academic process. The same pattern can be observed with Indigenous users more broadly; Taika Waititi, for instance, reposted a news story showing contact between Indigenous Americans and Polynesians going back 800 years, adding “old mates, bro,” in September 2021 (Waititi 2021).

In spite of points of potential conflict born of uneasy histories between the academic and Indigenous nations, there is a general acknowledgement among many Northeastern Indigenous individuals that, while attaining a western style education can be
difficult, foreign, and challenging, our young people are capable of enduring these challenges and transforming the future of education through their involvement and activism.

Several universities in the northeastern United States have also undertaken projects to support Indigenous knowledge collection and dissemination. For instance, the Digital Atlas of Native American Intellectual Traditions (DANAIT) is “an IMLS-funded project to create a space for conversation and collaboration, with the goal of developing a framework for sharing, exploring, and visualizing Native-authored library and archival collections” (Digital Atlas of Native American Intellectual Traditions 2021). Amherst College is one of the project’s partners, along with the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM), Mukurtu, and the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA).

Other academic and Indigenous institutions and partnerships seek to address the privacy and ownership concerns addressed earlier in Chapter Three.

Legal anthropologist Jane Anderson, for instance, working alongside James Francis Sr., the Tribal Historian and Director of the Department of Cultural and Historic Preservation for the Penobscot Nation in Maine, has confronted the reality that Indigenous people are often not the legal owners of material culture held by museums and individuals nor the legal custodians of their own images, and that property law and copyright law in particular maintain this state of affairs. The Penobscot Nation, in response, has reacted to these conditions with mechanisms including “a tribal intellectual property policy for ownership of future research, a tribal Institutional Review Board that reviews graduate and professional research involving Penobscot people and conducted on
tribal lands, a federal grant to support language revitalization, and two Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) under negotiation regarding Penobscot involvement in co-curation and access decisions for Penobscot materials that are currently held at the University of Maine and the American Philosophical Society (APS)” (Anderson 2018: 274). These approaches not only locate authority over Penobscot items and representations with Penobscot people, but they also allow for collections to be reanimated and properly contextualized and additionally, connect living people to ancestral items and histories. Memorandums of Understanding and the more formal Memorandums of Agreement, in particular, are legal mechanisms akin to contract law that can aid in establishing tribal rights and new relationships with institutions.

An international effort that looks at digital data in particular, the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance, similarly advocates for Indigenous data sovereignty. The CARE principles are meant to supplement the widely accepted FAIR guidelines developed by a consortium of scholars in 2016, which called for data to follow the four principles of Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability, with as minimal human labor input as possible. CARE stands for Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics. These are “designed to complement the FAIR Principles and guide the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in data processes that strengthen Indigenous control for improved discovery, access, use, reuse, and attribution in contemporary data landscapes” (Carroll et al. 2020).

Of course, these efforts do not entirely erase the power differential created by copyright and property law, which tend to reside with institutions that have collected Indigenous items and images, but they may be a critical move to negotiate around them.
In fact, academic research itself is sometimes viewed as activist in nature within the context of the Northeast, and tribal nations have given internal honors to professors, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, whose work has bolstered tribal interests or who have supported Indigenous students. “Native intellectual traditions encompass this need to speak out and uncover situated historical moments, not merely as superficially applied universal truths or fantastical outlets allegorizing the broad human condition, but as a means of chronicling real events and of encouraging accountability” (Dillon 2007b:223). This does not obscure the clear power differences between Indigenous academics who have the status and financial support of a university position and those community members who do not, but it does open a doorway for intellectual pursuits to be valued in relation to one’s Indigenous identity.

Academics themselves, of course, host a range of online workshops and talks, and these increased greatly in number after the Covid-19 pandemic drove entire universities and colleges online. Talks on university Indigenous initiatives, such as MIT’s MLK Visiting Scholar Patricia Saulis (Wolastoqey/Maliseet) and her goals for transforming the university into a less actively colonialist space, were circulated through listservs and left open for individuals to join even if they were not from within those organizations. A virtual “Circle of Notable Native American Scholars,” jointly sponsored by the Harvard University Native American Program and the Stanford Native American Studies Program and Native American Cultural Center, and co-sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, was scheduled for February 2021 as a celebration of Harvard and Stanford’s Native American Programs. Other events were hosted by academic institutions on platforms like EventBrite, such as the D’Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian
and Indigenous Studies event “Native Studies in the Apocalypse,” featuring Dr. Shannon Speed, Director of the UCLA American Indian Studies Center and NAISA Council Member.

However, one unusual disconnect from current academic discourse is the predominant use of the term “Native” and even the term “Indian” over “Indigenous,” even as “Indigenous” is picking up increasing currency in academic circles and internationally. This trend is described in more detail in Chapter Three. “Native” continues to be the dominant preferred term, both on Indigenous-created websites and on most personal social media accounts.

Universities can help foster positive relationships with local Indigenous communities by encouraging faculty to incorporate Indigenous theorists and authors into their curriculum, to counter the prevailing invisibility of Indigenous people on college campuses. They can cooperate willingly and enthusiastically with NAGPRA regulations. And, they can establish councils made up of representatives not just from Native backgrounds, but from the specific local communities in their areas.

**Policies and Protocols**

Due to the prevalence of Native American stereotypes, and their impact on the knowledge most Americans have of contemporary Native Americans, many content creators feel a need to go beyond setting the record straight, and proactively offer ways for non-Indigenous people to learn Indigenous history, support Indigenous causes, and interact directly at Indigenous community events. Yet to do this respectfully, some basic cultural rules must be shared.
The Tomaquag website, when examined in 2019, instructed visitors not to park near the pavilion during events because “that space is reserved for elders and disabled only.” The Mohegan provided some general powwow etiquette, including: do not take pictures during Grand Entry, do not refer to regalia as a costume, ask individuals before photographing them, do not touch regalia, stand during Grand Entry, do not sit in areas reserved for dancers, never record a drum without permission from its lead singer, do not bring drugs or alcohol, smoke only in designated areas, “respect everyone, Native and non-Native, especially Elders,” and of course… “have fun!” The Aquinnah Wampanoag posted guidelines such as not removing anything of archaeological significance, not taking clay from the cliffs or climbing them, not bringing alcohol or drugs or weapons onto tribal lands, visiting the tribal multi-purpose buildings only, respecting private areas such as personal homes, not picking wild berries or flowers, and disposing of trash. The Aquinnah noted these as “restrictions we have to protect both our island and our culture,” but additionally noted that “welcoming visitors has always been a central Wampanoag value and an important part of Island life,” maintaining a warm tone.

Protocols that teach visitors to Native spaces culturally appropriate actions are a subtle form of education in and of themselves. The use of published cultural protocols intends to decrease harmful actions on the part of outsiders, while also making outsiders more comfortable because they can enter a culturally distinct community with less apprehension about “breaking the rules.” “A lot of people don’t, have never, ever met a native person that they know of. A lot of times, they don’t know how to act. They don't know what to say or what to do” (Darius Coombs, personal interview, 2019).
Protocols may be offered online, in person, or a combination of the two. For instance, although the Nipmuc website did not feature any protocols at the time of its analysis for this dissertation in 2019, they did create protocols for their annual powwow in 2017, which were given out in person at the event. Elders collaborated on the creation of the document.
Figure 14: Nipmuc Nation Powwow Protocol, 2017.
Like the previous protocols, the powwow protocol bans drugs and alcohol (and pets), while maintaining a friendly and welcoming tone.

Many Indigenous nations have protocols specifically targeting drug and alcohol use. The Mohegan site, for instance, in addition to the protocols listed above, once again specifically notes on a separate page that at their community events no dogs, alcohol, or drugs are allowed. The Kanatsiohareke Mohawk community notes on its website that “the use and/or possession of alcohol, or any other illegal substance is **strictly prohibited.**”

Indigenous people, having created such protocols for non-Native people to follow, are also thoughtful about protocols that we each should be following ourselves. Several artists interviewed noted placing self-imposed guidelines around the kind of symbols they should use; sensitive information or highly evocative symbols from other tribal nations are generally considered inappropriate for use, regardless of the fact that it is legal for them to do so. While protocols help establish Indigenous-controlled guidelines, protocols are generally less focused on legal control, and more on a sense of respect for others. Thus, they are flexible enough to be available equally to sovereign nations and smaller, even non-federally recognized communities.

Digital media can ideally help make spread protocols and normalize respecting them, although the efficacy of this may also depend on personal, regional, and politicized attitudes toward rule-following. As the 2020 and 2021 years have shown, simple mask-wearing requests and even mandates during the Covid-19 pandemic were followed by some populations, and actively resisted by others; Indigenous protocols, if publicized,
may see the same varied reactions, and more stringent legal action may be required for some tribal nations for guidelines which must be observed.

**A Spiraling Model of Education**

Many educators and parents, aware of the brutal history of American colonization, are hesitant or unsure of how to teach it to their children. Aquinnah Wampanoag educator Linda Coombs applies the spiral model of education, “where topics are readdressed at a higher level in subsequent grades,” to the teaching of Indigenous subjects (Bennett 2007:25). The spiraling model of education conceives of the transmission of information happening cyclically, in a spiral form. One reading of this spiral form can be from the bottom to the top, such that information builds with time. Coombs uses this reading to allay fears from the parents of non-Indigenous children that learning about Native history will be too upsetting for them. Instead, they can be given information appropriate to their age range, emotional capabilities, and understandings.

This mirrors what other traditional Indigenous storytellers have done, varying “their presentation of stories to provide context and to make a story at a level appropriate for the audience. In telling indigenous stories there is ‘a simple version for children, [that] then moves to a slightly more complicated version for adolescents, to a deeper version for initiates, and to a still deeper version for the fully mature’” (Iseke & Moore 2011:29). Indigenous storytellers have long varied their stories based on the makeup of their audience and the lessons they feel need to be taken from a given story. When stories cannot be adjusted – for instance, when they are static recordings – warnings with content descriptions can be used. The Mashantucket Pequot Museum, for instance, noted that its
film *The Witness* “includes scenes of violence which may not be appropriate for children under 12.”

Envisioning education as a spiral also allows for a top to bottom reading, with information being passed down through time, either through direct intergenerational transmission or through digital means, as each person who reposts or shares a piece of information passes it like a baton to the next viewer. As a person gains more information, moving “up” the spiral, they are more and more enabled to pass information onto others, moving it “down” the spiral. This understanding of knowledge validates both educators and Elders, who accumulate knowledge over time and whose social responsibility it is to pass along information to others in ways that are meaningful and appropriate. We should imagine these two movements of the spiral taking place at the same time, as they interact with one another constantly; as the individual builds up their knowledge, they encounter community resources and ideally, eventually reach a place where they can confidently and accurately begin passing information onto others as part of an allied learning community. If one envisions both of these cycles happening simultaneously, one might imagine a spiral that is a two-way pathway, or alternately, a double helix. I prefer the single spiral, as it implies that gaining knowledge and transmitting knowledge – learning and teaching – meld together and may at times be indistinguishable from one another.
Figure 15: Two visualizations of a spiraling model of education.

The spiral model thus communicates both a building up of knowledge over an individual’s life cycle, and a passing down of knowledge, both of which can only be done through relationships. Digital media has the ability to strengthen both of these processes. On the individual, “building up” level, resources can be provided that meet an individual’s age and level of knowledge. This is what the goal of the Belchertown Justice Collaborative’s iSHAPE Massachusetts project was – to provide age-appropriate Indigenous materials in an accessible way, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the communal, “passing down” level, digital media allows for large-scale communal sharing and conversations to take place.
At the same time, digital communications cannot be solely relied on for the transmission of values. As noted earlier, part of storytelling and the transmission of values is that they are not static, but shift with each telling based on the audience, the season, or the contemporary political climate. Recordings solidify and ossify a story, and give audience members the power to choose which version they hear, rather than leaving this to the wisdom of the storyteller. What digital media can do is strengthen relationships and help them preserve across time and distances, teach basic cultural protocols and help unpack stereotypes, draw in support even from a geographical distance, and shine attention on important efforts within Indigenous communities.

Conclusion: Carrying Education into the Future

The importance of education and historical awareness throughout Indigenous communities and individuals in the Northeast is readily apparent in Indigenous-created media and through personal interviews. Tribal nation and Indigenous museum websites help “to eliminate stereotypes, reduce misunderstandings, and improve communication” (Mitten 2006:1343).

Many Indigenous people see some hope for contemporary digital art and social media communications to have an ameliorating effect on education. Speaking about people who are disappointed that his work isn’t what they expected from an Indigenous artist, Justin Beatty explained to me, “I don’t fault them for that. You know, that’s what they were taught and that’s what they want. They expect that, but hopefully they come in and walk away with a little bit better understanding of who we can be like” (personal interview, 2019). Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz, thinking back to how kids have to be told the same information “50 times,” added that if “you keep telling the truth, someone might
hear it, who might tell someone… and now we have social media, it's helping because I'll share it and you'll see it and you'll share it. And five or your friends will see it. And then two will think about it. So it's getting out there” (personal interview, 2021).

The books and short stories of author Joseph Bruchac have been heavily used in educational settings, especially because he is one of a handful of Indigenous authors who writes for multiple younger grade levels. In addition to the education his books provide non-Indigenous students, he has also seen firsthand the impact on Indigenous readers. “I think that when kids read books that have that kind of truth in them, that they are going to identify with it, they're going to relate to it… And I think it's going to change their lives for the better I have gotten, occasionally, emails and letters (more emails these days), from people that have made me cry because they've said their son or their daughter read a book of mine for the first time. They feel proud about being Indian. I go, whoa, that's a heavy burden. I hope I can bear it. I hope I can live up to it and honor it” (personal interview, 2021).

Joseph Bruchac, shortly after our conversation in early 2021, spoke to the middle school in my neighboring town. Through the work of teacher and ally Judith Brier, those students spoke with several Indigenous educators, authors, and artists virtually through the Zoom platform. It is likely that without such a way to communicate across distances, both the concerns around close contact with the Covid-19 pandemic and the distance of speakers would have prevented such a comprehensive unit on Indigenous history and current issues. With the assistance of technology, students were able to speak with Dr. Bruchac along with other Indigenous activists and scholars.
Allies as well can play a role in sharing accurate Indigenous histories. As mentioned above, they can incorporate Indigenous histories into classroom context. They can also help shine a light toward Indigenous stories. Hosts Hilary Goodnow and Tom Begley of the Interwoven Podcast commented that “if we’re going to see history as a tool to live our best lives today and in the present and in the future, we need to understand its continued significance and implications” (personal interview, 2019). Non-Indigenous historical reenactment photographer Randall Steele’s perspective on Indigenous history is a sympathetic one; he hopes that through learning more about history, we can all “learn from it” and that settlers can have more honorable interactions with Indigenous people in the future (personal interview, 2019).

Indigenous communities and individuals in the Northeast are aware that both tribal national sovereignty and personal wellbeing rely on a knowledge of one’s own culture and, ideally, having those cultural ways seen and respected by others. Digital media allows for powerful “counterstories” to be told that emphasize Indigenous histories, political sovereignty, and continuance (Hearne 2017:9). These efforts should be supported by formal educational structures in the Northeast, as well as tribal nation materials and individual tribal members’ efforts on digital media and social media platforms. “Working for accurate and diverse historical and contemporary portrayals of Native Americans and Native American nations in media and schools is essential” (Davis-Delano et al. 2020:74).
CHAPTER 5

POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS: THEY WERE ALWAYS OUR TOOLS

**Introduction: Is Technology Colonialist by Nature?**

Chapter One provided a brief discussion of two perspectives on technology, the substantivist view and the instrumentalist view. Greg Young-ing clearly outlined these two perspectives on technology in his chapter “The Indigenous/New Technology Interface” in the 2005 groundbreaking compilation of Indigenous digital theories and frameworks, *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture*. These two theoretical viewpoints, discussed in detail below, offer different readings on technology’s impacts in Indigenous societies, as well as different visions of how Indigenous people contribute to the production of digital technologies.

Several Indigenous scholars and artists have spoken with conviction on the limits and possibilities of technology. Substantivists believe that “technology cannot be transformed to produce a different function other than the one for which it was designed” (Young-ing 2005:185). Surely no one could argue against the fact that the internet has wildly exceeded the expectations of even its creators. However, there is the concern that the internet has been influenced by mainstream western values, both in its content or in the often exploitative and exclusionary ways that its access is produced and disseminated, and will thus carry those forward in self-perpetuating momentum.

Some recent studies on bias within computer algorithms has shown that the identities of programmers and users have an impact on the algorithms and how they respond to users. Bias within fields such as computer programming, which have long
favored white men, mean that the white male perspective becomes the default and impacts programming (Manyika et al. 2019; Heilweil 2020; Nouri 2021). Beyond the programmers themselves, even other users’ perceptions of cultural concepts like beauty impact who becomes featured on, for instance, social media sites. Algorithms may be predisposed to reproduce user biases and thus tend to highlight young, light skinned users over minority and older users, leading to issues such as Black content creators whose trends are taken up by white social media influencers, who are more favored by the majority of users and then profit financially from the dances and songs that Black users created (Asare 2020). Big Data can be used to direct humans in ways that reduce autonomy for everyone and, by extension, sovereignty for Indigenous nations and individuals. “Combining the power of Bio-Tech in genetics, brains, emotions, and human behavior with the power of Info-Tech in unprecedented data processing will lead to the formation of big-data algorithms which can most likely take away authority from humans and transfer it to algorithms” (Shoorcheh 2021:2). When these algorithmic trends combine with racism and colonialism, they can lead to another wave of intentional silencing of Indigenous voices through omission and the continued proliferation of stereotypes (or commissions). “Stereotyping indigenous peoples has been a useful tool for the implementation and maintenance of colonization, assimilation, acculturation, and imperialism. It benefits individuals and groups in power by keeping people who are considered different ‘in their proper place’ (Allen et al. 1992; Lorein 1995)” (Parezo 2013:319).

Environmentalist and economic concerns are also cited by substantivists. Digital technologies and the internet, and the economy built around them, are currently
enmeshed in larger capitalist systems and could certainly be seen as part of the status quo of settler colonialism. “Wolfe (2006) defined settler colonialism as a sociohistorical structure, not an event, that destroys indigenous peoples in order to replace them with colonizer culture, governance, laws, and ideologies” (Clark et al. 2011:40). Although she sees the potential for both collective and connective action through social media, as well as the benefits of digital media for dispersed communities, Marisa Duarte is also concerned about the impacts of technological production as well as how “our technocratic impulse treats the sky, etc… as airwaves,” commodifying nature in terms of its usefulness to technological “progress” (2021, Berkeley Center for New Media, History and Theory of New Media Lecture Series: Indigenous Technologies). In response, we must respond to the “crisis of technicized, technologically informed human beings” who must “reorient their belonging to the soil, clean water, clean air.” Nakamura likewise points out that “software is always a response to hardware and its constraints. Chief among these constraints is, and always has been, expense” (Nakamura 2014:936). This suggests that companies will continue to degrade the environment even if other, sustainable options are available, as long as cheaper options remain available. However, Nakamura also acknowledges the impact that activism in the past (specifically, the American Indian Movement’s presence at the Fairchild Semiconductor plant) had on production, and Hearn points out that “digital media and networks have also been imagined by Indigenous artists, activists, and intellectuals in ways that foreground relationships with land, water, and the nonhuman world” (Hearne 2017:11). Similar activism may push industries toward more ethical production methods for digital hardware.
The internet itself can be seen as binary (quite literally), as adherent to western legal structures that value individualistic rights over collective ones, and as invasive – all values that often conflict with traditional Indigenous values. “Cyberspace, and to a large extent the commercial and governmental infospheres, have been dominated by the U.S. in their contemporary development, in promoting U.S. interests, and in establishing a dominant market and cultural position for U.S. media and information products worldwide” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:200).

There are Marxist concerns about the level to which the internet encourages alienation in an already increasingly alienating society. Métis filmmaker Loretta Todd argued that “cyberspace… is driven by a much different ideology: born out of the climate of late capitalism, the need for cyberspace stems from a fear of the body, an aversion to nature, and a desire for salvation and transcendence of the earthly plane” (Hopkins 2005:135). Similarly, French cultural theorist Paul Virilio “has denounced new media technologies, and the means by which they ‘virtualize’ the physicalized understanding of landscape, geography and culture” (Srinivasan 2006:498). Christina Hill and Medeia DeHass note that digital media may legitimize Elders’ authority, or do the opposite, and “detach knowledge from its local Indigenous context… it objectifies it instead of recognizing its fluid and living nature” (Hill & DeHass 2018:43). While the connections drawn between the internet and the noosphere (described in detail below) seem to substantiate this concern, it is worth noting that a blended approach might be used that unites technology and ecology. Further, online communities may be able to support physical communities rather than supplanting them (Srinivasan 2006:499). “The internet has the potential to reinforce and reinvigorate (hopefully without ‘reinventing’ or
replacing) traditional forms of thought and ways of interpreting the world around us (Wemigwans 2008:35).

The very openness of the internet can be threatening to Indigenous interests, as Indigenous knowledge has frequently been made public via the internet, without proper approval or context. The “availability of politically sensitive information” concerns Indigenous groups within and beyond the United States; however, there are solutions being drafted to this issue which include digital replications of “the protocols of access required to interact with culturally-sensitive material,” a few of which were mentioned in more detail in Chapter Four (Brown & Nicholas 2012:308,310). The downside to these solutions is that some determination of indigeneity or degree of indigeneity must be determined, which is fraught with complications and almost sure to leave out some individuals of Indigenous descent. The “tensions between protecting and promoting traditional Indigenous knowledge” may also be viewed differently from tribal nation to tribal nation, and from individual to individual (Wemigwans 2008:31). For instance, in a study focused on Indigenous students’ opinions on a health website, “what some participants considered appropriate, others did not” (Filippi et al. 2013:490).

And of course, even though there have been substantial Indigenous contributions to the internet and digital media and a steady Indigenous presence since the early days of the internet, these contributions have been largely ignored in mainstream circles and even overlooked or forgotten within Indigenous Studies and Native communities. Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to cyberspace may indeed differ. “Cyberspace has been created within societies that view creation and the universe so differently – one that
creates hierarchies of being that reinforce separation and alienation with one that seeks harmony and balance with the self and the universe” (Todd 2005:157).

If substantivists are correct, there is little that ordinary people can do to alter these trends, which are both built into the systems and perpetuated by larger stereotypes and biases. Additionally, the ubiquity of the internet means that Indigenous people also cannot afford to resist it. Participating in it may be viewed as “another attempt to assimilate sovereign people into mainstream dominant culture” (Filippi et al. 2013:487). “In essence, the hegemonic assumptions of the global good of new media technologies have to be accepted by Indigenous people in order to ‘progress’ or have their voices heard” (Rekhari 2009:177). While this dissertation leans heavily toward the instrumentalist view, as did many interviewees whose comments embraced Indigenous uses of digital technology, concerns about privacy and appropriation, consumption of goods, and the power of hegemonic norms to overtake traditional cultural practices did emerge through discussions and should not be ignored, even by those of us with optimistic views.

However, substantivist perspectives should also be viewed critically. Several substantivist arguments stem from the assumption that the internet was created purely from a colonialist viewpoint by non-Indigenous peoples, and cannot be used outside of the context of its creation. Like other industries – not just other media such as film and television but all industries in colonial nations – the internet’s creation relied and continues to rely on the wealth created from stolen lands and underpaid labor. That is hardly arguable. However, many technological innovations have stemmed from Indigenous labor. “While both genders benefit from cheap computers, it is the flexible
labor of women of color, either outsourced or insourced, that made and continue to make
this possible” (Nakamura 2014:919). And Indigenous contributions to the internet have
never been limited to stolen lands and physical labor. Indigenous people have also
contributed valuable intellectual labor, stemming from creative conceptualizations of
cyberspace and innovative uses of new technologies. To assume that digital technologies
have been solely extractive of Indigenous communities tells part of the story, but only
part; it also makes the assumption that Indigenous people are not builders and creators,
but passive victims of modern technological development.

An instrumentalist view leaves room for more agency on the part of Indigenous
tech workers and enthusiasts, as well as artists. Anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins
as well as Indigenous Studies scholars such as Greg Young-ing caution against viewing
people as passive subjects, and argued for viewing them as dynamic agents. “The view
that new mediums, such as text and print, can be adapted into Indigenous cultures and
can support Indigenous political and social initiatives is consistent with instrumentalist
theorists, such as Mumford who has stated, ‘Technology is responsive to the ideological
and cultural situation into which it is introduced,’ and further (to repeat) that, ‘culture can
control the development of its tools”’ (Young-ing 2005:184).

Certainly, it is widely accepted that Indigenous people have used written language
forms and print media, photography, film, and even classic music and ballet for their own
purposes and to express Indigenous ideas and values (National Park Service; Cates 2021).
All of these technological forms originated, in part, from outside of North American
Indigenous traditional cultures, but received contributions from Indigenous people or
were creatively incorporated into Indigenous artistic practice. It seems strange to accept
that all of these technologies and art forms can be “Indigenized,” but digital media and the internet cannot. Instrumentalists, instead, acknowledge that Indigenous users have “appropriated media technologies to serve their own cultural, political and social visions” and continue to find ways to “program their digital and social media spaces with cultural logics and communicative strategies that negotiate and, to varying degrees, resist neoliberal regimes of race and technology” (Srinivasan 2006:497; Florini 2019:16).

In fact, some see revolutionary potential within digital media forms. In considering the internet as an “early draft” of the noosphere – a term coined by Jesuit priest and scholar Pierre Tielhard de Chardin to describe a shift away from a reality dominated by the physical, to one dominated by collective consciousness – some noted that the internet’s “accessibility, equality, and freedom” were “qualities that threaten U.S. domination and that expose its vulnerabilities” (Frank 2015; Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:200). “There remains a growing association in many societies between digitization and democracy, where digital culture is seen as a vehicle for freedom of expression and information, not only operating within, but also enabling the development of, a transparent and accountable socio-political system” (Brown & Nicholas 2012:309). Early internet uses and digital artists seemed to embrace this aspect of the internet, and it can be a liberatory space for those wishing to embody a new identity (Hearne 2017:7). It can also allow an insertion of Indigeneity into online spaces that are being “colonized” by mainstream populations and capitalistic uses of the internet. For instance, the virtual short films or “machinima” creations of Mohawk creator Skawennati, under the name *TimeTravellerTM*, are “ironically part of the larger project to decolonize cyberspace or take advantage of the critical purchase of a territory already colonized by a neoliberal
techno-meritocracy” (Jim 2015:4). In an interview in 2019, Justin Beatty noted that all artistic forms, including expression over the internet, have revolutionary potential. “People don’t feel heard, people don’t feel seen. They’re resorting to some of our time tested and true methods of change and revolution, so to speak. But you know, creating art is a revolutionary act too. If I make something that inspires somebody or makes them think differently or makes them feel reassured, then I feel good about it” (Justin Beatty, personal interview, 2019).

Projects like *TimeTraveller*TM, the creation of tribal nation websites, online activism, and even individual Indigenous creators’ TikTok pages, seem to demonstrate that Indigenous uses of new media can push back against hegemonic uses of the internet and cyberspace. These efforts show “the ability of Indigenous people to use technology to their own benefit, as a service to human endeavour, rather than view it within the confines of the aggressiveness and seductiveness of media corporations” (Rekhari 2009:179). And given the recent enhanced visibility of Native Americans in even mainstream forms – notably, the TV shows *Reservation Dogs* and *Rutherford Falls* – there is the possibility that digital media has heightened awareness of Indigenous people enough to begin making inroads into previously inaccessible mainstream media forms.

Furthermore, there is the potential for new technologies such as artificial intelligence to combat environmental pollution, possibly leading to technology without the baggage of environmental damage or ethical work practices. Automated farming machines can reduce food costs if they can be made affordable for communities; while farming by hand may be preferable for the knowledge it reproduces, the idea of organic food being provided to those who currently have no access to it is nevertheless a step in
the right direction. Artificial intelligence also has some promise in sustainability initiatives. “AI has the potential to accelerate global efforts to protect the environment and conserve resources by detecting energy emission reductions, CO2 removal, helping develop greener transportation networks, monitoring deforestation, and predicting extreme weather conditions” (Mulhern 2021). Writing on the power of algorithms and Big Data, Shoorcheh insists that “we have to use information technology and relational networks for making the earth a better living place for all of us” (Shoorcheh 2021:3).

A truly revolutionary view of the internet and digital communications sees it as having the same type of spirit that other items are imbued with in many Indigenous belief systems. While western narratives focus on the ghost in the machine, Indigenous thinkers have conceptualized spirit within the machine. Artist and digital media theorist Âhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw famously spoke about the internet providing a “truly networked way of being” (Loft & Swanson 2014). His views on technology being infused with spiritual potential, rather than being antithetical to the spiritual world, were highly influential in early Indigenous digital media scholarship in the United States and Canada. “Such is the way we often understand technology, as something alive and filled with spirit” (2bears 2014:14).

This position allows for technology – including its theorization, production, and usage – to find a place within Indigenous worldviews. “Tracking the convergence of the web and the Web – from the spider’s web described in intertribal prophecies, to the symbols of reclaimed relational and ecological knowledge in the mid- and late twentieth-century work of Indigenous writers and artists, to the earliest days of Internet chat rooms – reveals not only the ongoing relevance of traditional epistemologies but also the
recognition, through premonition and experience, of the powers, dangers, and possibilities of networked space” (Hearne 2017:12). And if technology can find a home within Indigenous worldviews, there is the possibility that every aspect of it might be brought into an Indigenous ethic which would reject coercive labor practices and environmental degradations.

New media, then, may both “show an alternative to hegemonic global narratives and corporate control over media production” but also may pressure corporate control in several industries into making inclusive and environmentalist decisions that such conservative industries would not otherwise take (Rekhari 2009:179).

Acknowledgment of Colonial Histories and Privileges

A growing practice in the Northeastern United States, and in the country more broadly, is a land acknowledgment at formal events. The mere act of acknowledgment is considered both culturally respectful and politically supportive; although most Indigenous individuals in the Northeast who I have spoken with concede that acknowledgement alone is not enough, it is seen as an important first step toward creating more workable relations between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people and institutions.

