

Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Indigenous Digital Life. The Practice and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 259 ISBN 978-3-030-84795-1

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“Give colonisers an inch, they’ll take a continent.”

Dreamtime saying @IndigenousX host Scott Trindall, March 2nd, 2021

*Indigenous Digital Life* by Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer offers powerful evidence of Indigenous presence and sovereignty, of creativity and engagement, of refusals and critiques, of desiring, and visionary paths for new futures.

The humorous and satiric tweet above – included at the outset of the fifth chapter titled “Fun” – is a pastiche, a palimpsest, and a cogent summary of the power of social media and emerging and transformative technologies to connect the past, the present, and the future. It simultaneously issues a critique of historical mythologies through the sophisticated use of rhetorically implied chiasmus, an allusion to commentary about the oppressed, all by employing a turn-about of a paternalizing cliché reminiscent of a comment in the narrative authored by then then-fugitive American slave, Frederick Douglass where he quotes an owner of human slaves: “give a [slave] an inch, and he’ll take an ell.” Trindall’s tweet invigorates debates and dismantles myths about terra nullius on which founding narratives and rationales about Australia’s “founding” and “settlement” have been built. It also issues a claim of Indigenous sovereignty, rooted in Indigenous wisdom and guidance from time immemorial, all delivered via a contemporary, edgy, and entertaining venue – Twitter – that engages individuals and groups across space and time.

*Indigenous Digital Life* is both a refusal to situate Indigenous Peoples in the past and a refusal of deficit models regarding Indigenous Peoples. It delivers on these necessary refusals through an examination of social media as a space for Indigenous action in a variety of forms, as a contemporary context for meaning-making that is distinct but never separate or apart from the challenges of power relations that structure the physical and offline world. Carlson and Frazer emphasize early in the book that social media is always mediated through race, class, gender, sexuality and political relations with land: social media is a key relational platform “through which settler colonialism is extended, transformed, challenged, and sometimes defeated” (12).

The book’s richness and many layers – each time I return to various parts, I discover new elements – come from the novel insights and stories provided by research participants. Carlson and Frazer note that information provided by participants have shaped the book’s ideas and content. Readers are the beneficiary of the authors’ combined decade of relationship building and research – supported by three Australian Research Council Grants – that spanned 2010-2020 and includes a mixed-method approach that employs semi-structured interviews, qualitative surveys, analysis of news media about Indigenous social media, and ethnographic materials collected by authors through their own social media use and research or what they reference as “netographic data” (10). These methods are further framed by stand-point theory that centers the experiences, knowledge, philosophies, and cosmologies of Indigenous Peoples and thus recognizes that Indigenous users of social media filter their experiences through their own Indigenous world views.

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Carlson has been on the forefront of research about online and social media use by Indigenous Peoples in Australia and has published a full-length book on identity, *The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2016), that includes a discussion of online complications of how Indigeneity is determined. It is no surprise, then, that the first chapter returns to this subject as the groundwork for many later chapters. This first chapter on identity and the second on community provide readers with an understanding of how both notions charge most interactions and inform Indigenous views of subjects explored or shared on social media. These chapters discuss the challenges individuals face online when their personal lives are subjected to scrutiny by others who may form online communities that are affiliative rather than those who are members of filial or kin-based communities linked by families of origin and place-based relations with Country. Performative and visual elements linked to identity and personhood are subject to scrutiny and become the means by which individuals are questioned and critiqued or valued and supported.

The book's remaining chapters cover the following intersecting and salient subjects: hate, desire, fun, death, activism, histories, allies, futures. Carlson and Frazer remark that these discrete subjects appear jumbled in many social media settings, particularly where the boundaries between users is porous and mixed, but even in some contexts where the community is divided about appropriate behavior. Depending on readers' own interests or experiences, particular chapters will stand out among the rest. I was most drawn to chapters with deep, rich examples drawn from Indigenous participants ("Hate," "Desire," "Fun," "Death," and "Activism"), rather than some of the more theoretically dense chapters such as "Histories" and "Allies," though these too offer a rich analysis of the ways that social media provides the space for these negotiations.