The first formal land acknowledgment that I personally heard within the Northeastern United States, and in fact, one of the first formal acknowledgments that I ever heard, was at the commencement celebration for Hampshire College graduates in 2015. Since then, land acknowledgments have become far more common. For instance, Patricia Saulis (Wolastoqey/Maliseet) who was one of MIT’s MLK Visiting Scholars,
worked to craft a land acknowledgment for MIT, in addition to leading discussions on Indigenous activist efforts and championing recommendations from the MIT Native American Student Association. The Springfield-Agawam area has also adopted an official land acknowledgment, drafted by Margaret Bruchac (Abenaki, of the University of Pennsylvania) and Laurel Davis-Delano (of Springfield College) (Springfield-Agawam Indigenous Land Acknowledgement).

Land acknowledgments can be politically advantageous for tribal nations that are still undergoing the lengthy and costly federal acknowledgment process or those who are acknowledged by the federal government, but whose identities are still dismissed by their non-Native neighbors or mainstream society. “Land acknowledgments are critically important, especially for the roughly 245 Tribes that are still awaiting recognition by the federal government” (Cleaves & Sepulveda 2021). Of course, there is additionally the issue of traditional territories and what communities claim them, which is far from an apolitical act. Not only do tribal nations disagree about where their homelands are, often because many lands were shared by tribal communities concomitantly or used by different groups in different seasons, but there's also the issue of the legitimacy that land acknowledgments provide. If, for instance, an Indigenous group wants to repurchase part of their original homeland to put into trust status (which would make the land, similar to reservation land, obligated to follow federal and tribal laws), but another group also claims that homeland, the group with more public acknowledgment as the “ancestral” community has a distinct advantage in legal proceedings. (The same issues apply to the creation of maps; in attempting to create a map of ancestral tribal homelands in Massachusetts in 2014, one solution to this issue was to use a color scheme where
territories’ colors could fade into one another and overlap, instead of hard lines to delineate traditional territories.)

Indigenous artists themselves spoke frequently about their positionality relative to other Indigenous groups, racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., sexualities and genders, and more. Several transplants to the Northeast explicitly acknowledged that, although they are Indigenous, they are living on the traditional homelands of others and are grateful for being permitted to do so. The use of the words “permitted” or “allowed” would appear to indicate that the traditional Indigenous group would have some way of evicting outsiders, which is of course not literally true; but the word choice does do important work. It acknowledges the right – not in U.S. legal systems, but in traditional Indigenous systems – of the primary group to evict outsiders, and places this power with them through the use of the words “permit” and “allow.” It also acts as a thanksgiving for inclusion in Native events, as the local Indigenous communities could absolutely choose to be socially exclusionary.

Indigenous artists also considered their own levels of privilege relative to other marginal communities within the United States. In our interview, podcast host Minty LongEarth noted that marginalization would impact Black women before “working its way out to my light-skinned mixed self” (personal interview, 2019). She also acknowledged the power she has as someone with a podcast that has followers. Minty noted that “we’ve made missteps and said stuff that we didn’t really think through, and we have to own that, too” (personal interview, 2019).

Among non-Indigenous people, identification as an “ally” appeared to make a significant difference in acknowledgment of land losses and historical harm done to
Indigenous people. Non-allies seem threatened by the idea of land returning to Indigenous people. In the *Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury Corp* case, the Mashpee Wampanoag sought to prove that lands were illegally purchased away from the tribe in direct violation of the statutes of the Nonintercourse Act, and asked that lands not occupied by individual families be restored to tribal control. Locals panicked over fear of losing their homes, and at least one juror admitted to receiving a threatening phone call. Several Indigenous interviewees echoed the pushback that many non-Indigenous people have when it comes to thinking about how land loss and colonization has benefitted them and disadvantaged Native Americans. Commenting on general mainstream society, Justin Beatty wrote that “it’s easier to forget about Native people than it is to deal with the reality that people are complicit in the ongoing issues that Native people face” (personal interview, 2019). In reflecting on why her interview with infamous ethnic fraud Rachel Dolezal was so challenging, Minty LongEarth said that she thought it was “her lack of any awareness about anyone outside of herself” (personal interview, 2019).

Non-Indigenous people who identified explicitly as allies, however, had a very clear understanding of their positionality. Several non-Indigenous creators I spoke to who work alongside Indigenous people were quick to fully acknowledge their positions as part of colonizing society. Randall Steele described his own ancestors as immigrants to Massachusetts who would have been oppressing the local Indigenous populations through their movements, and when speaking of Native people fighting back, admitted that “I believe I would have done the same thing… reading some of these first accounts, you can’t read these and not feel moved. A lot of times, the writers tried to depict them as savages, but they were just people trying to defend their homes, nothing anybody else
wouldn’t have done” (personal interview, 2019). This more nuanced understanding of history departs from earlier American accounts that portrayed Indigenous uprisings such as King Philip’s War as vicious and violent without reason.

Public Radio’s Indigenous series, which focused on the Brothertown Indian Nation and Samson Occom, began with a very explicit acknowledgment of settler colonialism. Hosts Ana Gonzalez and Alex Nunes’s initial topic was immigration, and they understood that they must “think of immigration not as a neutral term… it encompasses some parts of colonization, that settler colonial mentality” (personal interview, 2019). Fortunately, Public Radio welcomes such a progressive and nuanced understanding, and their editor was supportive of the idea of looking at immigration from multiple perspectives. Ana and Alex also recognized the burden on them, in outlining this story, to provide historically accurate representations. “We wanted to really go through primary sources and make sure that we were representing it in a way that was as truthful as we could be” (Ana Gonzalez, personal interview, 2019).

While Whyte wrote in 2018 that a “denial” (of white people that they are living in their ancestors’ fantasy world) “threatens allies’ capacities to build coalitions with Indigenous peoples,” this denial seemed largely absent in the Northeastern-based non-Indigenous allies and content creators with whom I spoke (Whyte 2018:224). This is promising, in that it indicates that an intentional desire to be an ally, paired with historical knowledge, can make non-Indigenous people more aware of the historical losses of Native Americans and more likely to be supportive of the cultural and political efforts of Indigenous groups.

**Appropriation, Legal Concerns, and Legal Identity**
Tribal nation websites, and even Indigenous individuals, must grapple with what information is placed online, with the knowledge that anything posted can be “copied and sent, even with protections” (Chief Cheryll Toney Holley, personal interview). With that in mind, the Nipmuc Nation selectively chose which parts of their language to put online, and what pieces of cultural information, while having other issues broached only within their private Facebook group.

In speaking about the danger of appropriation that online materials post, Jen Weston (Standing Rock citizen, who works with the Mashpee Wampanoag) said, “Indigenous peoples must be the purveyors and developers and communicators of our own stories and cultural and linguistic knowledge, while also maintaining clearly defined legal protections over our intellectual property and copyrights” (personal interview, 2017). Going even further, some scholars are working to challenge practices such as copyright and their basis in individual rather than collective rights, and to find legal ways of working around these systems.

Justin Beatty emphasized the same point: “We do that as Native people… we have to be careful about what information we share. That plays out in my art. I have to be careful about what I share, like, I try to avoid using specific symbolism in my art” (personal interview, 2019). He recounted several instances where he had purposely altered images to obscure symbols with specific personal or tribal meanings. “I think that that’s a very Native thing, being aware of those kinds of things and especially in the digital age where it becomes so easy to transmit information… it should make you take pause and be concerned, ‘should I be putting this out there?’” (personal interview, 2019).
Casey Figueroa could only think of one time where his work was taken without his permission, but since it was a photograph used as inspiration for art in a different medium, he viewed it as more flattering and less problematic than if someone had used a duplicate of one of his pieces for their own commercial gain. Generally, he allowed his art to be used for Indigenous event flyers and both his digital art and paintings have circulated on Facebook and Instagram through these means.

Randall Steele, a photographer who is not Indigenous but often works with Indigenous subjects, emphasized the right of an artist to determine the context that their art becomes a part of. While he generally consented to his art’s use, he was also wary for how it could be used without his permission. “If it’s for something vulgar, or racist, I’m not going to say yes – and that’s why I would like a hand in it” (personal interview, 2019). At the same time, he acknowledged the benefits of having one’s work circulate so easily online. “It’s free advertising in a way… the upside is that you get thousands of people who can look at it and find it and download it. And they also can take it. I mean, there’s a tradeoff. You can’t sit there and protect everything. You’ll go nuts!” (personal interview, 2019). Several other Indigenous digital artists and social media users that I met with similarly acknowledged the inherent risk of one’s online materials being distributed widely and with little artist control. “It comes with the territory,” noted one artist with whom I spoke at a local Indigenous gathering.

Indigenous artists themselves must be aware of what is fair use. Breakdances with Wolves co-host Minty LongEarth gave credit to their editor Michelle: “She’s amazing… we’ll say something that might be in violation of something we just learned about, or we couldn’t just play anyone’s songs… but every week we have Michelle saving our butt!”
(personal interview, 2019). Most of the Indigenous artists who I interviewed showed a marked concern with appropriating others’ works. Justin Beatty stated that “I try to represent things respectfully that aren’t directly associated with me without it becoming appropriative. Because that’s a big thing for me, trying to make sure that I’m not appropriating from a lateral culture” (personal interview, 2019). Among Indigenous artists, there is also an awareness of traditional gift-giving protocols and how these translate online. For instance, a well-known local museum official leaving a position published a video explaining his decision and singing a song he composed and gifted to the museum, thus explicitly allowing them to use the recording or play the song in their own media or at future events.

Indigenous artists are careful not to appropriate from others because they are aware of the power of narrative, both stories that come from within Indigenous communities and the stories that dominant society has told about Indigenous people. Western societies generally devalue the power of narrative with phrases like “it’s just a story” (this, in spite of the fact that one of the most powerful corporations in the world, Disney, makes its entire revenue off of stories in the form of film or lived story-book experiences at their theme parks). Stories are clearly a source of entertainment sorely needed in every society, but in Indigenous societies they still have import as moral teachings and ways of telling histories. They have perhaps become more important given their attacks under policies of cultural genocide, their collection by anthropologists, and the way that alternate stories have been told that paint Indigenous people as savages or mystics. “For Native people, justice resides chiefly in the assertion of the right to self-determination. Unambiguous and immutable. Thus, our stories become more than a
consumable, communal property. They become a part of the collective assertion of who we are as people” (Loft 2005:64). Thus, it is extremely upsetting to see either real traditional stories circulating online when they should not have been made public in that way, or to see misinformation posted online. It also hurts Indigenous media sovereignty, and thus sovereignty efforts in general, and perpetuates a hegemonic version of the internet rather than a liberatory one. “If there is a continuation of interpretations of people not on their own terms but on terms prescribed by others who have power, access, and control then the Internet may serve the dominant at the expense of all others.” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:224).

At the same time, Indigenous nations and individuals in the Northeast must make highly politicized choices about when to actually involve legal mechanisms against appropriation or misinformation. As the Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury Corp. case of 1979 demonstrates (along with countless other tribal law suits), the legal system has rarely prioritized Indigenous concerns, and is particularly lacking in understanding about communal knowledge and art. A few recent environmental court wins may be providing a bit more optimism, but even successful court cases are lengthy, costly affairs.

Furthermore, lawsuits that focus on appropriation are difficult to win and sometimes have no formal legal backing, as there are virtually no protections for art that is produced by multiple artists or handed down through generations. Western legal systems presume the stereotype of the “lone artist,” and insist that older art forms eventually enter the public domain. While liberals often support the idea of copyright expiration and the entry of popular materials into the public domain, this means that many Indigenous creations (particularly those published by academics in the early 19th
century, either with consent, under coercion, or against consent) are considered “fair game” for artists to use. This is, in fact, how Stephanie Meyer acquired Quileute traditional stories which were then incorporated into her *Twilight* book series.

A tribal nation that appears too aggressive or litigious may offend non-Indigenous neighbors or be perceived as militant (thus fitting in with the “angry Indian activist” stereotype). Most tribal nations in the Northeast have small territories and hometowns, and live closely alongside non-Indigenous neighbors. The tribal casinos in the Northeast employ large numbers of non-Indigenous people, as do many Indigenous nations. Tribal nation websites even talk about collaborative projects and how tribal efforts are meant to benefit entire ecosystems or towns, not just tribal members. There seems to be an overt attempt to demonstrate that Indigenous people in the Northeast are invested in mutually beneficial relationships with all of their neighbors.

The result of these factors is that many Indigenous nations have leaned heavily toward social pressure and education when faced with appropriation, misinformation, or even offensive incidents. Tribal officials with whom I’ve spoken have sometimes directly emailed website hosts to let them know that they have incorrect information posted. Schools teaching colonialist, biased histories often have tribal historians and Elders who meet with school officials, condemning the biased actions while offering to volunteer their time giving the Indigenous perspective. Only when Indigenous concerns are completely dismissed does the matter escalate into protests (either in person or through online petitions). While this approach is extremely laudable and surely maintains some measure of community goodwill, it should also be noted that the responsibility often falls on Indigenous people to educate others about themselves, while maintaining a gracious
attitude about the burden of correcting offensively biased ideas about their own communities and ancestors.

Finally, there is the politicized issue of who is actually Indigenous. “Native American” is the only racial category within the United States that carries a burden of legal proof. An Indigenous person may come from a federally recognized community, a state recognized community, or an entirely unrecognized community. They may be personally enrolled or not enrolled. They may be acknowledged by a community or not. They may be culturally knowledgeable or not. This creates a myriad of statuses; enrolled but in a state-recognized group, closely related to enrolled members of a federally recognized group but not enrolled personally, enrolled in a federally recognized group but adopted out at an early age and therefore culturally uninformed and disconnected from the community, part of a federally recognized group but whose family didn’t have adequate papers to be enrolled despite community acceptance and extensive cultural knowledge, and so on. Given the fight that Indigenous nations in the Northeast have had to be seen a legitimate – and the heart wrenching act of dis-enrolling known Elders, which some tribes had to do solely due to lack of official documentation – all of these legal issues are well known, which can make identity discussions complex.

One particularly thorny issue for many Indigenous artists is The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, a truth-in-advertising law that limits what art can be claimed as “Indigenous created,” “Native American,” “Native-made,” “American Indian made,” and so on. Only enrolled members of federally recognized or state recognized tribes can have their artwork recognized as such, legitimizing it as Indigenous art. Each Indigenous artist and official I spoke to was concerned about the specificities of the act, in spite of
supporting its overall spirit and the fight against non-Indigenous appropriative behaviors. Justin Beatty noted that “it’s a matter of enrollment, not a matter of connection with community, or having a relationship to language, or participating,” but at the same time “I completely understand it… I still see plenty of companies do something like take the Navajo nation seal, change the colors, take the wording off and put something else on it, and sell it on t-shirts” (personal interview, 2019). A representative of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum noted that they had to abide by the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 and that it did afford some assurance against fraudulent Indigenous art, but at the same time noted that it could potentially exclude legitimate Indigenous and Indigenous-descent artists due to the very nature of recognition, particularly federal recognition which relies heavily on documentation that some families cannot provide (personal interview, 2019).

Discussions of authenticity in terms of who is “Native” and who is not Native were approached with caution by each Indigenous person I interviewed. While it is true that “people who ‘wannabe’ Indian but are deemed inauthentic are despised by ‘real’ Indians,” contrary to Jacobs’ findings, many Northeasters did not solely use “reservation origins, brown skin and/or acceptable blood quanta” as sole determinants (Jacobs 2017:582). Northeastern Indigenous people are hesitant to publicly leverage accusations of appropriation, due to a longer history of intermixture with European and African populations in the Northeast, and the racist acts of erasure that have happened to even the most widely accepted Indigenous leaders in the area. Northeastern Indigenous groups have, in fact, received racist remarks about their own Indigeneity from both non-Indigenous people and other Indigenous groups, usually groups from the western United States who experienced colonization far later than Northeasters and are therefore
currently less likely to have intermarried with non-Indigenous people to the same degree. A high amount of evidence (and not simply a lack of phenotypical looks or no obvious community ties), must be present for talk of identity appropriation to circulate widely. For instance, if a person moves to the area lacking any legal or cultural community ties in their own nation, rejects opportunities to become close with Indigenous communities in the area, and exhibits behavior that could be considered harmful or “bad medicine” toward others, these acts may lead to suspicion over their identity given enough time.

All of these legal issues play out in discussions of what to post online, as well as how to respond to posts that others create and circulate. Public responses from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people also have a feedback role that draw artists’ attention to what kinds of creations they want to make and disseminate.

**Stereotypes, Public Perceptions, and Political Influence**

Although stereotypes have been addressed in Chapters Three and Four, they are worthy of consideration in this chapter as well due to their impact on public policy. Everyday perceptions of Indigenous people have an impact on the way they are viewed as political entities, as sovereign nations.

Writing about Australia, William Lempert notes that it “is a country in which the public imagination has a significant influence on Aboriginal policy decisions” (Lempert 2018:209). The same is certainly true in the United States. Historically, negative stereotypes about Native Americans have been used throughout U.S. history to “justify restrictions placed on Native nations’ sovereignty” (Davis-Delano et al. 2020:56). Davis-Delano further notes that “within the context of the hegemonic U.S. nation, Native nation
sovereignty is affected by the actions of the U.S. government, and the U.S. government is influenced by the public – especially White Americans since they hold the most power in U.S. society,” and that therefore it is likely that non-Native opinions about Native nation sovereignty affect the degree to which the U.S. government supports this sovereignty (Davis-Delano et al. 2020:75). It is possible that digital and social media may begin to combat the largely damaging mainstream messages about Indigenous people. “Whether this growing range of Indigenous media can influence public opinion and policy is as yet unclear” (Burrows 2016:11).

Dominant stereotypes are largely the way in which non-Indigenous people judge the authenticity of Indigenous individuals’ and tribes’ identification as Native American. As the 2001 documentary *Black Indians: An American Story* vividly demonstrates, “mythic Indian archetypes, such as the uncontaminated, dark skinned, black-haired “warrior,” live on in the dominant culture. These standards continue to be used by Indians and non-Indians alike to judge unknown individuals’ Indian identity claims” (Jacobs 2017:574). Many prominent Northeastern Indigenous tribal members were interviewed in that documentary, underscoring a history of integrating non-Native people in this particular area. “People don’t understand that Native American is a legal designation, not an ethnic identity” (Justin Beatty, personal interview, 2019).

While the legalities surrounding Native American identity are still murky to many non-Indigenous people, increased Native American visibility in popular media, federal acknowledgment of several Northeastern tribes, highly visible local tribal events, and programs within schools systems geographically close to Northeastern Indigenous groups (but limited to tribal members) have likely helped non-Indigenous people in the Northeast
begin to see Indigenous people in the area as legitimate, even if every tribal member does not always match stereotypical phenotypes. That is not to say that every non-Indigenous person respects their Indigenous neighbors, but there seems to be a gradual improvement in terms of acknowledgment of tribal authenticity.

The move away from stereotypical imagery is crucial. “Scholars like Spivak (1988) and Narayan (1997) suggest that the ‘subaltern’ – people who (like AIs) exist outside the hegemonic power structure of a colonizing society – will not be permitted to speak about their experiences as long as their authenticity is denied. Their authenticity inevitably will be denied, however, unless they ‘strategically occupy’ the ‘roles’ designated for them by the colonizers” (Jacobs 2017:576). However, even if certain people attempt to embrace highly visible symbols of Indigeneity (as some Northeastern tribal leaders were forced to do in previous decades, wearing Plains-style headdresses in order to be seen as legitimate and advocate for their people), certain aspects of someone’s appearance such as skin color cannot be changed to meet dominant expectations. Rather than feel that pressure to meet stereotypical expectations, the impetus should be put on dominant society to let go of those inaccurate images. Replacing stereotypes with accurate imagery will be difficult, as the history and current social and legal status of Indigenous people is highly complex and “Americans don’t deal well with complexity, don’t deal well with complexity at all,” but it can be accomplished through educational and media strategies (Justin Beatty, personal interview, 2019).

If stereotypes continue to be challenged by non-Indigenous people, the effects will go beyond taking pressure off of Indigenous individuals to meet others’ expectations in order to have their identity validated as legitimate. It will also impact legal
proceedings. Leaders who do not meet preconceived notions (including female leaders, who are vastly underrepresented in media portrayals of Native Americans) may be taken more seriously if those notions begin to lose sway. “The notion of authenticity is critical in this arena because it is often crucial to the arguments mounted by indigenous peoples in relation to knowledge and culture” (Tuhiwai Smith 1999:104-105).

Stereotypes are “easily reinforced through multiple forms of media, so believed and instantaneously accepted as real that they were used to justify social authority and power – in other words, the decisions that are made about, for, or on behalf of Native peoples without thinking of the consequences to those stereotyped of the realities of their lives” (Parezo 2013:322-323). A reduction in stereotypical attributes as the basis for social recognition of Indigenous people, which seems to be slowly gaining steam, would have far-reaching political implications. It might enable Indigenous issues to be taken more seriously, and for Indigenous leaders who don’t fit stereotypes to have more public support.

**The Gaming Debate and Digital Media**

One of the most troubling aspects of mainstream Americans’ understanding of Native American gaming is the idea that gaming is an ethnic right unfairly granted to Native Americans. In fact, Native American reservation lands and trust lands are held “in trust” by the federal government, making them subject to federal law but only limited state regulations. This status began due to a paternalistic system that insisted that Native Americans were not intellectually capable of managing their own lands, and needed the American federal government to manage them (an arrangement which resulted in the exploitation of Indigenous lands and the mysterious disappearance of billions of dollars
that were gained by leasing those lands out to corporations). However, tribal nations eventually found a benefit to this arrangement. Because there are no federal laws against gaming (the very reason that states can determine whether to allow it, like Nevada does, or ban it), Native American lands with federal trust status are not (at least, according to legal theory) subject to state laws on gaming, even if those lands are surrounded on all sides by state lands. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 solidified the rights of Indigenous tribal nations to pursue economic development through gaming, and added regulatory guidelines including state compacts for certain types of gaming.

A 2001 study that examined 58 Class III Native American casino websites, evaluating them based on marketing principles, found that at the time, “only half (55.7%) of the operations had a web site,” a number which they felt would surely rise (Choi & Hsu 2001). Choi and Hsu were right to make this prediction, as websites for Indigenous tribal nations have drastically increased over the last twenty years. In contrast to many of the web sites that Choi and Hsu studied, each Northeastern tribal nation that I examined with ties to gaming provided detailed information for potential visitors, including area attractions (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and hotel recommendations; they also contained a great deal of tribal history (unlike the only 34.5% of web sites that Choi and Hsu found that introduced their tribal history) (Choi & Hsu 2001:111).

Gaming is particularly visible in the Northeastern United States, with two of the most successful gaming operations being the Mohegan nation’s Mohegan Sun, and the Mashantucket Pequot’s Foxwoods. In terms of sheer footage, Mohegan Sun, operated by the Mohegan, is the second largest tribal casino in the United States, and the third largest is Foxwoods Resort Casino, operated by the Mashantucket Pequot. The state of
Connecticut, which houses both casino operations, was the sixth highest grossing state for tribally owned casinos in 2016, bringing in $1.61 billion (Harris 2021). Both casinos, through their state compacts, contribute 25% of their slot winning to the state of Connecticut, in addition to job creation (Hallenbeck 2021). Focus on the benefits provided to non-Native communities was, in fact, a recurrent theme across several Northeastern tribal websites that discussed gaming.

Community and museum websites for the Aquinnah Wampanoag, Mashantucket Pequot, Mashpee Wampanoag, Mohegan, and St. Regis Mohawk broached the topic of gaming, with the Mohegan featuring more than twice the references to gaming that other community websites had. Given both the preeminence of Mohegan Sun and its direct role in the tribal economy, this level of representation makes perfect sense.

![Figure 16: Spread of gaming references across websites.](image)

Previous research has called for a clearer link between tribal gaming enterprises and the benefits of gaming to Native American tribal nations (Choi & Hsu 2001). Several
websites in the Northeast have answered this call, clearly explaining how gaming supports both modern and traditional Native activities as well as how it contributes to the non-Native community.

The Mohegan tribal nation website described the details of why Indigenous groups can maintain casinos, and even went through some finer points of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. The Mohegan tribe also highlighted the benefits of gaming to the state of Connecticut’s overall revenue generation and job opportunities.

The Pequot nation site describes the Indian Gaming Commission and the extra regulation that Indigenous gaming is subject to, explaining that “Indian gaming is similar in many respects to a state lottery: they are both operated by governments to fund essential governmental services. However, Indian gaming, or tribal governmental gaming, is actually more heavily regulated because there is involvement on the Tribal, Federal, and State levels.” The Mashantucket Pequot Museum website also makes it clear that the Foxwoods Casino supports the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, and notes that it is a Smithsonian Affiliate and the largest Native American museum in the world.

The Mashpee Wampanoag cite lauded their First Light Casino development plan, noting that it “represents growth, progression, and opportunity while revitalizing the economic future for the City of Taunton” (Massachusetts). As their land holdings in trust status were threatened (thus threatening their ability to have a gaming enterprise), the Mashpee increased their educational outreach with videos and written statements describing their hard-won status as a federally recognized tribe, their history within their traditional lands, and how trust status and gaming work in relation to Indigenous nations.
The Aquinnah Wampanoag had a minor focus on gaming, directing all inquiries toward the Aquinnah Wampanoag Gaming Corporation.

The benefits that most of these tribal nation sites explicitly point to may explain previous findings that “voters who lived closer to non-gaming Native nations were less likely to support Native nation gaming, but voters who lived close to gaming Native nations were more apt to support Native nation gaming” (Davis-Delano et al. 2020:61).

In terms of code co-occurrence across all of the websites studied in this dissertation, “gaming” was most closely associated with: “legal/government issues” (21), discussion of land/territory (17), and economic development (14). Again, this shows that Native American tribal nations have answered the call to dispel common misbeliefs about their right to have gaming operations and to clearly show the benefits of gaming. While the term “sovereignty” had a low co-occurrence with gaming (3), the emphasis on legal issues and land/territory certainly suggests a focus on Native American tribal nation rights, as does a more qualitative reading of the sites. These web pages allow for Indigenous groups to enter their own narrative about gaming into the public discourse.

Research in 2007 on a range of official tribal websites that featured gaming showed a high use of stereotypical imagery; the authors found that “nearly 4 out of 10 tribes with casinos represent their own identities using the historic relic frame… in contrast, only 1 in 10 of the tribes without casinos communicates the same identity” (Cuillier & Ross 2007). However, tribal nations in the Northeastern United States did not exhibit this higher level of stereotypical visual imagery. Looking at all instances where gaming web pages also featured photographs, there were 17 instances where photographs were used alongside gaming text. Of the photographs featuring people (rather than, say,
buildings), five featured people in full traditional regalia, two featured people in regalia accessories only, and eight featured people in fully contemporary clothing with no signifiers of Indigeneity. Photographs therefore leaned more into contemporary representations of Indigenous people than stereotypical or “expected” ones.

Looking at specific terminology used in conjunction with gaming, gaming was associated with the term “tribal” 32 times and “Indian” 15 times, as opposed to the terms “Indigenous” (0 co-occurrences) and “Native”/“Native American” (10 co-occurrences). Some might argue that this reflects a use of stereotypical language. However, it is equally likely to do with the fact that “tribal gaming enterprise,” “tribal-state compacts” and the “Indian Gaming Regulatory Act” are all established, official legal terms related to Indigenous gaming. In fact, most web pages that dealt with the topic of gaming used a mix of modern Native imagery and non-stereotypical traditional imagery. The use of some traditional imagery (such as images of tribal members in regalia) is not simply a tactic for “Indigenous peoples [to] negotiate Anglo-imposed identity to their own advantage” (Cuillier & Ross 2007:199). Many of these images represent real cultural practices and culturally meaningful objects, and they are frequently featured alongside contemporary clothing and settings. Having non-stereotypical, tribally specific traditions shown in conjunction with gaming enterprises and icons of modernity may reinforce the idea that gaming supports the maintenance of Indigenous culture and contemporary survival, and is much more than a way to simply gain wealth. It may also undo the prevalent assumption that Native American gaming nations as divorced from their traditional cultures, as mainstream media frequently portrays – especially on the eastern coast of the United States (McLaurin 2012).
However, one aspect of Indigenous websites that Choi and Hsu found in their 2001 study that may still apply today is their observation that web sites “can further demonstrate the positive impact that casinos have had on the people and community” (Choi & Hsu 2001:112). While some websites describe this, perhaps even greater emphasis could tie together gaming enterprises and cultural revitalization. Having toured Mohegan Sun as an employee for the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association which held their 2012 meeting at this location, I was taken back by how much each design and architectural feature of the casino was influenced by traditional stories and values. The handrails, for instance, were based on Mohegan basket weaving designs. While it may have been a conscious choice not to share these aspects of Mohegan culture online, prominently pointing out to visitors examples of how traditional practices were integrated into handrails, carpet designs, and other Mohegan Sun designs may underscore that gaming is not a departure from traditional Indigenous cultures, but can be a way to support and extend them. It certainly impressed this visitor as I was given a guided tour of the space in preparation for the NAISA conference.

**Tourism and Economic Development**

Few studies have examined tourism and economic development in relation to Indigenous nation websites. In a 2000 study of 27 Native American web pages focused to some degree on tourism, topics included “support of cultural integrity and traditional values in the development process, the preservation and sanctity of the sites, ceremonies, artefacts, and ritual involved in the tourism process, and codes and processes in tourism development” (Buhalis 2000:363). A 2008 study found that tribal newspapers posted online focused somewhat on economic development, and that these were primarily
related to themes of tribal empowerment and sovereignty (Qureshi & Trumbly-Lamsam 2008). And in 2016, Seikel found that “a few tribes had sites which appeared to be primarily aimed at promotion of their businesses; however, it is not uncommon for tribes to devote pages on a site to business promotions, tourism, and/or employment” (Seikel 2016:40).

Of the 12 websites examined in this dissertation, economic development most often co-occurred with the subjects: formal education (17 co-occurrences), genealogy/membership/enrollment (14 co-occurrences), gaming (14 co-occurrences), environmental concerns and education (14 co-occurrences). This finding seems to again highlight a positive outlook toward gaining an education and working with educational institutions and universities.

![Economic Development Chart]

**Figure 17: Spread of economic development references across websites.**

As the chart above shows, most Indigenous groups examined within this dissertation had a focus on economic development, apart from the Nipmuc (whose website was in a transitional process) and the Kanatsiohareke Mohawk, who did not have
long-term economic development plans but do run a store that was advertised on their website. Interestingly, few economic development plans focused on non-gaming related tourism, although powwow and events were often open to the public and tend to attract mostly local Native and local non-Native visitors.

**Language Issues**

While languages were discussed in Chapter Four, it is worth returning to them briefly to understand the connections that Indigenous content creators draw between traditional languages and Indigenous rights more broadly.

In the tribal nation websites I examined, native language use appears to be heavily tied to forays into Indigenous rights. The use of Indigenous languages heavily co-occurred with legal/government issues (at 32 times), Native news and events (31 times), community action and activism (26 times), discussions on land/territory (26 times), formal education (25 times), health and healthcare (18 times), environmental concerns/education (17 times), and hunting/gathering/fishing/gardening (17 times). It seems to be a key assertion of cultural continuity and therefore persistent presence upon the land.

Related to the use of Indigenous languages in identity assertion and the struggle for rights is its use in artistic works. Indigenous languages, in written form, could be seen in 42 photographs and 20 drawn/painted images across these websites. There were 24 further co-occurrences where Indigenous language was used while Native art, music, or literature was being discussed. This may lend credence to the idea that Indigenous art is political by its nature and through the identity of its producers, an idea discussed more in
other chapters. Some international artists have used Indigenous languages without translations, as a way of allowing speakers to be privy to meanings that remain obscured to non-speakers, essentially providing a right of access that outsiders do not have.

Language issues, such as the loss of aging speakers, the boarding school era, and instruction, were discussed fairly infrequently across websites, with two notable exceptions being the Kanatsiohareke Mohawk community page and the Mashpee Wampanoag page. However, these two groups take different approaches to language instruction and preservation. The Kanatsiohareke community teaches the Mohawk language on site during intensive summer courses, which are open to everyone and often include student groups from higher education institutions. While the Mohawk language is shared, along with some basic crafts, Elder Tom Porter was clear on the fact that no spiritual practices are shared. The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Language Department, as part of their work with the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project (WLRP), took a different approach to language instruction and have prioritized reaching Mashpee tribal members and their direct relatives first and through in-person instruction. The inclusion of the Wôpanâak language at the local high school in Mashpee is also restricted to tribal members. Regardless of the different ways these two communities have chosen to support Indigenous language acquisition, it is clear that they both share a strong desire to see the languages flourish in the future.

Both groups emphasized in-person language learning, underscoring Jennifer Weston’s comment about languages being meant to be shared “breath to breath” (personal interview, 2017). “If languages… are to be taken up through the Internet and there is not a speaker of the language or member of the cultural group to explain its
relationship to the people then culture and languages can become commodities” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:213). A few Indigenous transplants to the Northeast did learn their ancestral languages online, but always through live lessons so that live interaction, if not breath itself, could provide some cultural context to their learning.

Some of the words most frequently linked to language discussions were “preservation” and “revival.” The importance of language preservation was also often linked to identity and the sense of continuity from ancestral practices moving forward into the future. The importance of language to continued Native identity may explain why discussions of language maintenance co occurred with the word “tribal” 27 times, “tradition” 18 times, “Native/Native American” 18 times, and “Indian” 18 times across these twelve websites. Although Indigenous languages, as we saw above, were often used in arenas that deal with Indigenous rights, there was little discussion of language preservation’s role relating to activism, legal proceedings, or the arts. It was, however, highly linked with identity. The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe’s Council Ordinance (2009-ORD-005 on June 10, 2009) states that their language is “central to the protection of the customs, culture, and spiritual well-being of the people,” and it acknowledges a “need to secure its survival for the benefit of future generations” (Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe).

Of course, as with all signifiers of Indigeneity, ancestral languages can be used in political calculations of who is Indigenous. Author and artist Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz talked about how her identity is challenged online; first, challengers want to see tribal enrollment, which she has. Then they advance to whether she can speak Inuittitut; when she demonstrates some command of the language, they start to begrudgingly accept her identity and art (personal interview, 2021). Such judgments about authenticity, relying on
language, might be projected on entire tribal nations, adding an additional political dimension to language revitalization and maintenance.

**Indigenous Celebrity**

Lori Kido Lopez noted that Asian American YouTube celebrities appeared to be “careful not to alienate any of their core audience with anything too controversial” (Florini 2019:15). This kind of political caution is not present in Indigenous celebrities. Their audiences are usually either not large enough to warrant this level of caution, or their audience is primarily comprised of Indigenous people and allies who would stand behind strong political support of Native actions. Mi’kmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby, for instance, “is not worried about offending audiences with graphic content” (Lempert 2014:171). In an interview, he expanded on this, saying “it isn’t the violent imagery that offends, but the message, that your culture is destroying mine… [and] that white people come first and everyone else is commodified into an ethnicity” (Lempert 2014:171). In fact, there may be a heightened pressure on Indigenous social media figures to endorse Indigenous activism.

Indigenous activism has a complicated interplay with notions of Indigenous identity and authenticity. During the Standing Rock water protection activism that took place in 2016, non-Standing Rock Native Americans related to those events in a variety of ways. Many people traveled directly to Standing Rock, and this was often a highly legitimizing action that demonstrated both Indigenous identity and commitment to environmental and Indigenous issues. Campers at Standing Rock posted images to social media accounts, and after departing, many gave public and school speeches for weeks and months following their trips. Other Indigenous people who could not travel supported
Standing Rock in other ways – through social media posts, local events, talks explaining the issue to the public, and fundraising efforts. Support of Standing Rock was a unifying moment for “Indian Country,” and a chance for some Indigenous people with complex identities to more visibly demonstrate their commitment to Indigenous identity. “Both non-Indians and Indians themselves question the authority of urban, ‘mixed blood’ Indians to discuss indigenous issues because they are situated outside of mythic yet legitimizing notions of Indianness” (Jacobs 2017:570). The Standing Rock movement gave such individuals a chance to become involved and visibly connect their identities to a prominent Indigenous event while being of service. Speaking on the topic of activism for Black Americans, Sarah Florini similarly notes that “individual aspirations are inextricably bound with collective benefit. They [users] engage in this labor with the hope of personal success and of doing something positive for Black people in general” (Florini 2019:25).

Of course, personally benefitting financially from anything related to Standing Rock would be abhorrent, and fundraising efforts occasionally had to be defended from such concerns. For instance, I took part in a fundraising event in Northampton, Massachusetts, and assisted in counting the contributions and overseeing the transfer of the funds, but shortly after this process, one online accusation of mishandling led me to post receipts proving that every penny did, indeed, find its way to the Red Warrior Camp. In fact, every Indigenous person I know who spoke about Standing Rock in classrooms or for nonprofit groups, if they received any monetary payment (such as a speaking fee), donated the entirety of these payments to the Standing Rock movement.
In a chapter I co-authored with Jonathan Hill in *Indigenous Celebrity: Entanglements with Fame*, the politics around identity, celebrity status, and activism are unpacked (Hill & McLaurin 2021). While few people appeared to gain personal wealth related to Standing Rock, there were accusations of enhancement of certain individuals’ celebrity status by other Indigenous people. Indigenous celebrities had to be somewhat careful not to appear to dominate the movement or use it to gain more screen time; accordingly, most actors and artists who were well known prior to 2016 supported the movement either in local ways (through fundraising) or through quiet visits with minimal social media posts. Indigenous activists who became more well-known through the movement and other activist efforts, such as Dallas Goldtooth, had to balance their community responsibilities to lead the movement and occasionally act as its “face” with consistent humility to ward off Indigenous critiques. Non-Indigenous celebrities were generally lauded within Indigenous communities for showing support and using their celebrity power to garner attention to the cause.

Activists in Indigenous circles have long been highly conscious of the role that media plays in portraying their political concerns and the legitimacy of their claims. For instance, speaking about a documentary on Columbus Day from the early 2000s, filmmakers noticed that “well known AIM activist Russell Means and others portrayed in the film were media professionals, and while they were gracious with their time, they were carefully following their own scripts in interview footage” (Peterson 2014:253). During the Standing Rock movement, some of these conversations became explicit and visible online. For instance, a video of several Indigenous activists at Standing Rock saying “fuck Donald Trump” was met with a mix of support and concern from Native
people across the United States. While the sentiment itself was seemingly shared by the majority of commenters, some felt that such a directly antagonistic expression would only draw his attention and vitriol to the community more.

Due to both the instant connection that the internet and social media provide, as well as surprisingly close personal relations between Indigenous people in the Northeast and Indigenous communities elsewhere, events like the activism at Standing Rock, the protests at Mauna Kea, and pop culture happenings like the airing of *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs* are topics of popular online and in-person conversation in the Northeast.

**Digital Media Activism**

Indigenous activism has, historically, rarely made it into mainstream news coverage. While the Alcatraz occupation in 1969-1971 and the Wounded Knee takeover in 1973 were able to garner media attention, decades would pass before more attention would be given to Native American efforts within the United States, despite activist efforts around police violence (such as the shooting of John T. Williams in Seattle), abolishing Columbus Day, fishing rights in the Northeast and the Pacific Northwest, and a wide array of environmental protections.

Standing Rock’s water protection efforts, too, seemed destined to be ignored by mainstream news outlets. However, a growing outcry over social media sites Facebook and Twitter and celebrity endorsements from Shailene Woodley and Mark Ruffalo helped propel the issue onto CNN and other major news networks. Followers mobilized support online “by witnessing image and testimonies of prayer, protest, courage, risk, harm, and
trauma; by their Facebook ‘check-ins’; by making monetary and material donations; by sharing consciousness-raising posts and documents; by creating, reading, and forwarding online syllabi and protocols for teach-ins and self-teaching; by their shared graphics and animations; and by making statements of solidarity – Mni Wiconi, ‘water is life,’ and “I Stand with Standing Rock” (Meyer & Waddell 2016; Hearne 2017: 16-17). Indeed, it seems that the protectors at Standing Rock were able to successfully “transform audiences into networked publics with which they might work in promoting their causes” (Jenkins et al. 2013:169). With celebrity allies, they were also able to finally make that jump to mainstream news outlets. Take-up by major outlets “can be thought of in terms of amplification, in a process whereby Indigenous voice expressed via participatory media can be relayed into more mainstream public spheres” (Waller et al. 2015:63).

Jennifer Weston, Standing Rock citizen and Director of the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, believes that social media sites can help activist efforts, especially “when it comes to mobilizing communities for events, gatherings, lobbying campaigns, or promoting information to media and activist networks” (personal interview, 2017). She sees the Standing Rock movement as having created “a greater sense of awareness and unity among Native nations and with environmental justice and civil rights allies,” even for individuals who could only follow the events at Standing Rock through digital media (personal interview, 2017).

Many Indigenous creative outlets across the United States scrambled to give Indigenous speakers with a connection to Standing Rock priority. On Breakdances with Wolves, Minty LongEarth noted that when speakers on Standing Rock became available,
friends who were previously scheduled for their show were asked to reschedule in a few weeks (personal interview, 2019).

Social media platforms provided Indigenous individuals and communities with a way to come together to support an Indigenous cause, both spiritually and practically; prayers were said across the country as supply runs were organized. In 2008, Sajda Queshi and Teresa Trumbly-Lamsam had theorized that if more Indigenous communities could access information and communication technologies might bring a range of benefits including increased civic engagement; the Standing Rock activities seem to prove that prediction. “Digital technologies have become a medium for speaking and telling our stories. The Internet, for example, was recognized almost immediately for its ability to bring people together and communicate across large geographical divides” (Hopkins 2005:135).

Randy Ross, once Vice-President of American Indian Telecommunications, addressed the fact that during the colonizing efforts of the 1800s, “the inability to communicate across the nation was a key reason that Indian lands fell,” and he “contends that new technologies can support Indigenous cultural and political initiatives” (Younging 2005:180). In fact, Indigenous-spread media has actually previously played this role of connecting distant nations. “As early as 1975, Video In was screening underground tapes of the 1973 Wounded Knee incident in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, attracting groups that used these tapes as a catalyst for discussions about the political struggles of Aboriginal people” (Claxton 2005:18). However, digital technology now allows this type of Indigenous-to-Indigenous communication on a much larger and faster scale. “The internet can enable ethnic communities to globally react, communicate, share resources
and mobilize in reaction to global events” (Srinivasan 2006:503). It is likely that digital communication will continue to be a vital component for Indigenous activism. “We are aware of the necessity of becoming involved with extensive and comprehensive communication systems as we recognize and begin to act on our mutual concerns as Indigenous people” (Masayesva 2005:175). While this is an older quote, most respondents I spoke with still felt that it was important to have a web presence, especially for tribal nations and museums.

In addition to Indigenous support, Standing Rock was unique in garnering non-Indigenous support as well. Many non-Native people physically went to Standing Rock or made supply deliveries. Others used digital media to show support. “At least 1.3 million Facebook users checked in virtually at Oceti Sakowin and other Indigenous camps and communities to ensure that support presence is recognized, while the world monitors the presence of the military and police force gathering at the construction site to curb further violence” (Raheja 2017:172).

The spiritual meanings associated with that level of public support, as well as an enhanced level of awareness about current tribal rights and issues, should also not be overlooked. Jen Weston, a Standing Rock Sioux citizen employed by the Wampanoag Tribe for language work, emphasizes that the “encampments at Standing Rock… were centered around treaty rights and natural resources protection, and grounded in spiritual practice and prayer” (personal interview, 2017). Political activism, cultural events, and spirituality are also frequently blended in other Indigenous contexts, including in the Northeastern United States. Websites and powwow protocols have mentioned “the Creator” and many forms of cultural expression, such as dances, are also sacred forms of
prayer. While traditional stories and more explicit prayers are not shared by Northeastern individuals or tribal nations, these forms of prayer and references to spirituality are fairly common. Some Indigenous scholars, discussed more in Chapter Six, see digital media as having spiritual energy as well as the potential to affect drastic social change over time.

Chief Cheryll Toney Holley of the Nipmuc Nation is admittedly more pessimistic, though she stated that she’d be happy to be proven wrong about the potential of digital media for social change. “It may look better and people may say that… but things have stayed largely the same for us for 100 years” (personal interview, 2017). Jen Weston echoed this sentiment. “I’m not sure how much that heightened awareness impacts the general public, unless they were already receptive to youth and tribal messaging around preventing future impacts of climate change, shifting to a renewable energy economy, and respecting the legal and treaty rights of Indigenous Peoples” (personal interview, 2017). Speaking about issues specific to the fashion industry (which has had numerous accusations of appropriation and design theft related to Indigenous designs), Alice Ming Wai Jim addresses a similar quote from the supermodel Iman who has simultaneously suggested that “‘If you engage the social media, trust me, it will hurt them in their pockets. If you take it out there, they will feel the uproar’” but also points out that within the fashion industry, no serious negative repercussions have been felt and companies may have even benefited from the uptick in consumer awareness in the long term (Jim 2015:364).

Still, Standing Rock was largely a public relations success in terms of uniting Native communities and garnering mainstream support and, although the Dakota Access pipeline was installed (and experienced leaks within the first few months of operation), it
was later ruled to cease operations by a federal judge, at least until a full environmental assessment could be completed (Kolpack 2020). Due to the media coverage, frequently focused on violence against peaceful protestors, many news outlets were at least somewhat sympathetic to the Indigenous concerns, contradicting a general trend wherein “Native peoples fighting to protect our lands and waters from the dangers posed by extractive industry” are portrayed as “the barriers to progress, a position that Native people have been relegated to for centuries” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:157).

The successful public outreach of Standing Rock seemed to inspire similar social media tactics in the Northeast, which is not surprising given how invested many Indigenous people from the Northeast were in solidarity with Standing Rock, both at a distance through digital means and through trips to the Standing Rock camps and in-person acts of water protection. The Mashpee Wampanoag, facing a legal battle to maintain the status of their lands which had been put into federal trust status in 2015 (which would allow for the development of gaming), turned to social media to bolster their efforts.

The Mashpee Wampanoag’s official Twitter account, @MWTribe, created the #StandWithMashpee hashtag on September 11, 2018, with the simple tweet below.

![First StandWithMashpee Tweet](image)

Figure 18: The first #StandWithMashpee Tweet.
The link provided led to a statement entitled “America Moves to Bite the Hand That Fed It: The Mashpee Wampanoag Sole Surviving Signatory Tribe to America’s First Indian Titled Land,” written the previous day by prominent tribal member and Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project founder Jessie Little Doe Baird and posted to the Mashpee Wampanoag’s official website (Baird 2018). This piece was quickly re-tweeted by the organization Cultural Survival, a nonprofit group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts which has held Indigenous-focused events throughout the state. The #StandWithMashpee hashtag (now commonly written as #StandwithMashpee), continued circulating among both Indigenous-focused organizations and Indigenous individuals in the Northeast, and seemed to gain greater traction in November 2018, given the historical significance of this month and its Thanksgiving celebrations to the Wampanoag people in particular.

A collection of tweets gathered over several weeks in summer 2020 with the #StandwithMashpee hashtag were examined to determine their general content. This was a particularly salient time to collect tweets, as Judge Paul L. Friedman ruled in early July 2020 that the Trump-led Department of the Interior’s “2018 decision that the tribe did not qualify as ‘under federal jurisdiction’ in 1934 for purposes of the Indian Reorganization Act was ‘arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion and contrary to law’” which constituted a victory for the Mashpee Wampanoag in an ongoing case where the Department of the Interior attempted to withdraw previously granted trust status to Mashpee lands (Spencer 2020).

The 186 tweets were analyzed with the tool Orange. The corpus of 186 tweets was preprocessed to remove common words (such as “a,” “an,” and “the”) as well as the original hashtag, #StandwithMashpee, to generate a Word Cloud. The Word Cloud
revealed that the top 10 most commonly used words in the #StandwithMashpee hashtag were:

Table 1: Top ten most commonly used words in Tweets bearing the hashtag #StandwithMashpee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wampanoag</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hearing</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reservation</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Court</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Vader sentiment analysis also showed a range of AI-perceived emotions expressed through the Tweets. In this chart, the yellow points are negative, upset, or angry comments while the blue points are uplifting, happy, or hopeful comments. (Note that exact wording of tweets are not shared in this dissertation; although tweets are generally considered public documents, in this researcher’s opinion it would be unethical to present them in such a way that they could be easily searched and traced back to creators’ accounts.)
The “most negative” comment, at pos = 0.117 and neg = 0.423 referenced the “greed & arrogance” of the Trump administration, and asked readers to sign a petition backing the Mashpee Wampanoag. The second yellow comment, at pos = 0 and neg – 0.402, began with “Racist Donald Trump” and included the word “disgusting” to describe the revocation of reservation status for Mashpee.

Green tweets, deemed “middling” in terms of their sentiment, often focused heavily on calls to action for readers. Blue, positive tweets were often shoutouts and statements of love and support for Mashpee, from non-Indigenous allies, Indigenous
people from other Nations, and fellow Mashpee citizens. Other blue tweets were explicitly celebratory; after the DC District Court’s ruling in favor of the Mashpee in 2020, one user tweeted their need for a Judge Paul L. Friedman shirt because he was their new hero. Another commented on the “clarity of conscience in the Judge” before stating that they felt the best they had in a long time. While using AI for sentiment analysis has its issues, in this case it seemed to accurately map, in a broad sense, the emotions of the tweets surrounding this case.

One danger of using social media for political actions is that the platform itself may be neutral (thus allowing misinformation to be presented alongside accurate information) or actively hostile to activist efforts, or may resist critiques of their or their partners’ practices (Jenkins et al. 2013:57). Overcoming these (literally) systemic issues will likely take concerted efforts such as the Mashpee Wampanoag’s push to create and disseminate educational and activist media.

**The Politics of Land and Art**

In the future, technology might ideally not only allow us to effectively respond to environmental threats, but actively protect the environment and socialize Indigenous values of respect into the landscape for future generations. “The discourses surrounding cultural landscapes and narratives can be advanced through an explanation of the relationship between landscape and technology” (Marques et al. 2019:199). Using augmented reality (AR) technology, Marques et al. argue that both Indigenous individuals and settlers may be able to gain an enhanced appreciation of an environment, and perhaps come closer to a traditional Indigenous valuing of it, through indirect experiences. “Technology permits the user to remain grounded in the context of a specific
site, while engaging in a direct relationship with cultural values of that landscape. Other layers of that place, such as music or voice recordings as well as haptic experiences through vibration, can also be introduced without altering the existing environment” (Marques et al. 2019:196). Rather than “deterritorializing” traditional ethnic lands, such a digitally enhanced environment would emphasize Indigenous connections to the land, much like the physical and digital signage in traditional Indigenous languages discussed in Chapter Three, and may even “reterritorialize the digital as Indigenous space” (Hearne 2017:9).

In discussing a different virtual rendering of the land, artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun states: “You may put these cities on it but it’s still Indian land. You can call it whatever you want, you can call it Vancouver, it’s still Salish land, and it’s still my Motherland. So you do get a total virtual Aboriginal perspective. You cannot think in a Western concept because you are visually experiencing an Aboriginal perspective” (Claxton 2005:37). These AR renderings of landscapes seek to impart Indigenous values without appropriation, in an effort to shift the way users experience and connect with the environment. They depart from virtual tourism in this intention, though it remains to be seen whether these moral and educational goals will overcome the power of the sheer spectacle of AR for early users.

The cohosts of Public Radio also felt a connection through time, through their visits to important Indigenous sites while recording interviews for their podcast. “I felt very moved by being there, looking at these trees that might have been the same trees that were there during the battles… it helps tell that story in a very present way, to help bring people to the same places” through ambient sound captured at these sites and used in the
podcast (Ana Gonzalez, personal interview, 2019). Perhaps digital recording, virtual reality, and augmented reality, emphasizing some awareness of the history of the lands, can impart these experiences and values to users.

While depictions of land, especially those that identify traditional caretakers or attempt to impart Indigenous values, have clear political implications, it is less clear if other forms of Indigenous digital production have political implications. For instance, when an Indigenous person creates a piece of art that is not explicitly political in nature and not inspired by Indigenous values, does their personal identity still make it “Indigenous art”? And is all Indigenous art political?

When asked whether Indigenous art and film was necessarily political, or had a moral obligation to be political, Justin Beatty commented that Indigenous art did not necessarily have to be political, but could be perceived as political for undertaking two goals. The first is “just the attempt, just the attempt to not default to the ideas around politics, aesthetics, economics, and education that have been placed upon a group of people by another group of people with disregard for the first group of people’s needs and wants. And the second… is to see your own practices as on par with whatever that colonizing identity and structures are, seeing them as equals regardless of whether or not one dominates the society, knowing that your teachings and your histories are just as valid and equally powerful” (personal interview, 2019). This echoes artist Stephen Loft’s hope that “the merging of Aboriginal art and new media will, in his words, ‘create our own self-perception and free us from colonialist concepts too often internalized by Aboriginal people.’” (Madill 2005:ix). Similarly, podcast creator Minty LongEarth noted that with each episode she helps craft, she and co-hosts Gyasi Ross and Wesley Roach
are “careful about trying to sift through how much of this is a white or westernized idea, and how we’re supposed to approach a topic of a way of doing things” (personal interview, 2019).

Despite not feeling that every art piece should be expressly political, Justin Beatty (echoing the feminist ideal that the personal is political) noted that “if you were born a person of color in the United States, especially a Native person, you are an activist by birth. Even the people that try to remove themselves from that and just become, a doctor and not a Native doctor… You’re still informing the world about what Native people are and can be and will be” (personal interview, 2019). He also noted that pieces could be political without that necessarily being the artist’s intent. “My piece featuring an Aztec in Manhattan is a juxtaposition beyond the juxtaposition of Native people in modern spaces. This dude is far from home. But he’s standing there like ‘I’m rooted here, because all of this is ours.’ And so the background too is also crisp and defined; my intention wasn’t to make that be the political statement, but when I finished it, I was like, ‘oh, that’s what I was saying when I was doing it’” (personal interview, 2019).

There is also the question of how culture and spirituality intersect with political movements and sovereignty (on a personal and tribal nation level). An understanding of culture and spirituality as strength is reified by many pieces of Indigenous art. Some see art as a way to speak back to acts of colonization and oppression. “Already we have seen Indigenous uprisings in the Americas, fueled by advocacy of intellectual property rights, as the world economy steamrolls over tribal sovereignty. It is from these outrages, not from tourism promotion, that Indigenous experimental films and videos will be created” (Masayesva 2005:175). Others focus on art that draws inspiration from scenes of
Indigenous bravery in the face of colonization. “Stephen Foster’s *Villains and Heroes* (1994) incorporates… footage of the Oka crisis standoff… images that depict the power of the army – replete with tanks and guns – to images of Mohawk strength – the drum” (Claxton 2005:28). Similarly, a photo of Mi’kmag woman Amanda Polchies on her knees holding up an eagle feather in the face of heavily armed troops, has been shared widely and used as inspiration for dozens of artistic renderings (Schilling 2013). The Covid-19 crisis, described in more detail in Chapter Seven, also showed the ways in which spiritual meanings are offered up online for the wellbeing of others.

Speaking on the topic of Edward S. Curtis recording dances that also had spiritual power, Avery Denny (Diné/Navajo) talks about how the camera captures the energy of a prayer, leaving it unable to go on and do what its purpose is. However, now that a camera is less a form of “capture” and more a form of distribution, new ideas around how digital media may further spiritual exchanges are beginning to circulate.

**Conclusion: Art and Capitalism**

In speaking on the art of influential Indigenous artist Brian Jungen, artist Casey Figueroa described the push and pull inherent to many forms of art created in colonialist contexts. Jungen’s remixing of Nike products into abstract forms and masks with a Pacific Northwest Coast aesthetic are awe-inspiring, but the use of “hundreds of boxes of Nikes,” products which have now been linked to forced labor and child labor, gives Figueroa pause (personal interview). This is something which all artists have to grapple with in colonial contexts; even paint is produced on an industrial scale. “People don’t see paint as technology. They may see how the paint is made and what it’s made of as
technology, but they still don’t see the painting itself” (Justin Beatty, personal interview, 2019).

This point is particularly salient for digital artists. Getting on a computer to create digital art may feel more sustainable than carving up dozens of pairs of Nike shoes. Speaking about an educational website, Greg Young-ing notes that “Printup-Hope’s website and its message of respect for the Earth and the natural world, which is inherent in Haudenosanee traditions, is accessible on line to Haudenosanee and other Indigenous people, as well as millions of other users worldwide while it poses no negative environmental or cultural impact” (Young-ing 2005:184-185).

However, the creation and distribution of digital art still ultimately relies on the production of the physical hardware of computers, tablets, and smart phones. The components of each computer, tablet, or smartphone are mined from the earth, soldered together in factories (often overseas, with underpaid workers), shipped hundreds and thousands of miles, assembled and shipped again, and finally shipped to retail stores or directly to consumers through online commerce. Once these machines arrive at their destination, they require energy to run – and even more “sustainable” forms of energy such as hydroelectric power have had devastating environmental effects and impacts on Indigenous communities in the past (Higgins 1987). Furthermore, Indigenous communities around the world “reside in communities that bear a disproportionate burden of environmental hazard, including but not limited to uranium mining, nuclear waste, military testing, food pollution, and garbage dumps (Hooks & Smith, 2004; LaDuke, 1999)” (Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi 2014:67). Native American communities in
the United States are certainly included within this group, but so are Indigenous people in other parts of the world.

The burden of technological production will fall on U.S.-based and international Indigenous peoples disproportionately. And yet, even if we consider ourselves collaborators with Big Tech, “collaborators are complicit with the dominant regimes of power, yet they often also use their incorporation into that system to redirect its energies or reroute its resources” (Jenkins et al. 2013:173). The extent to which each of us engages in these processes in order to produce art that reaffirms personal identity, Indigenous community, or tribal sovereignty, or questions capitalist regimes, is an issue that individuals and communities must seriously consider. We must also investigate ways to change corporate behaviors, as they are unlikely to change without significant public pressure.

Likewise, one issue that repeatedly came up throughout many interviews with tribal nation program leaders was funding. Websites take time and money to run and update. Language programs require funding. Legal protections and court battles demand exorbitant amounts of capital. Digital artists need to make a living, which is particularly hard to do when their pieces circulate for free online. Even for projects that are clearly culturally valuable, where people would ideally like to eschew practical conversations about funding, such avoidance of financial considerations is not possible.

In the past, media production of any kind took both money and connections. “The bleak reality is that those with access to the means of film/video production – an expensive proposition wherever you are in the world, no matter the currency – are most likely those who have traveled a distance from their mother tongue, traditional
instruction, and Indigenous learning” (Masayesva 2005:167). While this is no longer the case for small digital media projects, larger undertakings such as regularly updated websites, social media management across multiple platforms, or the recording of a substantial amount of oral traditions or Elders’ life stories still require some monetary backing and, even more, great expenses in terms of time. In speaking of Breakdances with Wolves podcast’s episode planning process, Minty LongEarth noted that “it’s nowhere near where we want it to be. We are trying to build capacity to be able to have someone who can sort of do a lot of the administrative stuff that gets out of our hands – we just don’t have the time” (personal interview, 2019).

Art may also directly challenge colonialism and capitalism. In speaking about one of his only overtly political pieces, Justin Beatty described his inspiration: “I saw a picture, and it was a little Palestinian boy throwing a rock at a tank. And I recreated that picture, except I put them in a ribbon shirt and a roach, and I called it ‘Why We Can Relate,’ because we see ourselves in that madness. We know what it’s like to beat a rock against a tank, you know? You’re not gonna win, but it’s not even about that. It’s like, I’m not going to let you just roll me over. I’m not going to just let you destroy what I have” (personal interview, 2019).

Indigenous activists are increasingly making these areas of friction visible and challenging major institutions to change. In discussing some of the long-standing impacts of the Standing Rock movement, Jen Weston said that the “global divestment movement catches broader attention because of its targeting of financial institutions that we all rely on in our personal and work lives with respect to financial decision making” (personal interview, 2017). This is perhaps the most uncomfortable aspect of Indigenous activism.
and political art – when it makes each of us, even Indigenous individuals, aware of our own role within a capitalistic structure that ultimately supports colonialism. This statement is not to say that responsibility is shared equally among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, that Indigenous and other minority communities are not disproportionately impacted in negative ways, or that corporations do not carry more blame than individuals – it is only to point out the current near-impossibility of living totally outside of the U.S. capitalistic system. However, while such a line of thinking may be uncomfortable, it can also help us not only reevaluate our actions, but help us envision a new system, one within which we could feel proud living. We can find ways to make “digital replication… catalyze ethical action” and become more adept at finding ways to place pressures on our economic system to become more sustainable and equitable (Hearne 2017:15).