Chapters on "Hate," "Desire," "Fun," "Death," and "Activism" perhaps intrigued me the most as they emphasized the affective and emotional components at play in social media use. The chapter on desire and online dating gives a glimpse into aspects of social media that are often relegated to interpersonal interactions rather than communal spaces. The focus in this chapter encompasses a discussion of preference, a notion that is coded with settler colonial discourses about desirability. I suppose I gravitated to these chapters because they provided some of the most pronounced Indigenous agency and self-realization and they powerfully lay out fundamentally human and quotidian details about the lived experience of Indigenous Peoples. This story of Indigenous humanity should be 'a given' but an examination of the colonial archive and ongoing colonial settler aggression and violence provides clear evidence that the colonial project depends on stripping Indigenous Peoples of their very humanity. Social media provides a space for Indigenous People to be fully human: to enjoy, create, entertain, laugh, love, desire, learn, commit to political agency, nurture, mourn, commemorate. The chapter "Fun" examines in detail some exclusive Indigenous online social media groups and provides examples of experimentation, originality, humour, and pleasure, from the creation and dissemination of memes; the participation in hashtags such as Chelsea Watego's #AnotherDayInTheColony; the posting of music videos during the COVID-19 lock-down in 2021 on #Koorioke; and, the creation of videos on #BlakTok through the TikTok social media platform. Such hashtags and groups, the authors note, support Indigenous social media users to affiliate and find like-minded audiences. Similarly, hashtags such as #IndigenousDads, #AboriginalLivesMatter, and #SOSBlakAustralia, among others, help galvanize and connect activist and social movements across the Australian nation, and in some cases, across the globe, as powerfully demonstrated by the authors' exploration in the chapter, "Activism."

"Hate" is perhaps the most necessary and troubling chapter of them all, essential reading for anyone in the fields of Indigenous Studies, Digital Technology Studies, Cultural Studies, Settler Colonial Studies and for anyone who cares about the emotional and physical well-being of others. This chapter probes the dark underbelly of the online world by analyzing the racist and prejudicial actions that Indigenous social media users are subjected to. These involve racist stereotyping, racist humour,

interpersonal racist abuse, including that of well-known figures such as athletes, and actions or statements issued by online anti-Indigenous communities. Carlson and Frazer report that almost *all* of their interview subjects mentioned racism and that the experience was an intrinsic and routine part of being online, but one that was difficult to become inured to.

The chapter on “Death” offers a provocation that resonates deeply: that social media’s influence on grieving and mourning practices demonstrates the dynamic, *living* culture of Indigenous Peoples, one that is evolving, complicated, and future-leaning. This will come as no surprise to Indigenous Peoples, but it’s counter to settler discourse about Indigenous attitudes and rituals about death. Because Indigenous Peoples have been dispersed across the continent of Australia and the world, often due to forces linked to colonization, the in-person and physical work of Sorry Business has become increasingly complicated and social media has provided a means by which such obligations might be practiced or fulfilled from great distances. The lockdowns associated with the global COVID-19 pandemic have further shifted attitudes about grieving online. As a result, social media has become a site of complicated negotiations and intracultural contests over appropriate and “authentic” responses to death. Social media is now a venue where families and individuals first learn about loved ones’ deaths, where the images and names of the deceased are shared, and where Sorry Business is practiced. Furthermore, those grieving are witnessed, scrutinized, and sometimes joined by complete strangers, though perhaps members of chosen affiliated online communities. As a result, social media has turned inside-out some age-old protocols about privacy and control; grieving online is now more public for many rather than involving mainly intimate, familial and local place-based groups of mourners.

The final chapter of the book delightfully filters the broad strokes of the previous topically organized chapters through the framework of Indigenous Futurism and in its reminder that Indigenous Peoples are active agents engaged in being and becoming, that Indigenous Peoples are “always-already imagining and building other futures” (241). *Indigenous Digital Life* richly delivers on its promise to examine how social media is different for Indigenous People. It does so by realistically examining the pitfalls and threats that are ever-present components of social media and online life, that coexist alongside other transformative elements. *Indigenous Digital Life* deserves recognition and an expansive readership. It will change the way readers understand and think about their own actions and engagement on social media platforms.