As we confront the systems in which we live, a first step toward change is escaping the hegemonic assumptions that accompany life in a capitalistic society. Whereas many western environmentalists and other radical thinkers look solely to the future and use genres such as sci-fi to envision a more equitable world, Indigenous radicals are often also traditionalists who look to the past and future simultaneously. Indigenous futurisms consider how to, in many ways, return to the past while incorporating the complexities and the technologies that are present in our lives today.
CHAPTER 6

INDIGENOUS FUTURISM: BACK TO THE INDIGENOUS FUTURE

Introduction: Indigenous Futurisms

A quote from Uppinder Mehan states that “postcoloniality includes those of us who are the survivors” (Mehan 2004:269). Indigenous people in the Northeastern United States, whether from original communities in the area or those who have resettled here from other parts of the country or the world, have had much to survive. In addition to violent acts, dispossession of lands and resources, kidnapped children, and relocations, the United States federal government has imposed restrictions on Native American identity that predetermine the extinction of Indigenous identity, at least on paper (and thus, for purposes of legal recognition).

According to current blood quantum guidelines, which are rooted in notions of race from previous centuries and not based on any scientific measures whatsoever, the children of a Native American who marries a non-Indigenous person have their “quantum” cut to half of their Native parent’s. If the same Native parent were to have married another Native person, but from another tribe, their child’s quantum would still be cut in half because only one tribal lineage can be claimed. Under pressure from the federal government, “many tribes adopted blood quantum criteria that are still in use today” (Jacobs 2017:575). “Blood quantum is a calculus of disappearance, an algorithm that make Native existence in the future an impossibility, because survival requires mixing – whether across clans, tribes, or races. Under blood quantum, mixing makes each
Native person a fraction of a Native person and thus farther and farther from existence with every generation” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:145-146).

The tribal nations of the eastern coast have been particularly targeted by this “calculus of disappearance.” In the 1970s, the *Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury Corp* court case featured an entirely non-Indigenous jury who found that the Mashpee Wampanoag were not considered a “tribe,” focusing on several factors, one of which was being a body “of the same or similar race.” The Mashpee Wampanoag would go on to receive federal recognition in 2007, but the lack of recognition in the 1970s served to alienate the Mashpee from unoccupied lands that legally should have been theirs, and to further mainstream notions that they were not a legitimate Native American nation. History books, which focus on the population losses associated with waves of smallpox and engagements in King Philip’s War (in the north) and Indian Removal (in the south), also leave the impression that few, if any, Indigenous people could still be left on the eastern coast.

Taken together, the laws surrounding Native identity and mainstream historical narratives, paired with overwhelming mainstream media depictions of Indigenous people as relics of the past (Berkhofer 1978; Stedman 1982; Hilger 1986; Rollins & O’Connor 1998; Kilpatrick 1999; King 2005; Deloria 2006), predispose most non-Indigenous people to not even consider Native Americans as part of the present or the future, and Native people on the eastern coast of the United States are particularly discounted as already-vanished, or near vanished. Speaking on how education predisposes people to see Indigenous communities in relation to modernity and futurity, and the geographical dimension of education about Indigenous societies, Justin Beatty noted that “they can
understand Indigenous people from Central and South America in cities. But North American Indians, they just don’t know enough about how we lived in cities. No one knows Cahokia. They don’t know enough about it to be able to contextually make that leap.” Expanding on how this has impacted his work, he continued: “I do have this series of sort of city Indians, because I grew up in New York and you don’t really see contemporary spaces in Native art very often” (personal interview). Each artistic piece that places Indigenous people and concepts into the present or the future can be “mobilized as a means for establishing visual sovereignty in relation to anachronistic pasts” (Lempert 2018B:173).

There is both a personal and a political dimension to this lack of recognition of Indigenous people both now and in the future. Personally, it is demoralizing to have a society around you that believes that your people are all dead, or soon will be. I have heard firsthand accounts of Native youth groups who were told by strangers they encountered “Oh, I thought you were all dead!” I would implore readers who are not Indigenous to imagine what it might feel like to be told this at the age of 14 years old. Again and again, these stories emerge from Indigenous people across the United States, but in perhaps even greater numbers in the Northeast. “Native people like me are told constantly, in myriad ways, that we are extinct, when tens of thousands of us live in this region alone” (Obomsawin 2020).

“Echoing the history of official US discourses and practices that projected Indian disappearance,” works of mainstream science fiction have historically erased Indigenous people from the future (Marez 2004:336). “Along with other imperialist discourses, it suggests that there is no future in being Indian” (Marez 2004:336).
Stereotypes that focus on eradication, paired with frequently oppressive economic and environmental conditions, may even impact Indigenous people’s own engagement with the future. “What we do not do much is talk about our future. We make plans to keep everybody alive for the next few years, and we strive to stay mindful of the seventh generation, but we do not tend to spend much time imagining what our communities will be like in one hundred, five hundred, or a thousand years” (Lewis 2014:56).

There is also a political dimension to the refusal of mainstream society to take Indigenous people into account. If any citizen or governmental official buys into the notion that Indigenous people do not exist (or likely won’t exist in a matter of a few decades), our political rights can be ignored. Indigenous people are currently becoming increasingly active and visible in asserting sovereign rights, especially in service to protecting the environment. This is a danger to many corporations and to those who embrace the status quo, giving these people a vested interest in steadfastly ignoring the personhood of Indigenous people and the legal rights of Indigenous communities. “‘This condition of improbability is designed to prevent even the conceptualization of social change’” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:194).

Given, then, the importance of asserting Indigenous existence both today and into the future, artistic narratives that place Indigeneity in the future and even see Indigenous values as critical to future endeavors are particularly important. “Since Native presence in North America, by colonial design, is always-already vanishing (rendering Indigenous futures impossible), inserting ourselves into future narratives (as subjects, authors, and participants in futurity) is a particularly powerful act” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:146). Dillon echoes this sentiment, stating that any and all “Indigenous assertions of
sovereignty and self-determination de facto offer resistance to the necropolitics of powerful governments” (Dillon 2016:3).

Several Indigenous scholars have created theoretical frameworks to specifically examine instances where Indigenous people are inserting themselves into the future. “As a model for how to further operationalize Indigenous futurisms, Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan scholar Jason Edward Lewis (2013), the director of the Initiative for Indigenous Futures at Concordia University, has articulated the importance of the ‘future imaginary’” (Lempert 2018B:176). In speaking to other sci-fi fans, Lewis found that they shared certain visions of the future, or the range of future societal and technological directions that were possible or probable, based on shared experiences of socialization from mainstream science fiction. Expanding on Charles Taylor’s definition of the social imaginary, “we began to refer to these shared visions as our common future imaginary, that is, the ways in which we imagine the social configuration, political structure, and technological reality one, seven, or twenty generations hence. And we realized that an important ingredient in creating change in the rate of Indigenous participation in the cyberspace of the present was to actively imagine Indigenous people in the cyberspace of the future. The question then became, How do we populate that future imaginary with Indigenous characters, stories, and worldviews?” (Lewis 2016:231).

The concept of survivance, originally coined by Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor, fuses survival, resistance, and (some might argue) joy in the act of survival. It has been fruitfully applied to futurism as well as digital media art. Elizabeth LaPensée and Jason Edward Lewis, for instance, have applied the term survivance to the
machinima production *TimeTravellerTM* (LaPensée & Lewis 2013). Part of projecting Indigenous survivance in the present is the hope and, indeed, the anticolonialist assumption that Indigenous people will persevere and exist in the future. Visions of the future inherently resist the dominant historical narratives and colonialist strategies that seek to leave Native people in the past. These images, by merely existing, are “defying and actively resisting social expectations from whites” (Russell 2018:266).

Grace Dillon made the future imaginary explicitly Indigenous with the concept of Indigenous futurisms. “Grace Dillon (2012) has developed the analytic of *Indigenous futurisms*, which challenges scholars to re-examine the explicit and implicit ways in which Indigenous people continue to be representationally confined to imagined pasts” (Lempert 2018B:176). “According to Dillon, survivance is a key function of Indigenous futurisms,” as stories of the future actively resist erasure through creative expressions (Baudemann 2016:126).

As such, it is critical that academia turn its attention to Indigenous representations in contemporary and future settings. “While anthropologists are increasingly engaging with the future (Collins 2008; Valentine 2012; Appadurai 2013; Salazar et al. 2017), the relative lack of work on *Indigenous* futurity suggests the continued temporal slotting of Aboriginal people into savage pasts and suffering presents” (Lempert 2018:209, emphasis in original).

Once one pushes past the dominant conceptions of Indigenous people as a “people of the past,” there is a significant logic to artistic productions that bring Indigenous cultures into the future. Indigenous peoples have, to a great extent, survived one a form of
dystopian apocalypse in the form of colonization. Indigenous peoples and their struggles for rights represent “the unfinished business of decolonization” (Wilmer 1993: 5).

Indigenous cultures are also primed for incorporation of the kinds of new technological forms that mark most visions of the future. Contrary to images of Native cultures as static and unchanging, Indigenous people in what is now the United States have long embraced cultural exchanges in the form of material exchanges and ideas. Being “willing to change… to develop new forms” is, itself, an anti-colonial act (Beaucage 2005:141). Staying completely static when a colonial structure rises around you with the intent to destroy your existence makes for an untenable situation. Instead, Indigenous cultures have maintained some traditions and modified others, finding ways of bringing Indigenous values with them into new terrains.

Both science fiction as a genre, and new digital media forms, offer resistance to hegemonic views of Indigenous people as belonging to the past. An internet presence for tribal nations may “raise consciousness among the general public about their continued existence” and overturn dominant notions of their historical demise (Mitten 2006:1338). Science fiction has long been of interest to people in marginalized American groups. Although not particularly visible, African American and Native American fans of sci-fi have existed for the history of the genre (Russell 2018). “As a marginal genre, science fiction has explored ideas otherwise not cherished by the rest of mainstream/conservative society” (Milojevic 2003:500). In fact, sci-fi has frequently critiqued mainstream values, which is of particular interest to groups not permitted to live freely in that society. It seems only natural that sci-fi, even in spite of the efforts of some sci-fi luminaries to gate-keep the genre, would attract the interest of marginalized groups. In turn, Indigenous
authors and artists from the Northeast and across the United States are infusing new concepts and viewpoints into the genre, and in turn using it as “a strategy for representation, an appearance of ‘the unexpected’” (Lone Fight 2020:7)

**The Importance of the Future to the Present**

Visions of the future act as possible predictions, oracle-like glimpses into what could be and how our present realities might extend themselves through time. What message, then, do we send to Indigenous people (and other underrepresented groups) when there are rarely any depictions of them in futuristic settings?

Considering the erasure of African American populations from science fiction and fantasy, Mark Dery posed the question: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” (Dery 1997:180). Based on the recent emergence of a number of non-white authors in science fiction and fantasy, I argue that underrepresented people certainly can imagine possible futures, but have been historically marginalized within major publication channels, which have previously seen fit to “gatekeep” these genres for their supposed fan base of white men.

In fact, historical research into comic book and sci-fi novel sales reveal that they have historically sold well in some non-white neighborhoods, despite talented authors of color being routinely marginalized by publishing houses (Russell 2018). Speaking about his own childhood, Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac noted that he had a cousin who loved science fiction, which sparked his own love of the genre. “I went back and forth between his house and mine, probably 20 or 30 times. I still have a lot of those books in my own
attic. And that was when I really started actually reading and thinking about fantasy and science fiction,” he stated, adding that its appeal was that it could show “Indigenous people being part of their future and not being relegated entirely to the past” (personal interview, 2021). In fact, I think that for dispossessed and marginalized people, imagining alternate futures has even more meaning and importance than it might for people who live in a society which already overwhelmingly caters to their culture, religion, gender identity, ethnicity, and racial identity.

Indigenous people are particularly excluded from visions of the future crafted by non-Native creators, due to the overwhelming stereotype of Indigenous people as historical and largely non-existent in modern-day contexts. “Mainstream narratives represent a profound and pervasive inability to portray Native peoples and our continued existence in the present, let alone to project us forward into any potential futures” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:139-140). For many Americans, this manifests as explicit bias, as they may be shocked to find that a coworker is Native American, or to drive by a powwow in progress. For other Americans, this may be an implicit bias. They know, logically and perhaps through direct experience or through education, that Native Americans exist in the present day and have contemporary issues and forms of cultural expression. But when they sit down to write their science fiction story set in the future, the idea of Native American characters simply doesn’t occur to them. Mainstream western culture “is busy dreaming of the future, imagining what it might look like through science fiction, and building it with science fact. Yet Indigenous people rarely appear in those imaginaries” (Lewis 2014:59). By contrast, Indigenous people do seem to come to mind in other, historical genres, such as westerns. In speaking about his digital
Justin Beatty noted that many consumers “want to go get something that helps them relive the old West, as opposed to experiencing Indigenous people in real time and in modern times. And so when you do digital art that conveys modernity… it makes people go ‘wait, what? Oh, that’s a thing I hadn’t considered.’” Justin went on to point out that “part of your racism is not considering… a dismissal of existence, where you don’t even consider stuff, it never pops into your head. People are amazed that there was a Native astronaut.” Joking, he added that a Native astronaut had to exist, since “I tried to ride a horse to the moon and it didn’t work” (personal interview, 2019).

Beatty’s joke places traditional imagery (the horse) with a sci-fi staple (travel beyond Earth), challenging the way that people subconsciously picture Indigenous people. Science fiction and speculative fiction are uniquely positioned to jar non-Indigenous audiences out of their preconceived notion of Indigenous people as belonging to the past. “Futurism, I argue, is therefore uniquely situated within popular culture for indigenous artists, specifically because it unexpectedly places the figure of the Native within a techno-modernist context where such presence if typically restricted; that is, if we think of the trope of ‘The Vanishing Indian,’ the stage from which the Indian is through to ‘vanish’ from is, in fact, modernity” (Lone Fight 2020:7) The artists with whom I spoke echoed this erasure; as Justin Beatty noted, “there’s almost nothing that shows Native people in the future” (personal interview). The exclusion of Indigenous people from futuristic settings, therefore, presupposes a world in which the genocidal campaigns of the 15th to 21st centuries have been completed in full. “If Indigenous people are not present in the future, one wonders why the settler culture need concern itself with what happens to us now. We will, after all, be gone soon enough” (Lewis 233-234).
Therefore, for Indigenous people, existing in the future “is not escapist but rather politically and culturally activist and a refusal to simply disappear” (Dillon 2007B:236).

The fact that Hollywood has long shown Indigenous people in overwhelmingly historical settings, and extremely rarely in futuristic settings, is detrimental and hurtful to many Indigenous people. “Native people serve as stereotyped props or plot devices that play into escapist fantasies – specifically about Native Americans – since Hollywood is at the heart of the sci-fi film industry. However, the stakes are higher in sci-fi than other genres because it can influence not only how we see the past and present, but also how we come to view Indigenous futures” (Lempert 2015). In discussing pieces of digital art that circulated on Facebook, Casey Figueroa noted that “I was basically working on those because I think it’s important for Indigenous people to be able to see a future that we’re part of, that we’re actively engaged in” (Casey, personal interview). Other works of digital art from Northeastern U.S. and Southeastern Canadian Indigenous artists likewise make an intentional effort to show a future with living Indigenous people and cultures. “TimeTravellerTM depicts Indigenous people living in the future as a vibrant, integral part of it, rather than in an idealized past” (Jim 2015:4).

In addition to validating Indigenous existence and survivance, visions of the future also provide a roadmap for how Indigenous people may continue to adapt and adjust to new forms of colonization, or (in more utopian visions) to spaces where anti-colonial praxis may be possible. “One of the critical features of SF is its engagement with the future, and such speculative projects serve as important cultural operators that reflect how we envision ourselves in the present” (Lone Fight 2020:3). An increasingly important undertaking for Indigenous sci-fi is a rethinking, both for Indigenous and non-
Indigenous people, of “what it means to be authentically Indian in ways that incorporate multiracial Indians and Indians living in cities” (Jacobs 2017:585). Speculative fiction is also implicated in political visions of a better, more equitable future (Beck 2019). These are contemporary concerns that can be stretched further in science fiction and speculative fiction, allowing us to come to terms with them better in the present day.

In response to the need for Indigenous viewpoints, Indigenous authors, artists, and scholars have begun making powerful inroads into fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction with projections of futurity that disrupt the history of exclusion from these genres. Many of these creators draw on traditional concepts that were highly abstract or futuristic. For instance, Angela Haas has written about wampum belts and how they can function as a form of hypertext, and encourages us to acknowledge that level of abstract thinking from Indigenous ancestors. “Perhaps if we allow ourselves to listen to this story of wampum as hypertext in accord with the other existing stories about hypertext, we might enjoy what Indiana Miami scholar Malea Powell describes as an emergence of a ‘new story about ourselves, not a ‘prime’ narrative held together by the sameness of our beliefs, but a gathering of narratives designed to help us adapt and change as is necessary for our survival’ (57-58)” (Haas 2007:96). Haas and Loft have gone on to assert that “masks, winter counts, petroglyphs, birch bark scrolls, Aztec codices, star quilts, drums, songs, and earthworks” similarly possess “their own set of ‘literacies’” (Hearne 2017:11). Neither complex theory nor creative thought nor inventive visions of the future are the provenance of western societies alone. “Native communities, our governance structures, the complexities of our social engagement, and the variety of our narrative traditions have always incorporated elements of futurity, prophecy, and
responsibility-rooted strategies for bringing forth better futures” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:139-140).

**Alter/Native Conceptions of Time and Space**

Colonialist interpretations of Indigenous people that frame them as people with simplistic superstitions misinterpreted – either out of ignorance or willfully, for political purposes – the conceptual depth that underlie many Indigenous views of time and space. “For many American Indian tribes, the arts (Western term) are viewed from a parallel time, the past and future are in the present; therefore the items, the histories, and traditions are constant but at the same time in process” (Ballengee-Morris 2008:31). As mentioned previously, this alternate conception of time can lead to ancestors and descendants being considered one and the same. A further demonstration of this conflation could be seen during the outpouring of grief that followed the 2021 discovery of 215 children’s remains at the Kamloops Residential School in Canada, with more sites and more remains discovered in the months after. In primarily Indigenous online spaces, the children were referred to as children and even “our children,” “our babies,” but they were also called “ancestors” despite the fact that these children were too young to have ever had offspring of their own and will technically retain the status of “child” indefinitely.

Non-Indigenous people are sometimes shocked at Indigenous feelings about past events, stating that events so far in the past should no longer hold emotional sway. While this confusion may result from an ignorance about how past events have impacted and continue to impact communities today, as well as the cultural genocide that makes remembering Indigenous cultures a radical act of resistance, it may also stem from an
alternative view of time. “Researchers have revealed, for example, that aboriginal notions of history, time and geography are incommensurable with Western rationalistic knowledge systems” (Srinivasan 2006:515). The predominance of linear time may also act to erase traumatic historical events as an act of political necessity within colonialist regimes. “Vine Deloria Jr. suggests that the notion of linear time in the Western world has always been interwoven with imperial endeavors” (Baudemann 2016:123).

“‘Remembering’ is about connecting to a past and bringing the history of communities into the present moment” (Wilcox et al. 2012:134). Yet many Indigenous artists today are committed to both remembering, and envisioning. They are considering the future, and even what we will look like to our descendants looking back at us. Casey Figueroa’s art installation “Relics of the Future” considered what archaeologically uncovered relics of a future Indigenous group would look like to people even further into the future, and incorporated traditional items and undefined pieces that we can only guess at today. Relics of the Future is “predicated on future history that is so much farther in the future, that there would be archaeologists from the future looking to us in the past… it’s a weird way of thinking about the future, but basically it comes down to the idea of, what will our Indigenous descendants be in 10,000 years?” (personal interview, 2019).

Other colonized groups are also engaging in precolonial conceptions of time that not only link past to present and present to future, but consider that the present and the future may speak back into the past. “While we should look at the conditions that have prevented Black women from dreaming, Black women of today can reinvent these past future images for their foremothers” (Milojevic 2003:505).
This view of time as non-linear can also be seen through formal artistic conventions. “Experiences of spiraling time, then, may be lived through narratives of cyclicality, reversal, dream-like scenarios, simultaneity, counter-factuality, irregular rhythms, ironic un-cyclicality, slipstream, parodies of linear pragmatism, eternality, among many others” (Whyte 2018:229). In practice, this may look like repeated scenes in a film, lines recalled multiple times within a short story, or a podcast that circles back to an earlier episode because more should be said on the subject. This practice of going back and forth has been labeled a revisional aesthetic, and in itself could be conceptualized as a form of time travel, or at least relationship between multiple points in time. “To have a revisional aesthetic emphasizes the modification of the past as a means of establishing a meaningful articulation in the present through the trafficking or ‘visitation’ back and forth between the two” (Lone Fight 2020:5). Podcast creator Minty LongEarth noted that “we’re cognizant of legends going on in our communities… so we’re always thinking about it circularly in an environment that is trying to be linear” (personal interview, 2019). Some productions may choose to balance these alternate structures while maintaining “a pace similar to the mainstream productions” with which audiences, including Indigenous viewers, may be more familiar (Iseke & Moore 2011:30). The internet itself has been considered a way to move beyond conceptions of linear time. “Web links afford opportunities to transcend the rigid order of place and time” (Fish 2011:100).

These views of time help connect Indigenous experiences to genres like science fiction which have long heralded time travel and alternate conceptions of time. However, it can also appear as a distinction between Indigenous worldviews and western ones, as
even very creative western science fiction may lean toward linear views of time. Apart from science fiction, science itself has not always taken “alternative conceptions of time seriously,” as Indigenous belief systems in the Northeastern United States frequently have (Lempert 2018B:176). “In non-western science fiction the future is seen outside linear terms: as cyclical or spiral, or in terms of ancestors” (Milojevic 2003:493). There is also the possibility, in Indigenous belief systems and Indigenous sci-fi, to see time travel as something that might be spiritually located, rather than technologically enabled. “As Mohawk activist Ellen Gabriel once said to Skawennati: ‘Our people have always used time travel to figure out the problems of today.’” (Jim 2015:4).

Producing digital media which exists, both spatially and temporally, in a “realm apart” may also be an act of Indigenous resistance in and of itself. Many Indigenous artists discussed their own art pieces as existing at different points in time. One digital artist I spoke with informally actually saved versions of his digital creations as he went, and like an evolutionary tree, three different saved versions might end up as three extremely distinct images after more edits were done to them. In one case, he saved a sketchy image of Coyote and then layered digital paint over that image to make a finely detailed Coyote. The two final images look exceedingly different, and he hailed both as finished pieces; both accomplished something desirable and spoke to aspects of Coyote’s character as the artist understood it, but with wildly different aesthetics. Similarly, Casey Figueroa discussed posting his works on Instagram in stages, and how viewers would reach out to buy a painting “that no longer exists,” since he had since added to it or altered it (personal interview, 2019). Digital art and digital photography, in a sense, thus
allow a piece to exist simultaneously at multiple stages of its creation, which disrupts the linearity that is often presumed in western artistic practice.

A similarly non-linear technique has been used in film and photography, creating layered images that then form relationships with each other. “New media theorist Lev Manovich observed a shift from sequential to what he calls spatial montage… layering of images where the filmmaker constructs the logic that determines ‘which images appear together, when they appear and what kind of relationship they enter into with each other’” (Hopkins 2005:136).

In addition to resisting the dominant discourse of Native Americans as a people of the past, “Indigenous media production helps to establish not only visual (see Raheja 2011) but also temporal sovereignty from the colonial imposition of ‘settler time’ (Rifkin 2017)” (Lempert 2018:209). In the digital sphere, artists like Skawennati (Mohawk) can create spaces that are marked as Indigenous in ways that are more proscribed in the physical world. “For Aboriginal media artists, technology defies colonialist modes of representation and allows for what Loretta Todd has referred to as ‘re-imagining Indigenous airspace’” (Loft 2005:94). At the same time, we should be cautious about pinning too many hopes on the internet and digital media. “As Mosco (2004) reminds us, these dramatic shifts in time, space and politics were also heralded at the advent of previous ‘new’ technologies such as radio and television” (Rekhari 2009:177).

The artists with whom I spoke also considered space and elements of the cosmos as inherent in their artistic practice. “Many native worldviews locate humans in relation to the cosmos in a profound, mythic way… this construct may be called cosmic, for its frame is defined by events in the cosmos” (Ballengee-Morris 2008:31). Justin Beatty
mentioned that “my art is a way for me to express what my experience is as this collection of atoms and molecules. It means everything, it means nothing. It’s amazing because it’s unique and singular in the universe, but the universe is so huge and fast that even if everybody on the planet saw a piece of my artwork, it would still be nothing in the universe” (personal interview, 2019).

Considerations of space also take into account colonial histories of displacement. “Indigenous mediamakers have in common the humiliating experience of being treated like foreigners in the lands of our ancestors” (Masayesva 2005:174). Casey Figueroa also opened the possibility that his “Relics of the Future” installation piece may not be on a future Earth, but on some other planet. If that was the case, he asked, “what does it mean to be Indigenous if you are living on another planet?” In a set of digital art pieces of my own creation, one shows places teepees from an Edward S. Curtis photograph on a distant planet with a giant ringed planet floating over it in the night sky, and the other shows a wetu with stars and rings in the sky behind it. The images are designed to spur viewers into asking the very same question that Figueroa posed. Is this another migration – and was this one chosen, or forced? What would each one say about how the future has progressed?

**Ancestors and Descendants**

One of the most prominent themes in Indigenous futurist work from the Northeastern United States (Indigenous individuals who currently live in the Northeastern U.S. or are originally/ancestrally from the Northeast) is the connection between ancestors, descendants, and ourselves. There is the lineal view of these relationships, emphasizing ourselves as the middle ground, the connectors between these loved ones in
the ancient past and the distant future. In this view, we each have to grapple with “the ultimate responsibility of being the link between one’s ancestors and future generations – a key cultural precept that has been referred to as ‘the time-space continuum’” (Young- ing 2005:183).

There are also alternative views that incorporate elements of non-linear time. “There's an understanding of the ancestors are not gone. The ancestors are with us here and as my friend Tom Porter, who is a Mohawk Elder, has said to me on numerous occasions, those who have died, those who have passed on are no farther away from us in the other side of a fallen leaf” (Joseph Bruchac, personal interview, 2021).

Ancestors may thus be seen as co-existing with descendants. For instance, the Anishinaabemowin word “aanikoobijigan… means ancestor and descendent at the same time… it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life” (228-229). The Northeast is home to a handful of Inuit transplants as well, who may embrace the traditional idea of ancestor reincarnation. In Canada, one of the most seminal works on Indigenous digital productions, Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture, is dedicated “To the Ancestors – the ones who have gone before us and those who will come after us,” further exemplifying a conflation of ancestors and descendants. These alternate conceptions of ancestry and time may work well with both the sci-fi genre’s experimentation with time and the digital medium, which is in many ways less time-bound than other forms of art which can only be engaged physically, in real time, and by a limited number of people at once.
The emphasis on ancestry and descent is reflected in digital art from the Northeast. Speaking about Mohawk artist Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Dana Claxton writes that “like digital beadworks, her prints embrace the present and the future. In her work, she assures us that the past is real and that the wisdom permeating our ancestors’ teachings is accessible to us today” (Claxton 2005:36). Elders are heavily featured in Indigenous tribal nation websites in the Northeast, with multiple tribal nations dedicating whole pages to Elders who have passed on. The emphasis on connecting to ancestral knowledge forms and wisdom, and even love, is of course shared beyond the Northeast. Well-known Indigenous filmmaker Victor Masayesva has established that “the Indigenous aesthetic – like each tribal language – is not a profane practice, a basic human protocol, or merely a polite form of etiquette and transaction, but rather, it is the way in which we are heard and commune with the Ancients.’ To that, I would add, the present and the future” (Loft 2005:97).

In spite of inaccurate stereotypes about Elders left to die on ice floes and mountainsides, many non-Native people today may now be aware that Elders are generally honored within many Indigenous cultures. What may be less widely known is the high value placed upon children and young adults as well. Colonial sources often painted Indigenous children as wild and undisciplined, owing to the fact that Native people rarely utilized methods such as spanking and encouraged children to be energetic and lively rather than quiet and repressed. This value was challenged by colonial conceptions of how to “properly” raise children, and when government leaders decided that Indigenous children were still not assimilating to American culture to their satisfaction, children were abducted and sent to residential boarding schools where they
routinely faced significant mental, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. In the mid-
1900s, boarding schools were either closed or in the processing of being closed, but the
foster care system began extracting Native children from their homes in a widespread
fashion, replicating many of the same harms. Several artists with whom I spoke were
adopted by non-Indigenous parents, with varying experiences. While Indigenous
community ties were severed by these decades of cultural genocide and violence targeted
at children, ironically, these efforts have perhaps only strengthened the immense
communal love for young people. “One of the basic tenets of our philosophies is a
concern for future generations” (Todd 2005:158).

In addition to the cultural mandate many Native communities feel to cherish and
protect young people, especially in light of the brutalities of colonial interventions, there
is also the fact that young people carry culture forward. They are, in a very literal sense,
the future. “I think we see a lot of the young generation now feeding back into the
culture” (Darius Coombs at Plimoth Patuxet, personal interview, 2019).

While Elders are valued for their wisdom and guidance, there is simultaneous
acknowledgement that young people have crucial knowledge as well, and knowledge that
may be more suited for contemporary times. “I think about my son and I have to
recognize that I raised him for a world that doesn’t fully exist anymore… I made a
personal sort of pact with myself that when I get to be 65, 70 years old, I’m going to stop
voting for myself and my interests. I’m going to listen to the kids. I’m going to listen to
my grandkids. What is the world you guys want?” (Justin Beatty, personal interview,
2019).
Native youth in many Indigenous communities are often very aware of their role in creating the future. Many of the recent environmental movements in the United States and around the world have been led by young people. “Indigenous perspectives on climate change can situate the present time as already dystopian. Instead of dread of an impending crisis, Indigenous approaches to climate change are motivated through dialogic narratives with descendants and ancestors” (Whyte 2018:224). Our ancestors saw the changes coming, and we are living in them; we see the changes happening, and want to prevent future generations from living in even worse devastation. In challenging environmental destruction and degradation, many Indigenous youth use social media and other digital forms of communication to organize and voice their support for environmental movements. “Native youth have used media to engage environmental injustice” as well as non-traditional or blended art forms (Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi 2013:72).

Speaking about Australian Indigenous youth, Inge Kral writes that “young people are transforming their visibility by engaging in new forms of cultural production” and through this new media, are “taking up the challenge of global citizenry more than any other generation before them” (2011:5,12). Older generations of Indigenous people have generally expressed support for young Indigenous people, even when their cultural expressions have incorporated elements of new practice such as digital media production. As mentioned in Chapter Three, multiple interview participants wholeheartedly agreed that digital Indigenous art should be supported, encouraged, and highlighted alongside more traditional forms. Justin Beatty, when selling his art at powwows, noticed that his digital works appear to surprise some non-Native visitors but also often intrigued them,
and frequently garnered support from other Native individuals. This sense of support seems to hold true across North American Indigenous cultures and even Australian Indigenous cultures, as Dunba Nunju (Walmajarri) of Australia believes that “the future is synonymous with younger generations” (Lempert 2018:206).

This emphasis on the connectedness of generations permeates both discussions around new/digital media (which youth are typically more likely to be “native to” in the sense of having grown up with it), and the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction, which can be expressed through digital media or more traditional media forms such as novels. “Many Indigenous engagements with the future… focus on the well-being and development of younger generations” (Lempert 2018B:177). Kyle Whyte writes that “we are always in dialogue with our ancestors as dystopianists and fantasizers” (Whyte 2018:238). It is perhaps for this reason that Indigenous futurisms have begun appearing alongside a rise in Indigenous digital media and youth activism.

**Engaging the Alien**

A repeated theme across science fiction in general has been an encounter with something strange, alien, unknown or unknowable. This theme has particular resonance to communities who have been implicated in colonial confrontations throughout history. While the Europeans who landed in the Americas were surely just as “alien” to the Indigenous people here as the Indigenous people seemed to them, the resulting centuries of introduced diseases and warfare created a mainstream culture where European ideals held power and Indigenous people became framed as the “other.”
For much of sci-fi history, plotlines focused on white male leading characters encountering alien “others” either because these aliens came to earth (often with ill intent) or because the protagonist left the bounds of earth and encountered them in space or on their home planets (where they were still typically considered the “enemy,” thus perpetuating colonialist logics). Indigenous aesthetic motifs have even been used to mark these literal aliens as something outside of humanity. “While SF and fantasy have the capacity to facilitate a politics of recognition, how can their lessons carry genuine weight when the speculative terrain itself diffuses Amerindian, Aboriginal, and Native outlooks and exploits the common leitmotif equating the indigenous/Native with the alien other?” (Dillon 2007:219). Aliens may thus be seen as a stand-in for supposedly “problematic” human populations as well. Authors have used aliens as stand-ins for marginalized populations; for instance, in the words of an editor as reported by Octavia Bulter, aliens are sometimes used in a literary effort dedicated to “‘get[ting] rid of this messiness and all those people we don’t want to deal with,’ offering a kind of literary if not quite literal Final Solution as an anodyne” (Russell 2018:260).

Seeing the connection that mainstream, non-Native authors have created between Indigenous people and aliens, some Indigenous creators have humorously responded by linking Indigenous people to aliens within sci-fi settings in creative ways. “For example, in Colonization: The Second Coming (1996),” filmmaker Thirza Cuthand’s “discomfort with a vibrator is heightened to the point of absurdity when the sex toy turns out to be a beacon for aliens from outer space” (Dempsey 2005:86). Zanab Amadahy’s film Alien Night also takes a humorous approach to alien abductions and “satirizes terrorphobia” (Lui 2013). Indigenous humor over the ways in which Indigeneity has been equated with
literal alien-ness pervades many of these pieces. Jamaican-born Canadian speculative fiction author and artist Nalo Hopkinson has pointed out that such works “‘take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things’ (9)” (Lone Fight 2020:4).

Other Indigenous sci-fi artists have flipped the script, depicting aliens as colonizers (and thus, colonizers as aliens). “In other words, many futuristic conflicts projected on the screen ask: who are the Indians and who are the invaders, and what does that mean for the future?” (Marez 2004: 344). In an educational initiative where students were allowed to create short films, one youth participant created an “alien-themed spoof… What emerged was a profoundly powerful short film that presented Native youth as futuristic superheroes in a battle to protect their land against colonization and their culture from festishization” (Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi 2013:74). A digital print created by artist Steven Paul Judd depicts the popular arcade game Space Invaders as pixelated alien vessels, being shot down by Indigenous people in traditional clothing with bows and arrows. These pieces have a similarly humorous take on the concept of the alien, and point out the impossibility of Indigenous people being aliens in their own homelands. “Goldie (1995) describes a paradoxical situation in which ‘The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?’ (p. 234)” (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003:222).
However, these depictions can continue to reify the boundaries of colonizers versus colonized. This stark division can be seen as problematic from the perspective of the many people who now hold identities that involve both colonizers and the colonized as ancestors. Furthermore, it can perpetuate a binary us/them notion wherein “the alien does not only help create our identity (in terms of the binary oppositions) but is also seen as a danger to us and should consequently be exterminated” (Milojevic 2003:501).

While defense of Indigenous rights is to be lauded, even in sci-fi settings, some Indigenous creators challenge the idea that such a binary, oppositional relationship will always be present by necessity. If we can envision a world where we can find peaceful ways of encountering aliens – beings literally outside of our own species – this would bode well for humanity’s own internal struggles. “These journeys – real and imaginary – compel critical revisits to familiar frontier narratives and new ethical guidelines for peaceful and environmentally accountable approaches to extraterrestrial collaboration by spacefaring entities (private and state-based)” (Battaglia et al. 2015:246). Two strong examples of this new way of considering frontiers and encounters with Otherness are The Visit by Lisa Jackson and The Cave by Helen Haig-Brown. Both “depict nonviolent encounters of the third kind,” asking the question “Is it inevitable that such an encounter would begin with an unprovoked war?” (Lempert 2015). Thus, “Native sci-fi explores topics around dystopian assimilation, sovereign futures, and extraterrestrial encounters that defy colonial tropes of inevitable violence” (Lempert 2018).

In addition to critiquing the violence that sci-fi has previously depicted, science fiction produced by Indigenous and Black creators has even come to critique previous trends in science fiction and the way that colonial governments teach history. Within
Toussaint in the novel *Midnight Runner* by Jamaican-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson, “would-be colonists prepare for their journey to New Half-Way Tree by watching a computer-generated history lesson that projects the simulacra of the douen and other species indigenous to this world as terrifying creatures that had to become ‘extinct to make it safe for people coming in on nation ships’” (Dillon 2007:30). William Lempert’s short story “Planeterra Nullius: A Post-Apocalyptic Parable,” incorporates many aspects of Indigenous peoples’ past experiences, including infectious disease, a colonizing alien force that sees humans as “lesser beings,” stolen children, and a resistance effort that gains strength over time. These works of science fiction and speculative fiction critique the foundations of both traditional science fiction and mainstream narratives from colonizers’ perspectives in general.

With the recent influx of Indigenous and other marginalized voices in literary circles, and sci-fi, speculative fiction, and fantasy in particular, there is room to be hopeful that these genres will no longer push colonialist narratives and may offer poignant anti-racist and anti-colonialist perspectives instead. For instance, “representations of alien captivity that encourage whites to occupy imaginatively the position of the Indian respond to recent political-economic conditions that call white entitlements into question” (Marez 2004:344). There is some question, however, of whether equating humanity with Indigenous peoples may also encourage an appropriation of Indigenous identity, even in an abstract sense; “invaders from space endanger white humans, in effect threatening to treat them like Indians (Marez 2004:345). It could reify us/them dynamics, since these films reveal “non-Native colonizers’ anxiety about becoming the colonized” (Well-Off-Man 2020:19). On the other hand, such
representations may assist viewers in having empathy for Indigenous histories by emphasizing the shared humanity of Indigenous people. Interviewing allies who work alongside Indigenous people, many were able to empathize with the actions of historical figures like Geronimo by considering how they would have felt if they were having their lands invaded and their cultures attacked. Thus, it is possible that science fiction films that place viewers in such a position might allow them to make the mental connection to the experiences of Indigenous people, and to critique continued colonial actions. “Recent indigenous science fiction films are particularly promising, in light of this genre’s propensity for social critique via the imagining of dystopian future and extraterrestrial encounters” (Lempert 2012:39).

**The Place of Four-Leggeds, Those Who Fly, Those Who Crawl and Those Who Swim**

As noted in Chapter Three, the Indigenous digital media creators I spoke with were highly attuned to animal symbolism, both in terms of sacred animals and the specific communities that held those animals sacred, and as each animal related to its human relatives, its respective clan members. Apart from some works of environmentalist science fiction (which frequently focus on extinctions), animals are rarely featured in works of traditional science fiction. Yet in Indigenous futurist works, animals frequently play a major role. Several short films (such as 2010’s *Bear Tung* starring Gary Farmer as a hunter having a conference with the animals of the forest) have protagonists who are “women and nonhumans who have to figure out how to relate to each other again to resist the genocide and environmental destruction of the occupiers” (Whyte 2018:231).
In turn, academics have begun drawing out this connection to animals and how core it is for Indigenous communities and individuals. “Medak-Saltzman focuses on how Indigenous science fiction works empower women and nonhuman protagonists” (Whyte 2018:232). Her work in particular has examined “the way that Indigenous epistemes (similar in this regard across Native communities) engender a basic beingness to our planet and to other-than-human people (inclusive of plants, animals, and other key elements that make up our world)... of our vast responsibilities as humans to human and other-than-human beings alike” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:149).

Indigenous science fiction works may also be differentiated from environmentalist science fiction through their acknowledgment of the ways in which the environment has already been impacted, and was disrupted centuries before environmental concerns began to develop in western cultures. “As Audra Mitchell’s research shows, today’s global discourses of extinction are often so focused on ‘species’ that they cannot come to grips with Indigenous peoples’ experiences of having their relationships with nonhumans greatly disrupted by colonialism (Mitchell, 2006)” (Whyte 2018:226).

Beyond the realm of science fiction or new media productions, Kim Tallbear also calls attention to this need to center nonhuman relations throughout all of Indigenous Studies in her open letter, “Dear Indigenous Studies, It’s Not Me, It’s You” in the Critical Indigenous Studies collection (Tallbear 2016). “Our lives are impoverished if we forget about the co-constitutive relationships between us and the nonhumans that also hail from our traditional lands... One of the things that gives me hope for working within the academy is that some disciplinarians are finally circling back toward recognizing the
animacy or agency of nonhuman organisms – bear, rabbit, mushroom, worm – beings that have destinies that are co-shaped with human lives and with each other” (Tallbear 2016:80).

**Women and Non-Binary Centered Futures**

Haudenosaunee cultures share in common a creation story of Sky Woman, or the Woman Who Fell from the Sky. What all versions have in common is that this pregnant woman was from a sky realm, and one day fell toward the earth. As she fell, she was aided by animals who became concerned for her safety – birds flew beneath her to slow her descent, and aquatic animals struggled to dig dirt up from under the vast oceans to make a place for her to land and rest. Muskrat finally succeeded, and placed the bit of earth on the back of a turtle, which would eventually form the North American landmass, giving rise to the commonly used term “Turtle Island.” Descended from her are two twins, one good and one evil, and humans are created by the good twin. Strawberries, raspberries, and peaches were brought by her, and she brought songs with her as well, connecting this oral tradition to both the land and Haudenosaunee cultures (Four Directions Teachings). This story, which comes from Haudenosaunee peoples but is commonly known throughout the Northeast, not only recognizes intelligent nonhumans from beyond our own skies; it posits a woman as the ultimate source of human life on the planet, and animals as intelligent, compassionate beings who precede humans on the planet.

Oral traditions such as the Sky Woman story and prominent symbolism (such as the “Three Sisters” motif to celebrate the strategy of growing corn, beans, and squash together, used today by both Haudenosaunee and Algonquian cultural groups) point to
the prominent role of women in Northeastern Indigenous communities – and in fact, in the majority of Indigenous American cultures.

In a digital event in 2020, Nipmuc storyteller Larry Spotted Crow Mann commented that “you don’t hear much about the greatness of women in early America, it’s all about the male,” explaining that this was a product of European selectiveness rather than Indigenous cultural practices (2021, We Are The Story, We Are The Land, Warner Free Lecture). For this and a myriad of other reasons, he advocates for Indigenous stories to see a resurgence in contemporary times and in the future. Joseph Bruchac likewise stated that “any man who does not listen to women is a fool, because it is the women who are the heart of the family and the culture, and also the intellectual core of our being” (personal interview, 2021).

Indigenous women are vastly underrepresented in media created by non-Indigenous people (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). Indigenous oral traditions which center and celebrate women, told by Native people either in traditional mediums (such as face to face gatherings) or contemporary formats (such as Mann’s online Zoom event), or respectfully reinterpreted through genres like sci-fi, can help reinsert Indigenous women into stories about Indigenous people. Digital art is particularly useful in this regard, as digital art forms “are far more available to Indigenous women and have a pronounced youth orientation” (Hearne 2017:7). This in turn helps generate social and political acknowledgement and respect for the myriad roles played by Indigenous women – as culture bearers, professionals, family members, artists, and activists. Films like The Sixth World demonstrate how Indigenous creators can show “actual Native knowledge and
Native people being important into the future,” which “extends the significance of Navajo origin stories into the future” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:163).

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous historians and anthropologists have researched the role of women in Indigenous societies in the past and the present, and have made compelling cases for their traditional involvement in tribal nations’ cultural and political practices, though the mechanisms for their participation may vary by cultural group. Some more recent research has looked at historical roles for gay, trans, and non-binary or, to use the contemporary general term, “Two Spirit” individuals within Indigenous communities. As noted in the above section, both Kyle Whyte and Danika Medak-Saltzman have written on the subject of Indigenous science fiction and speculative fiction that focuses on empowered women and nonhuman characters (Whyte 2018). However, academic work on Indigenous female and non-binary representation in both mainstream and Indigenous media is relatively a young field of study, and more attention should especially be paid to LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit histories and creative works.

It may particularly surprise many non-Indigenous, and even some Indigenous individuals, that traditional Indigenous stories made room for people who were not what we would call today “heterosexual” and “cisgender.” Contemporary Indigenous artists and authors are also bringing forth these histories and stories. Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time is a short story collection edited by Hope Nicholson, featuring Indigenous science fiction and urban fantasy with a focus on LGBT and two-spirit characters. Another anthology, Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction, pulls its title from the post-dystopian reality of Two Spirit people.
living under colonization, but also promises readers utopian visions queer Indigeneity
finding spaces in which to thrive. Joshua Whitehead’s poetry collection *Full Metal Indigiqueer* combines elements of sci-fi and cyberpunk informed by anti-colonialist and queer theory. The short films of Thirza Cuthand offer commentary on her own identity as a butch lesbian. Kent Monkman’s drag alter ego as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle has appeared in museums and online. Buzzfeed articles now explain the term Two-Spirit to readers (Talusan 2015; Bubacz 2018). Nenookaasi Ogichidaa’s Instagram page depicts the Two Spirit fancy shawl dancer at Canadian Indigenous cultural celebrations.

Closer to the American Northeast (and specifically New England), where research for this dissertation took place, multiple university Indigenous cultural centers have sponsored programming supporting LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit identities (Amherst College 2013; Yale 2016; Brown University 2014; Harvard 2020; Cornell 2015; University of Maine 2018; University of New Hampshire 2018; Dartmouth 2020; Dartmouth 2021a: Dartmouth 2021b). Two-spirit individuals in the Northeast have also helped spread awareness and acceptance. Narragansett tribal member Sherenté Harris, who attended Brown University, is using both powwow dancing and art to enlighten others about the issues that Indigenous people and two spirit people face, and recently became the main subject of the documentary *Being Thunder* (Sherenté Harris 2018; Indian Country Today 2021).

As with the role of women, the role of people who would now be identified as LBGTQIA+ were marginalized by colonial populations and cultural practices, and actively obscured in the colonial record. Scholars such as Bea Medicine helped shine a light on non-straight traditional roles, but Two Spirit Indigenous people today are gaining
visibility for themselves through narratives that center non-straight and non-binary characters, both online and through print media. “We can ask how and when digital production might restore gender balance and body sovereignty to visual media’s representational field” (Hearne 2017:20).

**Body and Spirit**

Within academic Indigenous circles, some discussions have centered on the relationship between physical bodies and place and virtual realities. The internet has been seen as a potential tool of both colonization and liberation, and as a place alternately rife with connective ability and a void where connectivity withers and dies. There is also concern over how technology monitors our physical spaces and bodies.

Given the history of governmental oversight of Indigenous communities, it should come as no surprise that some people are wary of technologies that would provide more ways for Native people to be monitored and tracked. In an interview with filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, Puhipau draws a connection between the name reassignments that took place in Kunuk’s Inuit community and Puhipau’s Hawaiian community, making a connection to technology by saying “we all get social security numbers. That’s how they keep tabs on every one of us until we die. They put you in that computer” (Puhipau & Kunuk 2005:58).

This concern about tracking can become pressing when mobile and social media data are used to monitor and militarily respond to Indigenous protests or acts of environmental protection. At Standing Rock in 2016, a suspicion that local police were using Facebook location check-ins to monitor activists’ activities met a response from
allies, who posted that they were there in Standing Rock despite not being there at all, in an attempt to overwhelm and confuse the police and disrupt their ability to plan based on the numbers. The local Morton County Sheriff’s Department denied using the data, but in addition to using social media information, many “law-enforcement agencies routinely use technologies like Geofeedia to track protesters’ posts, photos, videos, and locations in real-time” (Meyer & Waddell 2016).

However, concerns about the internet have gone even beyond practical safety concerns and into discussion of corporea and the importance of physical realities. Widely praised filmmaker Loretta Todd, for instance, “saw a number of problems with severing the relationship between the body and the physical world” (Hopkins 2006:343).

A cybershamanist movement led by Terence McKenna, an ethnobotanist and early internet enthusiast, appropriated aspects of Indigenous cultures in a virtual realm disconnected from the physical landscapes as well as the Indigenous peoples who gave rise to those practices and continue to imbue them with meaning. A post captured from Usenet after his passing stated that “Terence's legacy to the net should not be underestimated. He saw the unstated design goal of virtual reality as a digital simulation of the psychedelic experience” (In Memory of Terence Mckenna). A concern thus arose among some Indigenous people that “Terrence McKenna and the advocates of the cybershamanism would take the imagined mind, the supposed dreams of the native, and discard the body” (Todd 2005b:158).

Marisa Duarte, while acknowledging some of the positive aspects of technology, sees two primary dangers in the creation and use of modern technology (2021, Berkeley Center for New Media, History and Theory of New Media Lecture Series: Indigenous
Technologies). The first is the environmental harms and human rights violations that often go hand in hand with technological production. These include mining for metals, underpaid labor, and tech waste disposal. The other potential problem is the way that technology impacts our ability to understand the world around us, such that we become easily bored and disconnected with natural environments. If our attention cannot be held for longer than a few minutes, ancient and time-tested methods of teaching may be lost, along with the important messages they carry about environmental care.

In addition to these concerns, there is a more overarching consideration that a reliance on machinery, even machinery with dazzling abilities and the promise of connection to others, will ultimately increase our sense of alienation from nature and from each other. “In the potential enormity of cyberspace and the seeming limitlessness of VR, the universe seems more ‘mechanical and separate’ than ‘connected and immanent.’ The alienated psyche of western man and woman cannot find relief in cyberspace and virtual reality. You can go anywhere, be anyone – but you are still alone” (Todd 2005b:163).

Yet other authors see cyberspace as infused with spirituality in much the same way that natural materials in the physical realm are in a number of North American Indigenous belief systems. These theorists believe that we can incorporate machinery into our view of the connected, spiritually-infused world, and perhaps “make kin” with the machine. “Indigenous epistemologies are much better at respectfully accommodating the non-human… We propose rather an extended “circle of relationships” that includes the non-human kin – from network daemons to robot dogs to artificial intelligences (AI)
weak and, eventually, strong – that increasingly populate our computational biosphere” (Lewis et al. 2018:2).

“Writers like Allucquere Rosanne Stone believed that cyberspace, through its computer-mediated shedding of materiality and the physical body, offered new possibilities for identity – identity that would not be defined by the boundaries of gender, race, and age, but by the individual themselves” (Hopkins 2005:134). While this sounds promising, the premise carries with it possibilities like the cybershamanism movement. Additionally, after decades of engaging in cyberspace, we now know that while online identities can certainly differ from individuals’ real world identities, the constructs of racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism, Islamaphobia, and colonialism can all be reproduced online in ways that are complex and contextually based. At the same time, many people struggle to hold onto their real-life identities and cultural understandings in online spaces, in spite of predictions that they would shed them for “easier” identities. While online spaces and the exchange of energies across telecom lines may be incorporated into a spiritual view of the world, this does not mark online space as utopian. In fact, in such an interconnected spiritual view, it would only make sense for these spaces to be intimately connected to, and therefore affected by, the rest of the world.

If Loretta Todd is correct, that eventually “cyberspace will not simply create a new machine, it will fuse human and machine,” it remains to be seen whether this transformation of mankind will result in an incorporation of the machine as spiritual being, or a loss of our humanity in favor of the enhancements and power that
technological advances may provide us (Todd 2005b:159). Perhaps the answer will be found in how we approach technology and fold it into our worldviews.

**Sustainability and Hope in the Future**

Given that Indigenous peoples have already lived through a dystopian reality, including attempts at both physical and cultural genocide and significant disruptions of their environment-oriented practices, one might think that all visions of the future are grim. However, this is not the case. In fact, Indigenous sci-fi and speculative fiction often present hope for not only Indigenous people, but for the earth as a whole. As such, Indigenous futurism often centers Earth or considers how traditional practices from Earth could be transported to other planets, rather than viewing space travel as the ultimate goal, either in and of itself or as an escape from Earth.

Battaglia argues that narratives around space exploration stem from anxieties around Earth’s ongoing and increasing climate crisis, but that “these tensions drive imaginations of escape from Earth as much as they call for staying put and living within our ecological means” (Battaglia et al. 2015:252). Rather than divide humanity into the elite who get to escape a trashed earth and the non-elite who must stay behind and live in the aftermath, he argues for a counter-push that values the planet on which we all currently reside.

But Indigenous people have already been the non-elite living in the aftermath of environmental degradation, and continue to do so. Lee Sprague has noted that the contemporary reality is one that many Indigenous people’s ancestors would have envisioned as a dystopian future (Whyte 2017:207). Larry Gross has written that “Indians
survived the apocalypse,” and Grace Dillon has similarly written of a “post-Native Apocalypse” (Gross; Dillon 2012:10). “Callison’s work recognizes that the hardships many non-Indigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (Whyte 2018:226).

Grace Dillon argues that “the answer to the environmental catastrophe that threatens our planet resides in traditional teachings” (Dillon 2016:3). Indigenous inventions, such as “terra preta,” the man-made hyper fertile soil that originated in the Amazon Basin, are now being seen as viable, as are traditional hunting seasons. “Every day, there’s some new scientific discovery, that’s what Native people have been doing for thousands and thousands of years” (Justin Beatty, personal interview, 2019).

Indigenous teachings that may help restore the planet go beyond simple resources management and entail a new type of relational understanding of animals and plants. Explaining why Indigenous cultures were frequently so adept at living with the environment, Dillon explains that “the reason is not because resources were so abundant that hard work and systematic thinking simply were not required, or that indigenous groups did not inflict environmental damage simply because they did not aspire to grand public projects. Instead, to echo Anderson’s study of indigenous thinking, the concept of indigenous scientific literacy suggests that sustainability is about maintaining the spiritual welfare of natural resources rather than simply planning their exploitation efficiently so that humans do not run out of necessary commodities” (Dillon 2007:26). Such a way of living with nature has been traditionally devalued in western societies. “That’s the
American mindset – if it’s close to natural, that couldn’t have taken much.” (Justin Beatty, personal interview). However, if such a spiritually ecological mindset could be embraced, perhaps we might see “maybe even a majority of the world kind of living according to Indigenous ways, in terms of a balance with nature” (Casey, personal interview, 2019). “What if our anthropocentric myopia is supplanted by a spiritual growth that catches up with and supersedes our technical prowess, a future in which the best values of traditional societies come to the fore, and a balance of spiritual and technological equality becomes the dominant paradigm?” (Pechawis 2014:37).

Many Indigenous visions of the future focus on the possibilities of North American and other worldwide Indigenous teachings and practices to restore the environment. When asked about what art could be timeless, Justin Beatty commented on art that looks at the human condition, and especially pieces that are based on real people. But he also brought a sustainable perspective to the art that will endure into the future. “Thinking about how to plant things that create situations where the way those things are planted are beneficial and speak to culture. That’s the stuff that stands the test of time. You can look back at the Amazon, how they were building tiered systems to turn that ground into sustainable land for growing food, and it’s amazing. There’s an art to that” (personal interview, 2019).

There is an explicit focus on hope in many Indigenous creations, and this is a trend that appears to be rising. During the 1990s when Indigenous films saw a rise in popularity owing to the documentaries of groundbreakers such as Osawa, Obomsawin, and Todd, as well as the historical fiction film Dances with Wolves, many fiction and documentary films sought to bring public awareness to serious, often devastatingly
painful issues within Native communities. This was a necessary and timely use of film as a medium. However, some media skewed toward hopelessness and resignation, and it can be a challenge to find films that are joyful, humorous, or hopeful. In response to this, many creators today attempt to highlight possibilities and provide at least a balance between discussions of trauma and discussions of hope. “As Vision Maker’s [Shirley] Sneve related… ‘We don’t ignore the bad things that have happened but we like to think that there’s hope for Native American people’” (Peterson 2014:250). When discussing visions of the future, Casey Figueroa said “there’s a lot of imagery on the future, like Mad Max or Blade Runner. There are, like, two possible branches, and an Indigenous future might look quite different” (personal interview, 2019). He went on to note that he believed and hoped that an Indigenous futuristic setting would look less dark than many of the dystopias portrayed in mainstream science fiction.

In addition to giving Indigenous people visions to believe in and hope for, there is another reason that many Indigenous artists highlight hope in the future. We are familiar with the notion that “fantasy, sf, and speculative fiction often rely on so-called ‘cautionary tales’ to depict dystopic worlds where the slavish embracing of advancing western technologies leads to environmental decay” (Dillon 2007:23). However, Milojevic writes that in addition to highlighting problematic issues in the present through the lens of a future society, dystopian works can “prepare and de-sensitize the populace for the consequences of postmodern global capitalism” and can be used “to teach us that we should be happy with our present (social) order as the future could be much worse” (Milojevic 2003:500). Lempert echoes this concern, noting that “dystopian ethnographic depictions may unintentionally serve to reinforce the dispossession of Indigenous
futures,” and that “such dystopian representations carry high real-world stakes for Aboriginal people.” (Lempert 2018:203,208).

In the Northeast and across the United States and Canada, Indigenous futurist visions are starting to emerge as sites of hope and imagined possibilities. “Those who have already lived through an apocalypse and are articulating generative hope in its aftermath” (Lempert 2018:203). Having online communities and connecting to other Indigenous people can also be an exercise in affirmation and hope. Wemigwans, in 2008, noted the importance of seeing oneself represented and how “creating such a presence online has generated a surge of hope for various peoples from many diverse communities” (Wemigwans 2008:36). Within Indigenous futurism, even many “plotlines that at first may resemble dystopic soothsaying… inevitably unfold junctures of hope” (Dillon 2007:24). Instead of seeing these glimmers of hope as escapist fantasy, we should see them as companions to real social change. It is likely no coincidence that Indigenous visibility and narrations of hopeful futures are rising as Indigenous youth activism is also rising. The following quote from artist Skawennati Tricia Fragnito on cyberspace could easily be applied to conceptualizations of the future as well: “There may be other ways to imagine cyberspace, not as a place born of greed, fear, and hunger but instead, a place of nourishment. A place where people can find their own dreams. Not just fantasies of abandon, but dreams of humanity and ways to keep the land clean” (Claxton 2005:36).

Major Works in Indigenous Sci-fi and Fantasy

There are a significant number of books in the speculative fiction and sci-fi genre written by self-identified Indigenous authors that have made it into mainstream book lists, elite reviews, or academic discourses. A few examples taken from publishing
(including novels, novellas, short stories, screenplays, and graphic novels) include:

Thomas King (The Back of the Turtle), Daniel H. Wilson (Amped!, Robopocalypse, Robogenisis), Gerry William (The Black Ship), Misha Nogha (Red Spider White Web), Daniel Heath Justice (The Way of Thorn and Thunder Series, The Ruins of the Phoenix War Series), Brian Hudson (“Land Run on Sooner City”), Richard Van Camp (Wheetago War graphic novel series), Drew Hayden Taylor (AI, Take Us to Your Chief: and Other Stories), Eden Robinson (“Terminal Avenue”), Rebecca Roanhorse (Trail of Lightning, Storm of Locusts), Gerald Vizenor (Bearheart), Louise Erdrich (Future Home of the Living God), Joseph Bruchac (Killer of Enemies series, “The Next to the Last of the Mohegans,” “An Indian Love Call”), Cherie Dimaline (The Marrow Thieves), Ambelin Kwaymullina (The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf), Claire Coleman (Terra Nullius: A Novel), Blake M. Hausman (Riding the Trail of Tears), Waubgeshig Rice (Moon of the Crusted Snow: A Novel), and Elizabeth LaPensée (They Come for Water).

Notable Indigenous short film directors include Donavan Seschillie, Jake Hoyungowa, and Deidre Lynn Peaches (The Rocket Boy), Ginew Benton (Looking Glass), Heid E. Erdrich (Pre-Occupied), Lisa Jackson (The Visit, VR film Biidaban: First Light), Helen Haig-Brown (The Cave), Sydney Freeland (Hoverboard), Zainab Amadahy (Rebellion, Alien Night), Danis Goulet (Wakening), Jeana Francis and Nigel R. Long Soldier (Future Warrior), Travis Holt Hamilton (Legends from the Sky), Jeff Barnaby (File under Miscellaneous), Thirza Cuthand (Colonization: The Second Coming), Josh Bryer and Oscar Nicholson (Kindred), Elizabeth LaPensée (Returning, The Path Without End), Amanda Strong and Bracken Hanuse Corlett (Indigo), Nanobah Becker (The 6th World) and Giuliano Cavalli and Jorge Mario Suárez (Gonawindua). A few of these
works represent “emerging sub-genres” such as “Indigenous steampunk (The Path Without End, Indigo) and Native youth engaging with future technologies (Hoverboard, Rocket Boy)” (Lempert 2015).

Recently, the Cherokee Nation Film Office has also helped support *Totsu* (Redbird). This short film was produced by Cherokee citizens and filmed in Cherokee lands. *Totsu* tells the story of an Indigenous woman who has to confront an unknown predator in both the world of prehistory and a dystopian future. All of the dialogue in the film is in Cherokee which, within the story (and I would argue, within our society), is an act of rebellion. And in 2021 *Night Raiders*, the first feature film from acclaimed short film director Danis Goulet (who had previously directed *Wakening*) premiered. Set in 2043, the film focuses on a dystopian future where children are taken from parents by the military to be placed in state schools, echoing the history of Indigenous boarding schools.

Some of these works were highlighted in the 2012 Indigenous sci-fi anthology *Walking the Clouds*, which “challenged critics and artists alike to recognize the qualities lauded in contemporary experimental sf as core elements of ancient Indigenous epistemologies. *Walking the Clouds* asked critics to recognize the Indigenous origins of sf tropes” (Dillon 2016:1). It is also fitting that Indigenous Studies was somewhat quick to recognize this movement of emerging Indigenous science and speculative fiction. In addition to being self-proclaimed fans of these genres, several prominent academics are also authors or creators themselves. Many of these works have strong connections in universities. In the above group of published authors, Thomas King, Gerry William, Daniel Heath Justice, Brian Hudson, Richard Van Camp, Drew Hayden Taylor, Eden Robinson, Gerald Vizenor, Joseph Bruchac, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Blake Hausman and
Elizabeth LaPensée have all held positions within academia, typically as professors. However, digital media provides publishing opportunities for aspiring authors outside academia for whom the traditional publishing world is too costly, time consuming, complicated, or closed off.

Many Indigenous creators are thus using digital platforms to distribute their writing and art. Artists who I spoke with frequently posted their work to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Mohawk artist Skawennati’s immersive Second Life-based machinima series, *TimeTravellerTM*, is entirely hosted online, with episodes available through YouTube. “Social media abounds with Indigenous Futurisms as well. Grace Dillon wrote about the Imagining Indigenous Futurisms Facebook discussion forum in 2016, it was “growing its 800+ members daily;” now, as of August 2021, it has over 5,000 members (Dillon 2016:6). Of course, there is a danger in social media posting too; individual posts can be difficult to find once lost or given a new html home, and entire platforms can become defunct or lose favor with users. The once-popular quarterly zine *kimiwan*, which called for submissions on Tumblr’s platform, for instance, does not seem to have posted new content since 2014.

Another advantage that the internet can provide is the opportunity for crowd-sourced funding. Many Indigenous films and graphic novels have been crowd funded through sites like Indiegogo, GoFundMe, and Kickstarter. In some cases, if a target number is not reached that would make production viable, contributors are refunded their contributions. This allows creators to gauge public interest and potentially fund their works with no out-of-pocket cost.
Indigenous publishing companies, particularly in Canada, have been instrumental in amplifying Indigenous voices and giving opportunities to Indigenous authors. Groundbreaking publishing companies like Theytus Books, established in 1980 and now the oldest Indigenous publishing house in Canada, have taken chances by publishing works of fiction that incorporate Indigenous experiences, worldviews, and perspectives instead of relying solely on the ethnographic and historical narratives that many readers expect from books about Indigenous people. Fortunately, even mainstream publishing companies are beginning to express an interest in incorporating previously unheard voices. “Tor Books and Fireside Fiction have publicly expressed an openness to ‘represent the full diversity of speculative fiction, and encourage submissions by writers from under-represented populations’” (Russell 2018:271). Even so, there must remain Indigenous publishing houses, as these will continue to push beyond the bounds of the expected and stereotypical, and will innovate in areas such as Indigenous editing styles as well (Young-ing 2018).

These authors are steadily fighting back against the assertion that “such then is the blindness to tradition and the fascination with the west, that non-western writers do not use their non-western roots as a springboard for their creativity” (Milojevic et al. 2003:498). Instead, they are privileging their perspectives as Indigenous people. In turn, “the rise of the Native sci-fi film genre is beginning to influence other filmmakers” (Lempert 2017).

Not all of the works listed in this section have been entirely well received. Even Indigenous-produced media is not immune from criticism, both from Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers and reviewers. Additionally, books such as Rebecca Roanhorse’s
Trail of Lightning raise the issue of how an author’s Indigenous identity should impact their writing, as Roanhorse is not Diné/Navajo herself but has used Diné/Navajo oral traditions, language, and symbols with which she is familiar through her time living in Diné/Navajo territory and through her in-laws (Shapiro 2020). These criticisms and responses to criticisms have largely played out over online discussion boards (Agoyo 2020).

While Indigenous futurisms are on the rise in novels and film and in online spaces, there are few Indigenous creators from the Northeastern United States who have emerged in this field. For instance, looking over the 51 short films featured on LA SkinsFest as of August 2021, one of the largest showcases of independent Indigenous film, only five directors appeared to be either born in the Northeast or relocated to the Northeast, and several of these were not associated with any tribal descent information and so may be partners with Indigenous creators, or may be of Indigenous descent but from elsewhere. Three of the 51 films were futuristic in their setting, though none of these were associated with the Northeastern directors. Given the rich oral traditions of Northeastern cultural groups, there is currently a need for more Northeastern Indigenous voices in sci-fi and speculative fiction, particularly in film and digital media.

There was, in the past, an “unstated but clear assumption that technology, space, and by extension, the future was de facto white and male” (Lone Fight 2020:2). This assumption continues to be disrupted by emerging Indigenous and African-descent authors who draw on ancestral concepts to revitalize not only the sci-fi and speculative fiction genres, but also the way we envision time, space, and our relations to ourselves, each other, nature, and the creatures with whom we share the planet.
Conclusion: Indigenous Art as Medicine for the Future

Indigenous futurism, scifi, and speculative fiction are on the rise in Northeastern Indigenous communities and across “Indian Country.” Authors located in the Northeast and/or who have ancestral groups originally from the Northeast are contributing to science fiction literature. “And luckily, now we have our own cadre of really incredibly talented Indigenous science fiction writers who are producing work that I think is as good or better than anything that you've seen so far in the field” (Joseph Bruchac, personal interview). Futurism is also gaining grounds in other areas apart from literature as well. The Native American Indian Center of Boston (NAICOB) even featured a monthly Indigenous Futurism group, called “Indigenous Futurism 2420 Group: 400 Years / 5 Moons” throughout spring 2020 (2020 Calendar).

Some have argued that sci-fi and other future-focused genres have been unappealing to Indigenous and other minority groups, but both historical research and more visibly diverse participation in sci-fi as of late have proven this notion false (Russell 2018). Indigenous futurisms have in common with feminist sci-fi and Afrofuturism a desire to inject alternate epistemologies into the future; although one key difference between some forms of feminist sci-fi and Afrofuturism is “the priority of many Native peoples for material and cultural sovereignty from, rather than equal and equitable inclusion within, dominant systems (Lempert 2014:165-166, italics original).

Likewise, cyberspace itself has been lamented as a space of pure alienation. However, some maintain the hope that “there may be other ways to imagine cyberspace, not as a place born of greed, fear and hunger but instead a place of nourishment” (Todd 2005b:163). Steven Loft provides a different point of view, writing that “for Indigenous...
people the ‘media landscape’ becomes just that: a landscape, replete with life and spirit, inclusive of beings, thought, prophecy, and the underlying connectedness of all things – a space that mirrors, memorializes, and points to the structure of Indigenous thought” (Loft 2014:xvi).

Subversive imagery (such as the juxtaposition of robots and teepees in Casey Figueroa’s digital art), and even new media forms such as machinima or online independent news outlets, create a challenge to mainstream authoritative narratives and industries. The insertion of Indigenous languages into digital works likewise acts as a direct challenge to narratives of disappearance and assimilation, and insinuates these languages “as part of the contemporary world and as relevant for the future of a particular group” (Eisenlohr 2004:24). “The future of experimentation will be based on challenging control in its various manifestations” (Masayesva 2005:176). This call from Masayesva, over 15 years old at the time of this publication, was a call to use digital media in ways that would not perpetuate the erasure and domination of Indigenous people. Tribal nations in the Northeast, as well as individual Indigenous creators, are answering this call with their digital creations.

It should also be noted that digital artists and traditional artists frequently blend popular science fiction symbolism into their work, often with humorous intent. For instance, “many Native artists have reworked Star Wars iconography in their work, demonstrating the striking importance of this revisional act within the aesthetic field of SF” (Lone Fight 2020:10). This is certainly the case in the Northeast, as both digital artists and traditional artists such as beadwork artists blend futuristic, sci-fi, and pop imagery into their work, often alongside traditional imagery. A few popular examples
spotted at powwows and other cultural events have been “Baby Yoda” (later identified as Grogu), Hello Kitty, and generalized 1960s spaceship and robot imagery.

“By drawing on popular culture, North American Indigenous artists assert their presence in global media consumers’ world – drinking Coke, watching Star Wars, taking selfies – and re-appropriate the right to tell their own stories about past, present, and future” (Baudemann 2016:122-123). As recognizable symbols to mainstream consumers, they also pull Indigenous presence into the present and future. They are also powerful symbols for larger ideas. “The Starship Enterprise can represent the best in human endeavors while the Emperor Palpatine epitomizes the forces of evil” (Fricke 2020:25). “Contemporary Native artists do not just simply ‘appropriate’ sci-fi imagery from mainstream society; instead they subvert and indigenize popular culture to interrupt colonizer power structures, to reclaim their cultures, and reimagine the future from an Indigenous point of view” (Well-Off-Man 2020:15).

These juxtapositions of Indigeneity and futurism do more than challenge the stereotype of Indigenous people and traditions as belonging to the past, although they certainly have value in that aspect and in making us view the past differently. Science fiction can also remind us of the accomplishments of our ancestors, that they were never “savage” or “barbaric.” “A relative of mine believes that as Aboriginal people we were once very modern, perhaps even more modern than the newcomers” (Todd 2005:110). Furthermore, “representations of futurity carry serious political implications” and can “help reimagine the assumptions that inform the social policy treatment of contemporary Indigenous peoples” (Lempert 2018B:177-178). Visions of the future, even imagined ones, can thus impact the present.
Yet science fiction and speculative fiction, in addition to shining a light on the past, can also directly craft our futures. Gregory Benford once said that “you cannot have a future you do not imagine,” and Milojevic echoed this by asserting that “the imagination of the future creates the reality of tomorrow” (Lempert 2015; Milojevic 2003:493). Just as the writings of Arthur C. Clarke inspired the actual design and function of satellites, and the cellular phone was drawn directly from the communicators on Star Trek, science fiction and speculative fiction are areas where visions of the future are tested. “While we cannot have a future we do not first imagine, we also consciously or unconsciously create the future based on what we assume to be possible, desirable, and even inevitable” (Lempert 2015). Indigenous futurists, therefore, are not solely interested in Indigenous futurisms as ways of disrupting colonialist stereotypes. “Thwarting colonial endeavors doesn’t have to be its primary function” (Carlson 2020:45).

Indigenous viewpoints, incorporated into the future, may not simply provide representation and validation to Native people – they may be the key to finding an alignment with nature that will actually allow for a viable future. “Indigenous futures are not only vital for Aboriginal people; they also provide valuable insight into global challenges” (Lempert 2018:202). Already, Indigenous preservation of swaths of land and even individual seeds have shown remarkable results, and the impressive foresight of ancestors both prior to and during eras of colonization (Cascone 2015). In discussion Indigenous futurist works, we should acknowledge their inherently political ramifications, and “recognize that Indigenous resurgence and Indigenous futurisms not only are the antithesis of blood quantum politics, narratives, and policies designed to
eradicate Native peoples but they also mark the way toward a path foretold to a verdant, green place of possibility” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:167-168).

“I think that’s what I’m doing as an Indigenous artist, is helping to skew the art world and the future of the art world, maybe a little bit back into Native identity” (Justin Beatty, personal interview, 2019). In this way, works of art that posit a future where Indigenous ideals are fully incorporated are helping to actually create such a future as a possibility, as an idea that seems plausible and visionable, something toward which we can work. N. Scott Momaday has asserted that “we are what we imagine,” and to that we may add that our descendants may also become what we imagine. Imagining is thus an act of reclamation, of resisting stagnation; rather than stay stuck in museum displays, Indigenous artists are laying powerful claim to the future. Works of Indigenous futurism “represent the power of imagining and bringing into existence alternative realities and alternative futures” and each piece “requires us to dream better realities into being” (Medak-Saltzman 2017:166).

Science fiction is thus able to offer “the creation of plausible future worlds from a range of civilizational perspectives” (Milojevic et al. 2003:495). Historically, it has offered a somewhat narrow view of the future, a “‘technoscientism’” that can be overcome in Indigenous and anti-colonialist visions of the future “by going back, way back, to tradition through the telling of story/ceremony, and by going forward, way forward, by mining the imagination to construct an ameliorated technology informed by indigenous tradition and practice” (Dillon 2007:24-25). Indigenous artists, with their personal and firsthand experience of Indigenous ideals and viewpoints, are best suited to craft this relationship for the future. “Indigenous knowledge is embodied. As opposed to
the Enlightenment impulse to abstract ideas from things, Native objects are information, and they convey political and aesthetic purpose simultaneously” (Dillon 2016:4). Indigenous artists agreed that Indigenous viewpoint should emanate from Indigenous people, and were simultaneously thoughtful about who should speak for who, even across tribal nation and clan differences. “Our artists are the ones who are able to bring visions of the future into the present... if you have something that you can add into and move towards that, it’s easier to achieve” (Casey Figueroa, personal interview, 2019).

An emphasis on Indigenous futurity, already a “major trend in contemporary Native art,” has also started to gain ground in non-artistic fields such as pedagogy, thus signaling that the Indigenous futurist movement in the arts has started making a broader impact (Well-Off-Man 2020:14; Kulago 2019). Indigenous futurisms may be viewed as a form of medicine, which have the power to heal not only Native readers who long to see a future where they still exist, but also potentially entire systems of relation to nature, to animals, and to each other. “The future is not far from us, nor is the past. And the past is always getting bigger. As we move further into the future, it's not like we're leaving it behind” (Joseph Bruchac, personal interview, 2021).
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Major Research Questions Revisited

In 2007, Cuillier and Ross asserted that “very little research has examined self-representation of identity of Indian nations on the World Wide Web” (Cuillier & Ross 2007:198). This has stayed relatively stable; in 2016, Michele Seikel agreed, writing “not a great deal of literature has been published heretofore which examines the content of Native American websites” (Seikel 2016:38).

Because the scope of the media I studied is so expansive – the websites alone, when put into document form, constituted a total of 1,201 pages – I used quantitative data methods such as coding website traits and using word cloud and sentiment analysis functions to analyze sets of Tweets. However, I also gathered interviews across the Northeast with local Indigenous leaders and content creators, Indigenous transplants to the area, and non-Indigenous allies to gain a broader sense of the motivations, challenges, and rewards of digital media production. This qualitative approach also allowed participants to speak for themselves and highlighted their individuality and agency. Although speaking on the topic of audiences, the following quote was instructive for my approach to digital media creators: “valuing participants solely as data returns audiences to a state of imagined ‘passivity’” (Jenkins et al. 2013:176).

Therefore, this dissertation – though focused on a limited area of the United States – sought to expand previous academic literature and infuse quantitative data based on coding web page contents with qualitative, participation and interview-based data so that
Indigenous website and other digital content creators could speak to their own creation processes, goals, audiences, and political perspectives. In the volume *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, a text which grew out of an artistic showcase at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, a lack of attention to Indigenous digital media artists in academia was called out: “there has, however, been too little critical discourse, academic or otherwise – and much less published – about their work from their diverse world views” (Ryle 2014:vii). This dissertation further pulls in this kind of direct artist feedback.

The five main research questions outlined in the first chapter have been addressed from several angles in the previous topic-centered chapters, but it is worth revisiting them here.

**RQ1: What digital media is being produced by Indigenous people in the Northeast?**

The range of digital media being produced by Indigenous people (and by allies with Indigenous partners) covers a wide range of media forms.

**Social Media**

Social media, as it is for much of the population of the United States, is ubiquitous among Northeastern Indigenous communities. Individuals share everything from family news to favorite hobbies to what they ate for lunch over Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. However, Native users’ activity typically includes cultural activities (such as powwows, beadwork pieces, drumming, Indigenous-themed paintings), Indigenous news articles (such as tribal governing updates, recent discovery of remains at residential boarding schools in the U.S. and Canada, or environmental efforts), and
explicitly political posts related to Indigenous rights – these types of content
differentiates Indigenous individual users’ social media activity from non-Indigenous
users’ activities. On a humorous note, Indigenous users also post memes that would be
entertaining largely to Indigenous people and allies who are very familiar with
Indigenous experiences and media. These memes are explored in more detail later in this
chapter.

In addition to personal social media pages, tribal communities use social media
for their own ends. Social Distance Powwow, which emerged to give Indigenous people a
sense of attending a powwow during 2020 when Covid-19 made most powwows cancel,
operates largely on Facebook. The Odenong Powwow, which began in 2021 as a
regional online powwow in western Massachusetts, used multiple social media sites with
coordination happening via Facebook. That powwow will likely become an annual event
with both in-person, live streaming, and asynchronous digital options for participation.
These online events demonstrate pan-tribal community building via social media
platforms. Specific Indigenous communities also utilize social media to gather online in a
closed space. Because group membership can be controlled on sites such as Facebook,
tribal groups are able to maintain these online groups as “in-group” spaces so that
sensitive tribal issues can be discussed.

Finally, tribal nations, pan-tribal organizations, and coalitions between Indigenous
people and non-Indigenous people utilize social media for political organizing. The
“Stand with Mashpee” hashtag on Twitter is a prime example of taking lessons from the
2016 Standing Rock movement and how it was able to garner non-Indigenous attention
and support through social media, and using similar techniques within a more local context.

**Websites**

A variety of websites feature Indigenous-created content. The most visible websites are tribal nation sites. A major finding of this dissertation is that tribal nation sites tend to blend images with traditional symbolism (headdresses/headpieces, buckskin clothing, beadwork, moccasins, etc) with images that feature contemporary imagery (such as business suits and modern office designs), either on the same page or within the same photo. Contemporary clothing dominated in pictures of Indigenous people for every age range. This contrasts with previous research which suggested that tribes, particularly those with gaming operations, were more likely to use stereotypical imagery on their websites (Cuillier & Ross 2007). While it may have been necessary during the early days of the internet to appeal to mainstream notions of “Indianness” to affirm their identities in the eyes of the public – just as many Northeastern groups felt pressure in the early to mid-1900s to adopt Plains cultural symbols just to gain recognition (and ironically, appear “legitimate”) in the eyes of the non-Indigenous neighbors – Northeastern Native nations now appear to be resisting stereotypes through the visuals on their websites. Traditional imagery is posted, yes, but it is posted alongside contemporary imagery and there is always at least as much information about current tribal news as there is tribal history, emphasizing tribal survivance.

Other prominent websites were museum sites. Two of the most well-known museums’ websites were analyzed for this dissertation to compare them to tribal nation sites. As could be expected, these websites had a stronger focus on education and
historical information, and were largely directed toward out-group (non-Native) audiences. They did have a surprising deviation from tribal nation sites, in that they had a higher usage of the term “Indigenous,” with the Tomaquag Museum being the only site to prefer that term over both “Native/Native American” and “Indian.” Both museum sites and tribal nation sites had an overwhelmingly positive disposition toward higher education, and both used traditional and contemporary imagery of Indigenous people.

While not analyzed in depth for this dissertation, there are also several nonprofit and educational sites that share historical information and promote Indigenous interests. These include Ohketeau (a youth-based cultural workshop nonprofit), the Massachusetts Indigenous Legislative Agenda (a group dedicated to support pro-Indigenous legislation within Massachusetts and occasionally more broadly), the North American Indian Center of Boston website, the United American Indians of New England, the group largely responsible for staging the National Day of Mourning each year on Thanksgiving and livestreamed in 2020 (and whose website states “We Are Not Vanishing. We Are Not Conquered. We Are As Strong As Ever.”), the nonprofit Gedakina (which seeks to expose young people to educational possibilities, providing resources and “enable them to choose and pursue positive life paths”), the Truth School (which prepares workshop participants for social justice leadership on issues of importance to Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color), Massachusetts Peace Action (which strongly advocates against Native mascots and the Indigenous imagery on the long-held Massachusetts state seal), and the Native Land Conservancy (a Native-run land conservation group with heavy Mashpee and Aquinnah Wampanoag involvement), among others. These sites largely have a focus of “what you can do,” including donating,
volunteering time, and supporting legislation to protect Indigenous interests, reduce stereotyping, and enhance environmental conservation efforts. Many also explicitly describe their goals and their latest activities.

Of course, Indigenous creators may also be featured on websites that have a much wider range. Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz’s digital artwork pieces (one focused on the Covid-19 pandemic, and another on the residential boarding school history) have been featured on the Easthampton City Arts page as well as the Leslie Grove Gallery, both online and in person at their Toronto location (2021). A few artists with whom I spoke also featured work for sale on Fine Art America and t-shirt design sites Redbubble and CafePress. Of course, as digital works become featured on websites with larger national and international audiences, the risk of theft and appropriation of those works grows, and this is a consideration that artists must take into account against the potential of greater exposure and artwork sales.

Podcasts

While there are only a few Indigenous-created podcasts entirely focused on Indigenous issues, there are a range of podcasts that have run Indigenous episodes, and more Indigenous podcasts that are very popular in the Northeast despite originating from other parts of the country. Analyzed in this dissertation were Interwoven, the educational podcast hosted by Plimoth Patuxet Museums that frequently examines Indigenous issues past and present, a Public Radio limited podcast series that focused on the Brothertown Indian Nation and featured several prominent Indigenous academics from the Northeast, and Breakdances with Wolves, which is hosted in Seattle, Washington but has a significant listening base in the Northeast.
A few shared features between these podcasts were the blending of personal and professional networks to find podcast guests, an emphasis on what practices create a podcast (even those that cannot be heard or seen in its finished form), and a consideration of each host’s personal identity in relation to what topics they should speak about. Podcast creators were also unanimously excited to see other people join podcasting; there was no sense of competition or needing to “corner” any particular niche or market, even one as potentially small as Indigenous issues.

A few other podcasts relevant to Northeastern Indigenous issues are Native Opinion (co-hosted by Michael Kickingbear, of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, and David GreyOwl, a member of the Echota Cherokee Tribe of Alabama), All My Relations (co-hosted by Matika Wilbur, Swinomish and Tulalip, and Adrienne Keene of the Cherokee Nation, currently living in the Northeast), Métis In Space (co-hosted by Chelsea Vowel and Molly Swain, which covers popular western culture media from an Indigenous perspective and is well known in the Northeast), and Coffee with my Ma (hosted by Kaniehtiio Horn, Mohawk out of Canada). And of course, local podcasts may occasionally feature Indigenous speakers or allies speaking about local initiatives.

Not only do these podcasts reveal “the potential for the podcast medium to be a robust site for new, multivocal experiments in ethnographic representation” and an innovative way to incorporate Indigenous voices into curriculum, they also constitute another powerful form of media where Indigenous stories can be told from Indigenous perspectives (Durrani et al. 2015:4). While this dissertation has attempted to provide some an entry into how Indigenous values and perspectives may have impacted podcast
creation, hopefully more research can be conducted on specifically Indigenous podcasts as they grow in number.

**Blogs**

Although this dissertation did not heavily focus on blogs, there are several prominent blogs in the Northeast, each with a different goal. The nationally recognizable blog Native Appropriations is maintained by Cherokee Nation citizen Adrienne Keene, who lives in the Northeast (and is currently a professor at Brown University in Rhode Island). Although the blog was last updated in June 2020 as of the writing of this dissertation, it has been instrumental in addressing appropriative trends caught in mainstream American culture and has been the subject of academic scholarship in its own right (Keene 2020; Baldy 2016). Its scale is therefore national, and its audience encompasses both Indigenous people equally tired of seeing their cultures ignored or turned into costumes and non-Indigenous people whom she hoped to educate on the issue of appropriation.

On a more local scale, On the Wampum Trail: Restorative Research in North American Museums is an educational blog which follows a team of researchers whose goal was to survey anthropological collections at museums, work with tribal wampum belt specialists, and “conduct interviews to construct more detailed object histories for wampum belts in regional collections” (Notes from the Trail). The site is thus an educational tool meant for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people interested in the history of wampum belts and how the field of anthropology has collected sacred Indigenous items and enclosed them within museums. The blog seemed to be most active from 2014 to 2017. Similarly, Wampum Memories: A blog dedicated to Mashpee
Wampanoag history, culture, and identity is the official blog of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Historic Preservation Department (MW–THPD) and focuses on historical artifacts, but with an emphasis on their relevance to the present as well. Speaking about wampum itself, for instance, the blog echoes the work of Angela Haas, noting that “We’ve recorded memories in these wampum ‘flash sticks’ for thousands of years” (Nosapocket). Wampum Memories also hosted updates on Project 660, an effort to highlight museum artifacts that are meaningful to the “660 Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Members between the ages of 18-30” at that time. However, the blog’s last post was in 2018.

A very local (and highly controversial) blog, Reel Wamps, is well known among Indigenous communities in the Northeast for its strong focus on Mashpee Wampanoag tribal governance and accusations of misconduct toward several members of the tribal council. This blog, started in December 2010, has steadily continued and is still very much in production, despite a very brief hiatus where the blog was “taken down without warning, and, I might add, without justification” and then reestablished at a new location (Reel Wamps: About Us 2021). The author of the blog identifies online only as “Ebenezer” – perhaps not a real name, but a pen name paying homage to Ebenezer Attaquin, a famous Mashpee Wampanoag historical figure who led as both a Deacon and a political representative (Weeden 2019). This blog is clearly directed primarily at not just Indigenous people, but Mashpee Wampanoag tribal members in particular as it seeks to “get answers” and “restore the Tribe’s dignity” (Reel Wamps: Contact Us 2021).

Individuals also occasionally maintained personal blogs where their art could be shared, alongside discussions of Indigenous issues. Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz, for instance, maintains https://www.ellaalkinuk.com/, where she shares her activities and
creations as a beadwork artist, painter, digital artist, poet, and public speaker. In addition to the art on display mentioned within this dissertation, which had digital components, Ella’s work can also be seen in physical spaces in the United States and Canada, with pieces currently hanging in local western Massachusetts galleries in Holyoke, Easthampton, and Amherst.

Because there were few blogs with highly varied audiences and goals, and most were no longer in operation, these were not covered in detail for this dissertation research project.

**Other Digital Media**

In addition to tribal nation and museum websites, social media (and the visual art hosted on those platforms), podcasts, and blogs, there are other digital expressions being created by Indigenous Northeastern artists.

Short films have been created with digital means, including fictional films (such as *Danny Attuk* by Nipmuc artist Talin Avakian, now Talin Borekjian), educational pieces such as the ones created by Mashpee tribal member Paula Peters for the Plymouth 400 commemorations, and digital news shorts (such as the “Breakdown” series hosted on Mashpee TV’s YouTube channel) (Torosyan 2013). While these have been touched on briefly in this dissertation, a more thorough investigation should be made in the future, especially as Northeastern artists hopefully receive more financial support and attention. Indigenous filmmakers from the Northeast are largely underrepresented in national film programs, and this is an area that should receive further attention. On a positive note,
Yale did recently institute a Young Native Actor’s Contest as part of their Indigenous Performing Arts Program (Rabinowitz 2021).

A few artists in the Northeast create music using digital tools and distribute it through YouTube, often with locally created music videos, or through SoundCloud. SoundCloud and YouTube are also used for following Indigenous musicians from elsewhere in the U.S. and Canada. However, artists using these methods were limited and the topic of music rarely emerged through interviews or informal conversations. As my background is focused primarily on visual anthropology, I did not pursue this form of digital media for this research project.

Finally, perhaps the newest form of “new media” are video games and apps. “Working as a research assistant for AbTeC (a group of artists and researchers, called Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace), Elizabeth LaPensée found that “Indigenous characters were rarely featured in video games and when they were it was most often in a way that instantiated numerous stereotypes. This echoed research into Indigenous representation in film, television, and also comic books” (Lewis 2016:230). LaPensée herself has contributed greatly to the amount of video games, apps, and interactive websites in the public sphere today, which focus on Indigenous issues or use Indigenous traditional values within their gameplay without stereotyping or relying on hackneyed visual symbols. However, no Indigenous nations examined in this dissertation had apps or games, apart from the visitor apps associated with the Foxwoods casino and the Mohegan Sun casino. One interesting, entirely coincidental finding is that Northeaster tribal nations are beginning to be recognized in games and apps that are not Indigenous in nature; for instance, the mystery-solving game June’s Journey mentions a Mohegan
farmer as her neighbor in the 1920s, and when the main character expresses surprise at his identity, her gamekeeper lets her know “you’ve got a lot to learn” about Indigenous people still being in the area. Future projects might examine more of these app and gaming media in detail.

**RQ2: What are the goals and motivations of Indigenous digital media producers in the Northeast?**

The chapters in this study were organized by the overarching goals discovered through media analysis and interviews with Indigenous content creators. A primary goal of digital media creation was expression, on the personal and tribal nation levels. Individuals took to social media to express details of their own lives (both related and unrelated to their Native identities). Tribal nations were able to combat stereotypes and express aspects of their cultures that they want the public to know, and that they wish to promote for their own sense of self.

Like Indigenous film, Indigenous media also intended to educate. However, whereas Indigenous film in the 1990s focused primarily on educating non-Native people about historical and contemporary injustices, Indigenous digital media from the Northeast today focuses both on educating non-Native people on Indigenous issues as well as using media to provide educational resources for Indigenous people. Indigenous communities are also attempting to implement change in systemic ways, addressing whole school systems and educational boards.

Another goal of digital media was to enhance political activism around Indigenous issues. These include both local issues (such as the Massachusetts state seal,
gaming rights, and area mascots) as well as larger issues like environmental protections. The Standing Rock activist efforts acted as a unifying issue throughout “Indian Country,” and was a striking demonstration of the ability of digital media to promote an Indigenous perspective and gain both Native and non-Native allies. It was also a case where online activism (petitions, slogans and hashtags, educational resources, and vocal support) was blended with in-person action at the site and tangible local actions (such as fundraisers, demonstrations against banks funding the Dakota Access pipeline, and removal of funds from DAPL-supporting institutions). Although digital media was already being used for political means prior to 2016, the Standing Rock movement cemented the power of digital media to attract mainstream attention and affect meaningful change.

Although not as prominent as the other themes, an emerging and growing theme in Indigenous arts, literature, and studies is a focus on the future through fantasy, sci-fi, and speculative fiction works. This growing genre incorporates traditional Indigenous epistemes while overturning the stereotype of Native people as belonging solely to the past.

Throughout these overarching goals and themes, a few other shared ideologies emerged. One comment that was repeated among Indigenous artists was the desire to invite other Indigenous people in and work collaboratively. There was a marked lack of competition among artists and content creators. In fact, more Indigenous people sharing their stories was a cause for celebration. Furthermore, there is a general move toward Indigenous people being the only ones to use Indigenous oral traditions and mythologies. A few stories from non-Indigenous authors and creators may still be generally well liked (for instance, there is some mostly positive buzz around a forthcoming movie based on
the Hillerman book series), but there is a growing feeling that for the foreseeable future, Indigenous people are best suited to tell their own stories.

**RQ3: What is the content of Indigenous digital media in the Northeast?**

Major themes found across Indigenous websites included tribal governance issues (478 occurrences), Native American art/music/literature of the area (303 occurrences), environmental concerns in general (208 occurrences) as well as water rights specifically (128 occurrences) and hunting/gathering/fishing issues (155 occurrences), formal education/schools/teachers (217 occurrences), Native news or local events (191 occurrences), Native community action such as political demonstrations (176 occurrences), genealogy/membership/enrollment (150 occurrences), health and healthcare (146 occurrences), employment opportunities (133 occurrences) and economic development (59 occurrences), childcare and children’s interests (119 occurrences), preservation/restoration/revival (100 occurrences), assistance programs (61 occurrences), and Elder care and Elder interests (72 occurrences).

Images were highly utilized (1240 across the 12 websites analyzed) and in terms of the presentation of Indigenous people, most photographs featured contemporary clothing (591 instances) as opposed to regalia accessories (141 instances) or full traditional regalia (240 instances). (Note that some photos may have been tagged with all three identifiers, if for instance, three Indigenous people were photographed together, one in full regalia, one in regalia accessories, and one in contemporary clothing.) A few other notable aspects about imagery on the websites studied: there were more candid images (425) than posed ones (333); more pictures were taken outdoors (717) rather than indoors (439); people were more likely to be pictured in groups (456) than as individuals (287
images of contemporary, and 46 images of historical individuals); and, there were more photographs of nature (262) than of man-made structures (113).

Looking at visual arts, the question of what to include was one given detailed and thoughtful consideration by content creators. Tribal nation website designers grappled with what tribal histories to emphasize and what current issues to prioritize for public display. Artists were particularly attuned to their own identities and how those impacted what they had the cultural rights to include in their work. One interesting finding that should potentially pursued further is that non-Indigenous allies with whom I spoke were attuned to their role as a non-Native person, and were even highly aware of tribal differences. They generally made a concerted effort to use tribally specific names when possible, and when they had to speak about Indigenous people at large, they attempted to default to the preferred term or what they felt was the least offensive term (often, “Indigenous” or “Native” or “Native American”). The Indigenous creators I spoke with also took these factors into consideration, but several had the additional consideration of clan membership.

Another important aspect of Indigenous digital media content was the attempt by Indigenous artists to incorporate Indigenous values not just into the themes of the work they created, but into praxis. Using brushstrokes (or mouse strokes) that move circularly rather than linearly in pieces that incorporate Indigenous visions of time and space, or asking for quiet attention for certain speakers during podcasts (much like in certain forms of oral tradition), are methods of bringing Indigenous values into the creation of digital media creations.
RQ4: How is digital media produced, and what kind of organizational work is a part of the production process?

Digital media products start with either inspiration (as is the case for visual art creations) or need (as it typically the case for tribal nation websites). Artists may be able to make art as a matter of expression, but tribal nations need websites in order to establish legitimacy, build community relations, deliver news to tribal members, and have an outlet to inform the public about tribal activities.

The artists that I spoke with described drawing inspiration from a range of sources, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Speaking about the podcast format, Interwoven host and Plimoth Patuxet Director for Education & Community Outreach Hilary Goodnow, who is not of Indigenous heritage, said “because I had no recording or broadcast experience, it was just a medium of storytelling for me. And I had grown up with radio plays that had been on vinyls, that my parents made into cassette tapes for me… I just thought of it as storytelling” (personal interview, 2019). Breakdances with Wolves podcaster Minty LongEarth, speaking about her podcast co-hosts, Gyasi Ross and Wesley Roach, noted that they grew up with radio being a primary source of information in their rural home areas. She also grew up on old radio shows that her adoptive parents would play. “I grew up listening to radio more than watching TV” (personal interview, 2019). Justin Beatty described the artwork he grew up around, especially because of his mother’s artistic abilities, and how these helped shape his own styles and interests. He also spoke about being moved by a particular feeling or intrigued by an idea, or even revisiting older pieces of his own artwork and considering ways to
rework them or take them in different directions, thus sparking the idea for an entirely new piece (and creating quite a circular artistic process).

In creating content, few artists – even visual artists – worked alone. Casey Figueroa used Indigenous theories to inform his artwork. Justin Beatty also incorporated Indigenous concepts into his work, and even actively solicits community feedback about which of his ideas he should pursue. Podcasts, of course, generally rely on conversation for content and thus depend on finding guests. The Interwoven Podcast relied on scholars and community members that they knew or who were recommended as guests. The Public Radio series on the Brothertown Band utilized community knowledge as well: “everyone we talked to, I think we said, is there anyone else who we should talk to, and would they give us other names?” (personal interview, 2019). And Minty, of Breakdances with Wolves, talked about reaching out through acquaintances and friends of friends in some cases to find guests.

Tribal nations face a separate set of motivations for digital media creation. Websites, particularly ones that appear to be professional, lend credence to tribal authority, which is particularly important for tribal nations that have been accused of being inauthentic due to tribal structures and practices that deviate from mainstream expectation, or due to intermarrying with outside groups.

There is a heavy pressure on tribal leadership, particularly in smaller groups, to handle website content creation and even site development single-handedly or with minimal assistance. In some cases, as website creation becomes more complex to execute, this has posed issues for tribal leaders. Tom Porter, for instance, elicits help from friends to create the Kanatsiohareke Mohawk website, calling them by phone and
dictating the content that should go online, thus using varied communications technology to draw on his extended network and pull together the community website.

While tribes are able to have strong levels of control over their own sites, social media has created opportunities for non-Native people and even tribal members to post counter-narratives to official tribal histories. In speaking about subaltern counterpublics, Elizabeth Burrows notes that historically they relied on exclusive spaces that allowed members to connect, regroup, and create representational and agitational strategies for engaging the mainstream public (2016). “However, Bruns (2008:67) argues this ‘one-to-many’ structure, with its vertical information flows, has been replaced by ‘many-to-many, user-led media’ that open up public sphere discussions through their horizontal information flows” (Burrows 2016:4). This is a tension noticeable in the U.S. Northeastern Indigenous community when it comes to digital media creation. While some tribal communities may maintain closed social media groups and/or official tribal communications offices, there is no controlling who gets to post online. Tribal members can and do run controversial blogs and speak publicly in ways that cause disagreement and discontent among other tribal members. And of course, there are differing opinions among Indigenous people on what can or should be shared and with whom. Even on the Native mascot issue, while the vast majority of Indigenous people in the Northeast are against them, there may be a few who speak publicly in favor of them, creating conflict within Indigenous communities and potential confusion for the outside public. While this is not unique to tribal communities, it can exacerbate historical disagreements, create political divides, and generate confusion among non-Indigenous content viewers.
Of course, in addition to digital media creation, there is also the aspect of digital media spread. Many social media users do not create new content – or they create content in simple, guided ways (such as creating a Pin on Pinterest, or sharing a URL on Facebook). Individuals have taken to social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok to share memes and jokes with other Indigenous individuals and to offer their experiences as education for non-Indigenous viewers. These creators increasingly use these “mechanisms to communicate, and to encourage political participation and vigorous debate, both inside and outside Indigenous public spheres” (Waller et al. 2015:62). This level of engagement should not be considered entirely passive; it is still a form of participation in digital media spheres, and plays a role in raising awareness, educating others, and establishing users’ identities (Jenkins et al. 2013).

**RQ5: Who are the desired and projected audiences for these Indigenous digital media creators?**

In the 1990s, there was a significant increase in Indigenous films, particularly documentaries. While this coincides with a rise in documentary and independent films more broadly, there is an identifiable goal of these 1990s documentaries of exposing injustices and bringing unknown histories to light for non-Native viewers.

Indigenous-created media today produces educational material for non-Indigenous audiences, particularly on museum and tribal nation websites, but creative digital media such as visual art pieces, memes, podcasts, and videos now seem to be directed in higher degrees toward Indigenous (even tribally specific) audiences. Looking at the 12 tribal nation and museum web sites analyzed in full for this dissertation, pages that were clearly directed to outsiders numbered 35, while pages explicitly addressing
tribal members numbered 96, showing an overall orientation toward Indigenous viewership.

However, considering Indigenous audiences first does not mean that other audiences are excluded entirely. This may be the case with some pieces that create barriers to outsider understanding, such as works that uses Indigenous languages without translations. But many digital media works simply privilege Indigenous audiences while still providing a strong narrative for non-Indigenous viewers to follow. “Indigenous artists and activists are using new technologies to craft culturally distinct forms of communication and artistic production that speak to local aesthetics and local needs while anticipating larger audiences” (Wilson and Stewart 2008:10).

A prime example of this kind of balance can be seen in a recent production that is neither digital nor from the Northeast, but got a hugely positive reaction in this area nonetheless. In episode 3 of the television show Reservation Dogs, the main characters visit an uncle figure who is rumored to be heavily involved in medicine work. Approaching the property, they see evidence of traditional practices. A plastic owl, hanging from a tree, spooks the protagonists and as it spins to the camera, its eyes are blurred out. As evidenced by questions posted on Reddit and Twitter, this scene confused many non-Indigenous viewers (and even some Indigenous viewers who don’t share a cultural understanding of the owl’s symbolism with tribes of Southeastern and Northeastern origins). Indigenous viewers who know that many tribes share a view of owls as being associated with death – in particular, the belief that meeting an owl’s eyes in real life leads to one’s death – were delighted by the scene and the fact that it gave a special nod to viewers “in the know.” The curiosity that arose around the scene for those
not “in the know” also acted as an educational moment, as the question of why the owl’s eyes were blurred was answered online by several websites within a day after the episode aired.

Lisa Mitten, a pioneer in tracking Indigenous online activity, explained in 2006 that “while early efforts tended to involve Native individuals looking for other Native people online, individuals and groups soon sought to present information about their peoples to the non-Indian world” (2006:1337). Now, it seems that Indigenous audiences are increasingly being seen as primary and Indigenous connections are being prized once again, with education to non-Indigenous viewers a secondary but nonetheless extremely important component of digital and social media productions.

**Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic**

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic began in earnest in the United States, with activity grounding to a halt and an extended quarantine beginning. The following year would continue some degree of quarantining, cancelled events, sanitary precautions, and social distancing. Individuals of every background felt the anxiety of the situation and, in many cases, the heartbreak from losing loved ones or the terror of contracting the disease themselves. Minority communities were impacted more by Covid-19 for a variety of reasons; some communities have a higher number of bodies per household, low income individuals were more likely to be in service positions deemed “essential,” low income jobs were frequently rife with inadequate precautions, and rural and low income areas have fewer hospitals that are sometimes less competent (CDC 2021).
As Indigenous people were dealing with these impacts, the internet became a way to maintain personal relations, community ties, and a connection to Indigenous cultures. There was also a spiritual dimension to the support that emerged over social media. Just as jingle dress dancers at Standing Rock allowed their dance to be recorded so that its healing power could be shared with the world, jingle dancers on the Social Distance Powwow danced us through the worst moments of the Covid-19 pandemic and, later in 2021, through the pain of children’s bodies being discovered at boarding schools (Hearne 2017:17). Individuals also used social media and internet campaigns to find out about areas in need of financial donations or masks. Many sent out resources to others even when their own stability was far from guaranteed.

Indigenous users also shared political posts, mostly geared toward helping Native nations that were in dire straits, encouraging mask wearing (and later, vaccinations), and supporting the sovereignty of nations like the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, who chose to close their borders. “‘Participation’ is not just limited to media creation. The acts of curation, conversation, and circulation that help spread… progressive messages are understood as part of the political process” (Jenkins et al. 2013:170-171). These acts of sharing showed public support for tribes’ rights, which was essential when legal officials were often ruling quickly about what rights businesses, tribes, states, and individuals had to respond to the pandemic.

Several websites posted Covid-19 information directed at their Native visitors. The Ohketeau website, for instance, added a page dedicated to the impacts of Covid-19 on Native communities, encouraged Native visitors to the site to get vaccinated, and offered local vaccination sites.
In addition to posts made on major social media sites like the Social Distance Powwow Facebook page, Indigenous individuals (like most others) took their personal accounts to share stories of isolation, pandemic hobbies, and even family tragedies. Art and poetry expressing the shared trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic were posted.

Speaking about Indigenous spaces online, Michelle Raheja has asserted that “these online ‘Indigenous territories’ (Hearne), crafted on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, save lives” (Raheja 2017:172). Given the isolation and trauma experienced by so many people during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the heightened rates of depression, it is highly likely that positive Indigenous spaces such as the Social Distance Powwow literally did save lives.

**Poking at Pop Culture**

A frequently overlooked aspect of many Indigenous cultures is that Native people can be funny. Hollywood movies played into stereotypes of Indigenous people as having little emotional range. The Edward S. Curtis photographs of Native Americans, taken during a time of trauma and additionally influenced by Victorian ideas that discouraged smiling in photos, also contributed to this notion that Indigenous people are humorless. (Curtis’s images of unsmiling Native people are so impactful that Native sketch comedy group The 1491s released a video titled “Smiling Indians,” simply showing Indigenous people smiling and laughing, with a closing dedication to Curtis.)

Most media have depicted Native Americans as stoic, though in many films and shows they are also depicted as angry; according to historic mainstream media, if Indigenous people show emotion, that emotion is anger. This has been a general
assumption that Indigenous educators and activists have had to combat (while not coming off as combative), so that they can appear approachable and reasonable, and gain well-deserved empathy for their points about Indigenous rights. In actuality, like many oppressed groups, humor has been a critical element in maintaining not only survival but survivance during times of struggle. It has allowed Indigenous people to make in-jokes that only they understand, and to poke holes in stereotypes of themselves, with other Indigenous people (and possibly, close allies) as their primary audience.

Take, for example, the now years-long back and forth taking place between several Indigenous people from the Northeast over Facebook, known as “you’re so Native…” This informal joke has been so productive in terms of churning out comedic gold, that a “You’re So Native” book is being assembled. One Facebook user, for instance, told the world that his friend was “so Native he was working out at the gym and someone whistled at him so he did 4 more push ups,” referencing the powwow drumming practice of adding onto a song at a signal to do so. Some reference Indigenous pop culture, such as “You’re so Native, the Slapping Medicine man slapped himself after talking to you” (Justin Beatty, referencing a well-known 1491s skit, Slapping Medicine Man), or even wider pop culture, such as the comment “You’re so Yupi’k... when you play Mario Kart your character uses a dog sled” (provided by Warren Griffin Jr.). Yet others touch on stereotypical signs of Indigeneity, reference Indigenous celebrities like Graham Greene and Wes Studi, or pull from local oral tradition and events. An offshoot of “you’re so Native” is “the most Native man in the world,” a riff on the popular Dos Equis ads featuring “the most interesting man in the world.” For instance, Justin Beatty
writing about long-time friend Warren Griffin Jr., wrote “when you take a picture of him, he steals a bit of YOUR soul… he is the most Native man in the world.”

The ability to laugh during the Covid-19 pandemic in particular certainly pulled many people through hard times. Consider, for instance, the early days of the pandemic when toilet paper shortages were happening across the United States due to panic buying, hoarding, and more rarely, predatory buying. In the midst of genuine worry about grocery supplies an image circulated, posted by Society of Native Nations on Facebook, of Wes Studi as his Pawnee character from Dances with Wolves, triumphantly holding a roll of toilet paper over his head while screaming.

![Figure 21: Meme depicting Wes Studi’s character from Dances with Wolves, Photoshopped to hold a roll of toilet paper, referencing the shortages in the early Covid-19 quarantine periods of 2020.](image)

Responding to travel bans imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19, well-known Indigenous performer and activist Dallas Goldtooth posted:
Let me get this straight: Europeans are banned from coming to America because of their chance of spreading disease amongst the population??

Well ain't that some shit? - Says every Native in America.

Figure 22: Tweet from Dallas Goldtooth referencing similarities between the Covid-19 pandemic and historical pandemics associated with the colonial period.

In another post, the “Rock Driving” meme format was used to highlight the unusual circumstance of Indigenous people accepting missives and advice from government agencies during the pandemic:
Humor allows stereotypes to be challenged, sometimes in subtle ways. Clever juxtapositions of stereotypical imagery may expose, for instance, how ridiculous certain stereotypes are. Some racist or stereotypical imagery are thus “subverted by the (re)appearance of an Indigenous subjectivity” that transforms the object or viewers’ experience or understanding of the object (2bears 2014:22). Although most Indigenous humor is pointed toward an Indigenous audience, there may be some educational potential in humor as well, and Native comedy has been used in college classrooms to overturn students’ ideas about “stoic Indians” while addressing stereotypes in a non-confrontational way.
Facebook group Bananaboozhoo, touting itself as a page where the author “uses humour to push past their own trauma while highlighting the contradictions of being a traditional Anishinaabeg whilst existing in a colonial society,” posted many of the memes that circulated among Indigenous Northeasterners during the Covid-19 pandemic, and frequently incorporated (and poked at) mainstream ideas about Indigeneity.

As the pandemic continued and Zoom’s stock rose exponentially, jokes emerged about doing ceremonies virtually:

![Image](image_url)

Figure 24: A humorous meme about demonstrating spirituality over Zoom.

The meme uses traditional, even stereotypical imagery to humorous effect. Likewise, Hollywood portrayals and acts of spiritual appropriation – though serious topics – was also used for comedic fodder in memes such as this one:
Figure 25: A meme using an example of Hollywood Redface to satirize appropriative practices of non-Indigenous people.

Indigenous people also brought in references from mainstream and “nerd” culture to joke about the state of the country and the world. Asking people if someone could check if dolphins are still here, artist Justin Beatty was referencing *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, in which highly intelligent dolphins abandon the planet before its imminent demise, as they are one step ahead of humans.
Figure 26: A social media post referencing pop culture staple *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* novel, wherein intelligent dolphins disappear prior to the end of the world.

Indigenous social media users were quick to respond to the case of a woman who approached a buffalo in Custer State Park, South Dakota while taking part in the Sturgis motorcycle rally (against local tribes’ wishes, due to Covid-19 concerns). When the buffalo charged her, its horn fortunately went through her jeans, giving her a relatively harmless toss to the ground (relative, of course, to the damages she very likely could have incurred). Since she emerged from her inadvisable buffalo journey mostly unscathed, it became appropriate fodder for comedy. Members of the Social Distance Powwow posted original art of buffalo with pants hanging off of one horn. One piece of art, featuring three buffalo running in a Plains ledger-style aesthetic, one with stylized jeans flying backward off its horn, joked that the “prophesy” had come true. Another posted an image of a fake buffalo in a museum with a pair of jeans slung over its horn. Members of the group continued to laugh at the notion of “buffalo petters,” even as more video evidence of tourists approaching buffalo keep coming out.
And in November 2020, when CNN aired an election report that listed all major racial groups by name except for Native Americans (simply referring to this category as “something else”), mixed with genuine disappointment and anger over the slight were humorous takes on the strange phrasing. People posted pictures from the Lone Ranger television show, featuring the titular hero and his sidekick labeled “The Lone Ranger and Something Else.” Another put up an image of John Trudell, playing a DJ in the film Smoke Signals, saying “it’s a good day to be something else” (rather than his original line from the film, “it’s a good day to be Indigenous”). A smattering of memes collected by Cynthia Connolly can be seen here:

Figure 27: A collection of memes based on CNN’s description of Native Americans as “something else.”

Many individual Native people noted that they had been told growing up that they were “something else” (as an American turn of phrase generally meaning that someone is “a handful,” strange, or vexing) and that with CNN confirming it, it must be true. Over the Forrest Gump meme, someone posted “and just like that, Natives were labeled
something else’ and they just ran with it.” “What followed was the takeover of the hashtag #SomethingElse, fresh street t-shirts, and mountains of memes shared by Indigenous people across the country cracking jokes at their newfound label” (Connolly 2020). Of course, these funny responses do not take away from the problematic aspect of being excluded even on highly respected major news outlets.

Likewise, the uses of humor above that were related to the Covid-19 pandemic should not be seen as callousness to suffering that it caused. Addressing his own use of humor, Justin Beatty wrote on Facebook, “please don’t mistake Native peoples humor about the COVID-19 virus, as a lack of concern or seriousness. We’ve been laughing through hard times for centuries.” Author Joseph Bruchac also touched on the subject, saying that “Indigenous humor is just like our storytelling. There's always a point to it. It may be to remind you not to elevate yourself… it may be a way of just getting you to think about something” (personal interview, 2021). Humor “also gives us permission to criticize ourselves” (Duarte).

For every humorous post, there were also heartfelt tributes to celebrities and friends who had passed, supportive messages to acquaintances struggling with loss or isolation, and angry posts about why the situation wasn’t being handled with more logic and empathy by government agencies and individual citizens. Jingle and fancy shawl dancers shared their dances over social media to encourage others. Other dances were incorporated into workout regimes livestreamed to help keep Indigenous people healthy during isolation (Johnson 2021). Beautiful artwork was shared that spoke to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the heroism of healthcare workers. The pandemic-focused paintings of Muscogee Creek artist Johnnie Diacon, for instance, circulated widely,
particularly a piece entitled “Tribute to the Healthcare Warriors in Indian Country During COVID-19, 2020” which depicts healthcare workers as warriors battling the Covid-19 disease on horseback in a signature flat painting style:

![Figure 28](image)

Figure 28: “Tribute to the Healthcare Warriors in Indian Country During COVID-19, 2020” by Muscogee Creek artist Johnnie Diacon

Indigenous people in the Northeast showed, overall, a sensible response to the pandemic, a touching degree of concern for one another and for tribal nations across the U.S. and Canada, and resilience through the ability to laugh at the strange situations we found ourselves in while the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded.

**Standing in Solidarity: Black Lives Matter**

The history of Indigenous and Black interactions in the United States has been complex. Often pitted against one another – Native American individuals were encouraged to engage in the practice of African slavery, and the famous African American “Buffalo Soldiers” were conscripted to fight western Native Americans – there
has nevertheless been an equally long history of intermarriage, cooperation, and allyship. Many tribal nations, particularly those who strayed from the so-called “progressive” ideals of previous centuries and hewed closer to their traditional belief systems – took into their nations immigrants from Europe, Africa, and other continents. Indigenous people have long been able to see clearly the points of overlap between their experiences and the experiences of Black Americans, and vice versa; and of course in many cases, individuals may have both Indigenous and African heritage. A history of intermarriage with Cape Verdean immigrants to the eastern seaboard has ensured a significant Afro-Native population in the Northeast, making issues of Black equality even more personal in this region. (Although, since only two websites in 2019, the Mashantucket Pequot and the Narragansett tribal nation sites, had references to the history of interactions with African descent peoples, more public information that highlights the interrelations between Indigenous and Black populations in the New England and greater Northeast area would be beneficial to a nuanced understanding of the region.)

More recently, Indigenous and Black activists have shown support for antiracist and anticolonialist movements in solidarity. For instance, Indigenous artists appeared at protests against the water contamination in Flint, Michigan, and Black Lives Matter activists traveled to Standing Rock to lend their support (Harrison 2017).

As Black Lives Matter protests swelled in 2020 in response to a seemingly endless string of police killings of unarmed Black citizens, including the highly publicized case of George Floyd, tribal nations and individuals in the Northeast voiced their support. Mashpee Wampanoag tribal members appeared at a Mashpee, Massachusetts protest in June 2020. Tribal member Miles Peters, present at the event,
wore a t-shirt referencing another case of police violence from 1976, the locally famous case of the “Mashpee Nine,” drawing a connection between the police brutality faced by Black and Indigenous people (Spencer 2020). Later, in August 2020, the Mashpee town’s Board of Selectmen moved to make a special proclamation in favor of the police to show support in the midst of “defund the police” conversations; Mashpee tribal member David Weeden was one of the few selectmen to raise concerns about the message this unprompted commendation of police might send in light of the Black Lives Matter movement (Hill 2020).

The Aquinnah Wampanoag (formally, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head) helped initiate, along with several other partners, a three-day police training program on implicit and unconscious bias (Dowd & Seonwoo 2021).

The Narragansett in Rhode Island were present at a South Kingstown march in June 2020, with tribal member Bella Noka speaking at the event and participants holding up signs that read “Indigenous in support with BLM” (Ahlquist 2020). Noka in particular gave thanks to BLM, saying that “they have stood up for all of us” (Miller 2020). Black Lives Matter leaders in turn attended a Narragansett action that commemorated the 17th anniversary of an illegal police raid on the tribe’s tax free smoke shop in July 2020 (Crandall 2020).

The Mohegan, through their Mohegan Sun venue’s Facebook page, posted a quote from Chief Harold Tantaquidgeon: “It’s harder to hate someone that you know a lot about.” Alongside it, they declared that “we stand united with the Black community and all who face discrimination of any kind. We will work together every day to build a more just world that everyone deserves” (Mohegan Sun 2020).
The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Council released a statement declaring that “As Native people have done for the past 400 years, the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation stands in solidarity with the Black community, just as they have for us, and all of our relations who are united in protest against racism, injustice, and inequality. WE ARE ONE” (Native News Online Staff 2020). In solidarity with the Mashantucket Pequot, at a local Black Lives Matter rally in New London, Connecticut, a list of demands was provided that, in addition to police de-escalation training, support for Black businesses, voting rights and housing affordability, also included “making ‘massive changes’ to K-12 curriculum and inviting the Mashantucket-Pequot Tribal Nation to collaborate, and the town investing in diversity, equity and inclusion training” (Moser 2020). In a separate town on the same day – Ledyard Connecticut – there was talk of changing Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day, and renaming the Thames River the Pequot River. Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Youth Council members spoke at the rally about their experiences in the school system and the discrimination they faced.

Anonymous individuals have shown cross-over support against colonial statues, particularly those that owned enslaved African people and/or committed acts of genocide against Native Americans. A statue of John Mason (infamous for his role in killing men, women, and children in the 1637 Massacre at Mystic), located in Windsor, Connecticut, was spray painted with “BLM” in July 2020, prompting questions about taking it down or relocating it for a second time (Hallenbeck 2020). The Mashantucket Pequot and Eastern Pequot nations were in agreement that it should be removed from public space. Across the country, statues of Columbus were similarly defaced, often with the BLM slogan and sometimes with red pain symbolizing his reign of terror over Taino people.
Individual activists, too, have pushed for equality for all people and for people of mixed African and Native descent. Penobscot tribal leader Donna Loring, for instance, has spoken out after acts of violence against Black communities. “In 2016, she wrote a fierce defense of African-American activist Rachel Talbot Ross for the Portland Press Herald. While the paper declined to print the piece in its entirety, she posted it on Facebook and asked friends to circulate it widely” (Bumbaca & Loring 2016). Loring’s support of Indigenous and African American communities is particularly meaningful given her service in Vietnam and the fact that “in 1984 she became the police chief for the Penobscot nation,” also making her the Maine Criminal Justice Academy's first female graduate to become a police chief (Bumbaca & Loring 2016).

Northeastern people also have a history of engaging the media to highlight those who have Indigenous and African ancestry. The 2004 documentary *Black Indians: An American Story* features multiple speakers from the Northeast, as does a 2020 Indian Country Today article featuring the stories of people who identify as Black Native or Afro-Indigenous (Walker 2020). Writing in September 2020, Mali Obomsawin of the Abenaki First Nation at Odanak voiced what many Indigenous activists are feeling when she wrote that “Native people have also benefited from the racial awakening that many white people are experiencing, as monuments as well as mascots and team names with racial slurs are being challenged. Like the Black Lives Matter movement, we want more than a costume change for white supremacy: we want a fundamental overhaul and dismantling of its systems” (Obomsawin 2020).

**Flexibility at the Heart of Indigeneity**
One of the primary themes of this dissertation was the notion that Indigenous communities have always incorporated highly abstract philosophies and have always encouraged flexibility and new methods. Although Indigenous groups may value traditional teachings and values, that does not lead to the notion that practices must stay static. The stereotype of Native American cultures as unchanging can be disproven with an array of historical and geological evidence; Indigenous people have faced environmental transitions, new cultural movements, population changes, and natural cultural and linguistic shifts even prior to European colonization. “Indigenous peoples have always proven to be adept at adapting new technologies into their cultures” (Young- ing 2005:180).

Traditional cosmologies and technologies are frequently abstract and complex. Notions of time and space as circular and enmeshed with each other are more difficult to conceptualize than linear notions of time and space, and yet seem to be more accurate according the most recent scientific findings on space/time. Viewing wampum belts, masks, winter counts, petroglyphs, birch bark scrolls, Aztec codices, star quilts, drums, songs, and earthworks as examples of hypertextual media with culturally informed symbolism necessary to fully interact with them “situates American Indians as techno-savvy, as it demonstrates how American Indians have a long-standing intellectual tradition of multimediated, digital rhetoric theories and practices” (Haas 2007:94).

Yet Native people, as a whole, have also been intellectually curious and have not (as stereotypes might suggest) recoiled away from emergent technologies or been befuddled by them, as films like Nanook of the North suggest. While traditional Indigenous works were being placed in museums throughout the 19th and 20th centuries,
Indigenous people were also involving themselves in groundbreaking new media forms, although their participation has been largely ignored. “Early historians of Native American art privileged only artistic traditions that were seen as untainted by Western influences. Hybrid forms were dismissed as inauthentic, assimilations” (Ballengee-Morris 2008:30).

For most Indigenous groups, and certainly for those in the Northeast, Indigenous values did not bar individuals from exploring non-traditional media forms. In fact, traditional values can be seen as encouraging experimentation and exploration, within certain ethical guidelines. “One of the most important of these is dynamism. Constant change – adaptability, the inclusion of new ways and new materials – is a tradition that our artists have particularly celebrated and have used to move and strengthen our societies” (quote from disputed Cherokee artist and activist Jimmie Durham) (Hopkins 2005:129). “Adaptation and artistic response to new technologies is embedded in Indigenous realities. From glass beads to hard drives, Indigenous ingenuity has utilized contemporary tools for artistic means for centuries” (Ryle 2014: vii).

Of course, this is not to say that technologies are used unthinkingly or without adaptation. “Indigenous peoples have adapted into their various unique and distinct contemporary forms by adhering to two important cautionary principles: 1) that incorporating new ways of doing things should be carefully considered in consultation with elders, traditional people, and community; and 2) if it is determined that a new technology or institution goes against fundamental cultural values and/or might lead to negative cultural impact, then it should not be adopted” (Young-ing 2005:183-184). This mirrors almost exactly the quote from Justin Beatty, first quoted in Chapter Two: “we
were inclined to adapt. If something came along and we found it useful, we’d use it. If it was something that had some particular understanding behind its use, we’d try to stay true to that” (personal interview, 2019). I argue in this dissertation Indigenous people have acted as financial backers, co-creators, and early adopters of digital technologies. In these roles, they have an absolute right to incorporate or reject aspects of digital technology as they deem appropriate. “Ultimately choices about new media are really choices about new ways of living and future directions a particular community wishes to take and the questions that must be asked about technology adoption” (Rekhari 2009:179).

It should also be considered that in many ways, digital media is a more natural analogue for traditional storytelling forms in Indigenous communities. Oral tradition and theatrical performances have long been forms of education and entertainment for Native communities. Digital media allows for these performances to be captured – albeit, losing their ability to shift with each performance, or vary vocal tones and volumes for specific purposes – in a more direct way than textual media forms. Åhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw once wrote that “‘the rhythm of the drumbeat and the language of smoke signals can be transformed to the airwaves and modems of our time. If we remain true to the values of traditional storytelling practices, we can use the new technology, without destroying the culture’” (Claxton 2005:19). Adam Fish, in 2011, saw that in many ways using the internet “is analogous to participation in oral tradition” (Fish 2011:92). Similarly, Catherine Knight Steele’s work focuses on the oral tradition in Black American culture, and how “electronic media signaled a shift back to orality” (Florini 2019:18).
Given this history of balancing tradition with intellectual curiosity and adaptive behaviors, it was no surprise, then, that Indigenous tribal nations and individuals showed remarkable cooperation and resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indigenous people pointed out that this was not their first time, historically speaking, surviving a deadly pandemic. Of course, this is also true for people of European descent, as Europe once saw the Black Plague and waves of smallpox, measles, cholera, and more. The United States, too, had suffered through the Spanish Flu in 1920 – complete with anti-mask movements then as well. But while national memory seemed to have forgotten the lessons of the 1920 Spanish flu pandemic, most Indigenous people in the Northeast responded swiftly to the Covid-19 pandemic, canceling events or moving them online, endorsing mask wearing, and eventually promoting vaccinations. It might be tempting to credit the more liberal Northeastern U.S. climate for these actions, but Indigenous nations in conservative areas appeared to have similarly proactive responses; as mentioned previously, the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe even attempted to close their borders to outside traffic. Perhaps the Indigenous emphasis on holding onto history, and learning from it, was directly responsible for the heightened awareness that many Indigenous communities showed toward the Covid-19 pandemic.

Major Movements

Several major movements touched on within this dissertation continue to move forward in the Northeastern United States.

Tribal nations endeavor to capture traditional knowledge from Elders, and the Covid-19 pandemic put into stark relief how quickly and unexpectedly our Elders can be lost to us. “It is likely that the long-term survival of our traditional knowledge will
depend upon our ability to exploit the new information and communication technology” (Person 2000:64). There is some partnership on this effort; for instance, the YouTube channel Mashpee TV, the “home of Community, Educational and Government access television for the Mashpee Community” with over a thousand subscribers on their YouTube channel, features a conversation series generally featuring tribal Elders. Of course, one complication is that the Covid-19 pandemic has made visiting with Elders risky. Tribal communities are currently working out how best to move forward, with Elders’ health as the primary concern.

Formal changes in education, which would ensure accurate and culturally sensitive Indigenous histories taught with the age-appropriate spiraling pedagogical technique, are being pursued at several levels. In 2016, a series of public talks was conducted, which included “the Institute for New England Native American Studies, Suffolk University Law School’s Indigenous Peoples Rights Clinic, Native communities, and non-Native allies” (Woods 2016). There was a particular focus on educational curriculum, among other pressing issues. “At these events, we discussed the relationship between Native Peoples in Massachusetts and the state. Our conclusion, coming out of these listening sessions, was that it was a fractured relationship at best, and a non-existent one at worse” (Woods 2016). The group continued to have structured conversations, inviting state governing officials to the events, and some state-level changes to the Massachusetts curriculum are in process.

Mascots, as well, are an ongoing issue where progress seems to be inching forward. Multiple groups have lobbied against mascots, including Ohketeau, the North American Indian Center of Boston, Gedakina, the Massachusetts Indigenous Legislative
Agenda, the United American Indians of New England, Massachusetts Peace Action, and the Belchertown Racial Justice Collaborative. Native individuals have also banded together over issues like particular mascots; the town of Turner’s Falls (named after a man who in 1676 massacred 200 Nipmuc people, mostly women, children, and the elderly) was seemingly adamant to keep its headdress-clad “Indians” mascot. Fans of the mascot firmly believed that it honored local Native people, in spite of the fact that it was outfitted in Plains garments inaccurate to the cultures of the region. However, online petitions circulated and individual letters and calls were made to school officials and Gill-Montague School Committee members.

Speaking on the subject, Gill-Montague School Committee member Marjorie Levenson mentioned that she estimated that “‘I received 150 to 200 emails from various members and individuals from Indian tribes or Native Americans’” (Brown 2017). Educational initiatives have also led to some increased support. Part of Levenson’s stance was because she “did her own historical research on Indian imagery” (Brown 2017). Additionally, a $60,000 National Park Service grant began to uncover more details about the “battle” of Turner’s Falls. “According to some, the study has awakened ‘a deep hunger to know’ ‘the history that is in their backyards,’ said David Brule, the co-president of the Nolumbeka Project, a non-tribal organization for New England’s Native American tribes” (Demers 2019). However, progress was slow going in Turner’s Falls and has been in other towns as well; to bypass these town-level battles, many tribal organizations, individuals, and allies are pushing for state-level changes.

A bill introduced in Massachusetts in July 2021 would “ban public schools from using Native American logos, mascots and team names” (Copeland 2021). While similar
bills have been attempted in the past, this is the first one to successfully emerge from the House Committee (Copeland 2021). New legislation in Connecticut is also making headlines, as it will make it mandatory for schools to teach Native American studies, with a focus on local tribal nations, beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. “‘When you’re in Connecticut, to not learn about the Eastern woodland tribes, the tribes that Connecticut was founded on, (that) was the issue that we were pressing,’ said Rodney Butler,” chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot, who firmly endorsed the bill (Haigh 2021).

A major win was the support of Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker in changing the state’s seal and flag, which currently bears a stereotypical Indigenous person standing beneath a sword and, in Latin, the phrase “By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty.” “The imagery of the current flag and seal promotes a history of conquest, appropriation, and genocide,’ Elizabeth Solomon, an elder of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag, said in a statement” (Lisinski 2021). The legal move was the culmination of years of activist work raising awareness of the offensive nature of the flag. “A legislative resolve creating a commission to recommend a new seal and motto (S 2848) emerged in the final hours of the 2020-2021 lawmaking session, earning support from both branches” (Lisinski 2021). On a website dedicated to this major change, https://changethemassflag.com/, the most recent update was an announcement that the Governor-appointed Special Commission on Massachusetts Flag and Seal was to meet on July 19th, 2021, after several months of delays (Detmold 2021).

As with the mascot issue, the renaming of Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day at state levels (and ideally, eventually, the federal level) is an issue with widespread support among Indigenous individuals, tribes, and activist groups in the Northeast.
Attending a Boston event for Indigenous People’s Day, Native community member and poet/artist Ella Nathanael Akiewicz said “when I was there in Boston, I felt really comfortable because it was allies and BIPOC people celebrating Indigenous life” (personal interview, 2021). Most of the groups previously mentioned that have been fighting against mascots have also been dedicated to eliminating a holiday named for a man who committed grotesque acts of genocide against peaceful Indigenous people. The Ohketeau website, for instance, has a page dedicated to materials that help people transition from Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day. Links on the page include petitions to change the holiday at the state level, and suggestions for allyship including a reading list, a call to support Native artists, and a challenge to “recognize and make changes to the dominant narrative that glorifies colonization and genocide of Indigenous peoples of your area... ‘Pioneer Valley’ is one such local term” (Ohketeau).

Several individual towns and cities in the Northeast have started proclaiming the day “Indigenous Peoples Day,” and this trend is reflected as part of a larger movement across the United States. After some public pressure (including a Facebook group entitled Google Change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day, and a few online petitions), in 2020 Google added Indigenous People’s Day to its calendar’s preset official holidays, though both it and Columbus Day appear together. However, the change was far from unanimous; a post on Google’s support page asking them to remove Columbus Day was met with rebuttals of people wanting Indigenous People’s Day removed. In fact, of all 29 replies, 19 were explicitly pro-Columbus Day (Calendar Help 2020).

Legal wins have also been celebrated recently. One of the major upsets in the Northeastern area has revolved around the Mashpee Wampanoag’s attempt to place and
hold 321 acres of land in trust status. As a federally recognized tribe (made official in 2007), they had every right to place lands in trust status, which makes them subject to federal law, and did so. However, in 2018, the Trump administration-led Department of the Interior declared that “the tribe does not qualify as ‘Indian’ under the federal Indian Reorganization Act” and attempted to revoke the trust status that had already been granted to those acres of land (State House News Service 2020). The Mashpee fought against this ruling, even using social media – they created the “StandWithMashpee” hashtag, encouraged online petitions, published essays and videos explaining the legal issues involved in the case, and encouraged outward signs of support for their nation, such as this shareable post that circulated on Facebook:

Figure 29: A social media shareable post that demonstrated support for the Mashpee Wampanoag.
In June 2020, U.S. District Judge Paul Friedman essentially overturned this ruling when he blocked the Department from rescinding the trust status. The Department of the Interior, in turn, declared in August 2020 that it would appeal Judge Friedman’s decision until February 2021, when it declared that under the Biden administration, it would no longer fight the Mashpee to take their lands out of trust status (Associated Press 2020; Native News Online 2021). The 2020 ruling from Judge Friedman, and the later confirmation that the issue was over in February 2021, was cause for celebration among Indigenous people across the Northeast, even those outside of the Mashpee tribal nation.

Traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering rights have also picked up steam. In Canada, accusations of Mi’kmaq people running their Sipekne’katik fishery illegally led to the Crown threatening to prosecute buyers who purchase from the fishery, which violates a previous ruling (the 1999 Marshall decision from the Supreme Court of Canada) (Decembrini 2020). In response, Indigenous people across the U.S. and Canada voiced support for the Mi’kmaq. This support ranged from letters to Prime Minister Trudeau and Nova Scotia Premier McNeil written by academics and legal experts to Facebook photo add-ons showing individual users’ support of their fishing rights.

In the Northeastern U.S., the Penobscot continue to fight for control of the Penobscot River. In September 2021, the First Circuit Court of Appeals sided with the state of Maine to argue that while the Penobscot have unambiguous fishing rights (which are decimated due to pollution in the river), rights to a clean river, and absolute rights to several islands within the river, their claim to the river itself is less clear (Carpenter 2021). The Penobscot have protested the decision and are hoping to take their case to the Supreme Court, extending the legal battle that the state began nearly a decade ago. It is
perhaps no surprise that of all tribal nation websites examined in this dissertation, the Penobscot had the most mentions for the topics: hunting/gathering/fishing, water issues, and health/healthcare.

A more positive news story comes from Vermont, where H.716, a bill designed to make hunting and fishing licenses free to tribal members, passed in 2020. “Indigenous activists have been vocal about hunting and fishing rights since the 1970s, arguing that native people in Vermont never gave up these rights to begin with” (Gokee 2020).

There is some building hope that environmental issues are gaining ground within mainstream conversations, and that “rights of nature” may even gain steam legally, in part through tribal legal challenges to mainstream understandings of plants and animals as mere resources to be mined. “Across the world, Indigenous nations, states, and local municipalities have utilized jurisprudence to pass ordinances and laws that protect the inherent rights of water, entire ecosystems, grasslands, forests, and even glaciers. These Rights of Nature change the dominant narrative that considers anything non-human to be property and resources of the rights-bearing humans, and conveys a greater understanding of our interdependence with nature as the web that our species exists within” (Fairbank & With 2021).

In addition to all of these ongoing issues, a major concern for the near future is when to restart face-to-face events, what safety measures to put in place, and what size/capacity is safe. Some events, which were planned to be “back on” for 2021, were cancelled as Covid-19 continued to be an ever-present issue, with variants that began causing hospitals to exceed capacity as they had in the early days of the pandemic. The
40th Annual Nipmuck Powwow, for instance, was planned for September 2021 but cancelled a month ahead of its proposed date.

![Cancelled]

Figure 30: Social media post showing that the 2021 Nipmuc Powwow was cancelled.

In posting the disappointing news to Facebook, Cheryll Toney Holley wrote that “this demonstrates the love, care, and respect that the Chaubunagungamaug council has for both tribal members and the public -thank you!”

As previously mentioned, the Odenong Powwow, which began as a virtual event in 2021 to bring community together, will move to a hybrid format in 2022. Announcing that the event was approved to be held on the Amherst town common grounds, the group’s Facebook platform touched on the horrifically genocidal actions of the town’s namesake, Jeffrey Amherst, through his own historical quotes before turning to the
positive. “This is a historic opportunity to show that WE ARE STILL HERE! To hold a powwow in the center of a town named after a man determined to destroy Indigenous people is no small statement” (Odenong Powwow).

As in-person gatherings are still uncertain, digital and social media continue to link people together as they did during the pandemic; and combinations of physical and digital interactions – such as the beading challenge from the Kahnawake Mohawk that circulated around social media channels, calling for submissions of beadwork on the theme of community to be sent in physically or digitally, contributing to a beautiful hybrid collection attesting to the power of Indigenous people to once again adapt and maintain traditional values through new means (Deer 2021).

These generally upward trends for Indigenous rights issues in the Northeast may signal a growing awareness, at least within the Northeastern United States, of tribes’ presence and an increased willingness to hear Indigenous concerns. If so, this is the direct result of the work that Indigenous people in the Northeast have done over the last several decades to increase public awareness of their existence and living cultural practices. “In the template employed by many nineteenth-century chroniclers of New England's history, native peoples once lived throughout the region, but, after King Philip's War in 1675-1676, their numbers thinned and their communities declined. As European settlers encroached upon their land, survivors moved north or west. By the mid-nineteenth century there remained in New England's inland towns perhaps a sole survivor of the first inhabitants or, in most cases, only a memory of their presence. This template has long dominated studies of the region's history” (Baron et al 1996:561). The existence of New England Indigenous groups was still being argued to the mainstream public in the 1990s,
and even indigenous people in their 20s and 30s right now can typically recall multiple confrontations in their childhoods with people who did not believe that they existed (Doughton 1997; Bruchac 2004). While this certainly still happens – I recently heard another case from a Native high school student in September 2021 – it seems that many people are becoming more aware of the Indigenous presence in the Northeast than used to be the case. One twenty-year-old, non-Native Cape Cod resident whose family lives and works in the area year-round told me that “the summer vacationers don’t know Native people are here, but for the people who actually live here, we know they’re here. They’re our neighbors.”

That bit of knowledge and goodwill is undoubtedly the result of many Indigenous educators, Elders, and activists working tirelessly for the last 30 years and more to improve education on local Indigenous history, assert and reassert their presence and right to speak (or to withhold their voices, and resist oversight), and to build relationships. The work will continue and, hopefully, gains will keep being made. Having seen the commitment of the Native community in the Northeast to push for a better future for the upcoming generations, it is difficult not to be optimistic.

**Indigenous Media in the Future**

In 1978, archival scholar Walter Hagan described Native Americans as “‘archival captives,’ because the U.S. government, anthropologists and historians produced an enormous body of historical records and research concerning the tribes,” almost all of which were “manifestly, written by white men” (Seikel 2016). As recently as 2005, a need for more Indigenous voices was still being voiced, as there was “a vacuum of
analysis and scholarship about Aboriginal art from a strictly Aboriginal perspective” (Townsend 2005:xii).

While media studies may seem tangential or unimportant compared to other pressing issues, I would argue firstly that Indigenous people can work on multiple issues at once and secondly, that these issues are interconnected. Media issues exist “on a continuum with broader issues of self-determination, cultural rights, political sovereignty and environmental degradation, and may help bring some attention to these profoundly troubling and interconnected concerns” (Ginsburg 2016:593). Michael Yellow Bird reaffirms these connections, stating that “the colonizer’s falsified stores have come universal truths to maintain society, and have reduced Aboriginal culture to a caricature. This distorted reality is one of the most powerful shackles subjugating Aboriginal people. It distorts all Indigenous experiences, past and present, and blocks the road to self determination” (2004:39). Wilson and Stewart underscore the point yet again: “Indigenous media are the first line of negotiation of sovereignty issues as well as a discursive locus for issues of control over land and territory, subjugation and dispossession under colonization, cultural distinctiveness and the question of ethnicity and minority status, questions of local and traditional knowledge, self-identification and recognition by others, and notions of Indigeneity and Indigenism themselves” (Wilson & Stewart 2008:5).

In spite of this dissertation’s instrumentalist viewpoint, which encourages Indigenous uses of digital tools, as we move forward we should all maintain a critical approach to digital and social media. Henry Jenkins warns that the use of social media, even for such laudable purposes as education and identity affirmation, “always involves
some degree of ‘self-branding,’ which can make the participants complicit in the systems of values through which commercial companies appraise their material” (Jenkins et al. 2013:59). We should note the additional labor now expected of many individuals and groups, especially those who feel the pressure to combat incorrect information about their identities. And we must consider the human labor and environmental impacts that our devices produce, and leverage political pressure to minimize these harms.

However, it may take diving into digital media to spread Indigenous worldviews to the degree necessary for humans to come together in care for the planet and one another. “How to maintain balance in our lives, how to relate to other human beings, and how to practice respect for the Earth which supports us, is desperately needed – and not only by aboriginal people” (Castellano 2000:33). Lempert appears to agree, arguing that “the future of and in Indigenous media remains inextricably tied to the future of communities and nations” (Lempert 2018B:178).

Part of the appeal of digital media for Indigenous and other minority communities has been its potential to “‘talk back’ to structures of power that have erased or distorted indigenous interests and realities, and denied them access to dominant media” (Ginsburg 2016:582). Northeastern Indigenous people have certainly made use of online spaces to tell their own communities’ histories, represent themselves in non-stereotypical ways, and connect with other Indigenous people locally and throughout the larger world. They have also occasionally used digital media as springboards into other avenues; online petitions become face-to-face meetings with state representatives, digital short films become production companies creating feature-length documentaries (as is the case with
SmokeSygnals and the film *Mashpee Nine: A Story of Cultural Justice*, local school talks lead to TV news interviews, and so forth.

“The gains made in expanding access to media platforms in a digital world are often painted as resistance to mainstream media industries” (Jenkins et al. 2013: 162). However, the recent surge of Native American representation through mainstream television shows such as *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs* – brought about by Indigenous creators who first gained attention through digital media shorts – shows that content creators can utilize both industries to heighten not only their own profiles but serve Indigenous communities with a higher quality of representations. “Indigenous media producers are… engaged in a social process of constantly refashioning indigenous identities” (Eisenlohr 2004:34). In 2011, Adam Fish stated that online media would not “‘overturn’ the marginalization of Native Americans but, like the advent of tribal newspapers, radio, television, and film… is a crucial advancement of tribal media sovereignty”; however, online media seems to possibly be pushing forward more nuanced and Indigenous-crafted representations in other media forms (Fish 2011:105).

Indigenous digital media creators can use multiple media forms to meet their goal of refashioning Indigenous identities in more authentic ways and speaking to a range of audiences (though increasingly, Indigenous viewership seems to be more sought after than in previous decades of media production for both digital productions and mainstream productions). Unlike in previous decades, where actors and writers would start “small” and then build up to the silver screen, creators might now occupy spaces in film, television, digital and independent creations, and tribal nation media all at once. Digital media “places those traditionally disadvantaged into the position of creator and
broadcaster,” and this level of control has allowed for more flexibility than ever (Srinivasan 2006:499-500). It has also allowed more Indigenous creatives to walk away from projects that they feel uncomfortable taking on due to the presence of stereotypes or unethical behaviors. If one project doesn’t work out, another one might come through an entirely different medium. As forms of media expand, traditional Hollywood elite control becomes less meaningful, and this gives up-and-comers more freedom to say turn down projects – to activate their right to be silent and not contribute their knowledge, or the legitimacy of their names as a production’s “cultural consultant.”

“Predominant Western perspectives have tended to view the Indigenous traditional culture and the modern technology interface as a paradox. However, Indigenous peoples have shown through their adaptation of technology that their dynamic cultures do not remain encapsulated in the past, static and resistant to development” (Young-ing 2005:179) This dissertation sought to provide ample evidence that digital technologies were created and shaped by Indigenous producers and users, and that they have been uniquely integrated into Indigenous communities. These integrations have not been without issues or moments of contradiction, but Northeastern Indigenous people and Indigenous people from across the United States have shown a remarkable ability to turn what could easily be a hegemonic tool of control into a connective resource with powerful spiritual, political, artistic, and educational potential. “‘We can determine our use of the new technologies to support, strengthen and enrich our cultural communities.’” (Maskegon-Iskwew 2005:208)

“Harald Prins describes the indigenization of visual media as the appropriation and transformation of technologies to meet the cultural and political needs of indigenous
people” (Iseke & Moore 2011:32). I see Indigenous media as a reaffirmation of Indigenous peoples’ roles in the creation of all major media forms, and a pathway forward for actualizing change “on the ground” (Hearne 2017:24). The purposes for which digital media has been actualized by Indigenous communities and individuals in the Northeast demonstrate creators’ ability to put Indigenous values into practice through digital media creation. Digital and social media play increasingly critical roles “as conduits of community information; in Indigenous activism; as mechanisms for debate and development of public opinion; in language-sharing; and as tools of resilience and education” (Waller et al. 2015:60).

Loretta Todd, generally a skeptic of digital media and cyberspaces, once asked “‘what ideology will have agency in cyberspace?’ Is it ‘a clever guise for neocolonialism,’ or can it ‘rupture the power relations of colonizer and the colonized’?” (Hearne 2017:17). Âhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw responded with the idea that the web could be a space of profound connectedness, echoing Indigenous values around communal support. A third way to see technology is existing “as shape shifter (not unlike the Trickster himself), neither inherently benign nor malevolent, but always acting and active, changing, transformative, giving effect to and affecting the world” (Loft 2005:94).

In the hands of thoughtful Indigenous producers, seeking wisdom through traditional pathways such as Elders, ancestors, and a consideration of the generations to come, digital media can and has been a potent tool in asserting visual sovereignty, overturning harmful stereotypes, correcting inaccurate histories within the U.S. educational system, building relationships across Indigenous communities and with allies, shining attention on environmental rights issues, and allowing for the radical act of Indigenous self-
expression and self-love. And as for what the future holds? We don’t simply have to wait to see it – we get to create it.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEWEES AND EVENTS ATTENDED

Interviewees:
Justin Beatty
Minty LongEarth
Joseph Bruchac
Casey Figueroa
Ella Nathanael Alkiewicz
Chief Cheryll Toney Holley
Jennifer Weston
Darius Coombs
Tom Porter
Christiana Becker
Mashantucket Pequot Museum Representative, Indigenous tribal member
Alex Nunez
Ana Gonzalez
Randall Steele
Hilary Goodnow

Events Attended:
Nipmuc Powwow, 2017
Odenong Powwow (Virtual Event), 2020
The Lost Spirits Film Screening, Eventbrite, 1/2/2021
HTNM Lecture, "Indigenous Cyber-relationality," with Marisa Duarte, 8/2020
WFL: We are the Story, We are the Land, A Journey into Nipmuc Land with Larry Mann, 1/15/2021
### APPENDIX B

WEBSITES ANALYZED

Websites Analyzed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquinnah Wampanoag</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/">https://wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanatsiohareke Mohawk</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mohawkcommunity.com/">http://www.mohawkcommunity.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashantucket Pequot</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://www.mptn-nsn.gov/default.aspx">https://www.mptn-nsn.gov/default.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee Wampanoag</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/">https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohegan</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://www.mohegan.nsn.us/">https://www.mohegan.nsn.us/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narragansett</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://narragansettindiannation.org/">https://narragansettindiannation.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nipmuc</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://www.nipmucnation.org/">https://www.nipmucnation.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nulhegan Abenaki</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://abenakitribe.org/">https://abenakitribe.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penobscot</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://www.penobscotnation.org/">https://www.penobscotnation.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Regis Mohawk</td>
<td>Tribal Nation/Community Site</td>
<td><a href="https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/">https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashantucket Pequot Museum &amp; Research Center</td>
<td>Museum Website</td>
<td><a href="https://www.pequotmuseum.org/">https://www.pequotmuseum.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomaquag Museum</td>
<td>Museum Website</td>
<td><a href="https://www.tomaquagmuseum.org/">https://www.tomaquagmuseum.org/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


About (n.d. a.) W1k. http://w1k.com/#!/pages/about


Bennett, D. S. (2007.) *Teacher efficacy in the implementation of new curriculum supported by professional development supported by professional development* (Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers, 946) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Montana]. ScholarWorks at University of Montana. https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/946


Brown, D. & Nicholas, G. (2012). Protecting indigenous cultural property in the age of
digital democracy: Institutional and communal responses to Canadian First Nations and

coming to Turners Falls. https://digital.nepr.net/news/2017/02/15/new-mascot-coming-
turners-falls-high/


(Ed.), A place called paradise: Culture & community in Northampton, Massachusetts
1654-2004 (pp. 18-39). Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press.

Bubacz, K. (2018, February 14). These stunning portraits show what it’s like to be a
Two-Spirit Native American today. Buzzfeed.
https://www.buzzfeed.com/katebubacz/these-stunning-portraits-show-what-its-like-to-be-
a-two


Buddle, K. (2008). Transistor resistors: Native women’s radio in Canada and the social
organization of political space from below.” In P. Wilson & M. Stewart (Eds.), Global
Indigenous media: Cultures, poetics, and politics, (pp. 128-144). United States of

Tourism Research 2, 363-365.

https://dawnlandvoices.org/collections/items/show/293

IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film, 3(1), 90–108.
https://doi.org/10.22492/3.1.08

Calendar Help. (2020, September 30). Why is Columbus Day still showing on my
calendar when Indigenous People’s Day is now there?
https://support.google.com/calendar/thread/74186338/why-is-columbus-day-still-
showing-on-my-calendar-when-indigenous-peoples-day-is-now-there?hl=en


Crandall, B. (2020, July 14). @nbc10_brian [Twitter post](https://mobile.twitter.com/nbc10_brian/status/1283101567462379521)


Dartmouth. (2021b). *In the spirit: Snowflake Calvert: Seeds & sequins*. Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth. [Event website](https://hop.dartmouth.edu/events/snowflake-calvert)


Ginsburg, F. (2011). Native intelligence: A short history of debates on Indigenous media and ethnographic film.” In M. Banks & J. Ruby (Eds.), *Made to be seen: Perspectives on
the history of visual anthropology (pp. 234-255). United States of America: University of Chicago Press.


Hallenbeck, B. (July 15, 2021). Casinos’ slot revenues were down year-over-year in June. The Day. https://www.theday.com/article/20210715/BIZ02/210719640


ICT Staff. (2017, September 13). The Inuit were right: Shipwreck find confirms 168-year-old oral history. Indian Country Today. https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/the-inuit-were-right-shipwreck-find-confirms-168-year-old-oral-history


MacBride, D. J. (Producer) & Jarmusch, J. (Director.) (1995). Dead Man [Motion picture]. St. Louis, Missouri: Swank Motion Pictures Inc.


Makepeace, A., E. Perry, J. Perry, and J. Wester (Producers) & A. Makepeace (Director). (2010). *We Still Live Here: Âs Nutayuneân* [Motion Picture]. Lakeville, Connecticut: Makepeace LLC.


Massachusetts Peace Action. (n.d.) *Change the state flag and seal; Ban the use of Native mascots.* All Events. https://masspeaceaction.org/event/change-the-flag-and-seal-retire-the-mascots/


Middlebury Site Network. (n.d.) *Indigenous place names in the Adirondacks and Champlain Valley* [https://sites.middlebury.edu/bihallview/indigenous-presence/place-names/](https://sites.middlebury.edu/bihallview/indigenous-presence/place-names/)


*Mohegan Sun.* (2020, June 3). Facebook.


University of New Hampshire. (2018). *Two Spirits: Film and discussion.* Wildcat Link: Memorial Union & Student Activities. [https://wildcatlink.unh.edu/event/1974292](https://wildcatlink.unh.edu/event/1974292)


Waxman, O. B. (2020, November 23). 400 years after the ‘First Thanksgiving,’ the tribe that fed the Pilgrims continues to fight for its land amid another epidemic. TIME. [https://time.com/5911943/thanksgiving-wampanoag/](https://time.com/5911943/thanksgiving-wampanoag/)


