

## CHAPTER 11

# INDIGENOUS INTERFACES

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This is a story about what happens when college-aged American Indians are asked the question, “What would Facebook look like if it were designed by and for American Indians?”<sup>2</sup> This story emerges from my embodied experiences as a Finnish and Ojibwa woman, and my desire for digital spaces where I can compose myself and my relations with rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons, 2000). This story also emerges from my own explorations of how the design of online spaces invites certain ways of being and understanding (K. L. Arola, 2010, 2011, 2012). While I continue to believe the design of online spaces is rhetorical and does encourage certain compositional affordances and relations between and amongst users, I’m less inclined than I once was to believe in the rhetorical sway of interface design itself. That is, while an interface can encourage certain uses, this small study illustrates how the visual design of an interface, in this case the social media interface, does not necessarily imply one set of compositional affordances. Instead, visual design is only one element within the web of relations within which communication and representation occur.

Not so long ago, I returned to my hometown in order to attend the Spirit of the Harvest Powwow—a powwow sponsored by my alma mater, Michigan Technological University, and largely attended by members of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Lake Superior Band of Chippewa Indians, one of whom includes my mother, a powwow jingle dancer (among other things). I spent a week with Michigan Tech’s American Indian student group attending regalia-making workshops, helping make frybread for the powwow, and interviewing powwow participants (both dancers and those organizing the event) about their cultural crafting practices. While my work was most focused on material crafting practices, I concluded most interviews with the question, “What would Facebook look like if it were designed by and for American Indians?” Overall, I interviewed twelve people, and while these results are of course by no means representative of one fixed American Indian worldview, I share here the answers in order to problematize a conception of race and representation based solely on

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2 Within my own tribe, “theory” as we know it within academe is generally told through stories. This is common within indigenous cultures. See M. Powell et al. (2014).

the visual; as well, I interrogate the compositional affordances encouraged by the visual design of a social media interface.

## RACE AND THE INTERFACE

The idea of an ideological rhetorical interface—that is, that the design of a digital space persuades users to engage in particular actions, representations, and relations, and that it is always already embedded in existing belief systems—is not new. Consider Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe’s (1994) exploration of the ways in which graphical user interfaces are always political and ideological, or Anne F. Wysocki and Julia I. Jasken’s (2004) look at the rhetorical work of the interface, or Teena A. M. Carnegie’s (2009) understanding of the interface as exordium. Those of us who work with digital rhetorics understand that interfaces are value-laden and work to position us and relate us to information, ideas, and each other in particular ways.

I’ve argued before that “the act of composing a [social media] profile is an act of composing the self” (K. L. Arola, 2010, p. 8). I would add that the act of composing *within* a social media space—be it to post a picture, respond to a posted link, post a status update, etc.—is also an act of composing the self in relation to, and with, other people and ideas. However, the fixed template-driven design of most social media platforms appears to limit the ways in which one is able to compose oneself and one’s relations online. Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2007) has done a good deal of work exploring the ways in which race and representation are figured and refigured through the use of digital media. Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (2011) have argued that “the digital is altering our understandings of what race is as well as nurturing new types of inequality along racial lines” (p. 2). Nakamura (2002) has suggested that this inequality comes, in part, through cybertyping, or a menu-driven identity whereby certain prefixed racial categories are available for one to choose from when composing the online self. Her claims about race online—that it doesn’t simply go away but is reinscribed with similar baggage from offline spaces—hold true today. However, her work on menu-driven identities is now a bit dated. While it was true in early versions of MySpace and Friendster that one was encouraged to define oneself from a limited set of racial categories, Facebook doesn’t even have a category for race or ethnicity. The categories Facebook does have for self-identification, such as language, religious views, and political views, include both drop-down options and the ability to both fill in the blank and add a description. Additionally, there is no requirement that one fill out these categories to have a profile. You can simply ignore them. The menu-driven identity of Nakamura’s early 2000s Internet is no longer as visibly fixed as it was once, but the choices a social media site offers

afford particular types of representations and relations.

Rhetoric and composition's exploration of the ideological interface, along with Nakamura's exploration of race online, both suggest that the design of online spaces function from a "white as default" premise, as well as an arguably straight and male premise (Alexander, 2002, 2005; Alexander & Banks, 2004; Barrios, 2004; Blair & Takayoshi, 1999; McKee, 2004; Rhodes, 2002, 2004). This interface presumes a monolithic user. I asked the question, "what would Facebook look like if it were designed by and for American Indians?" as I was curious how this supposed default white position presumed by many digital cultural scholars was understood by American Indians themselves. Would they imagine a space differently? And if so, how?

## BEING/SEEING INDIAN

In asking what Facebook would look like if it were designed by and for American Indians, I was largely relying on the assumption that visual design guides a user's composing practices in a space. That is, I was thinking that were a social media interface to "look" a certain way, it would attract a specific set of users and would enable a specific set of uses. I presumed that an interface could, in some ways, *be* Indian. Within American Indian Studies as it is found in the halls of academe, as well as American Indian thought generally, there is an ongoing tension between this sense of *being* Indian and *doing* Indian. Ellen Cushman (2008) suggested this shift from *being* Indian to *doing* Indian so as to move the focus of "Indianness" away from preoccupations with blood quantum and phenotype, and toward issues of what's at stake and for whom when Indianness is categorized in particular ways.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in interrogating the notion that there is something identifiable and representable to *being* Indian, Scott Richard Lyons (2010) reframed the question, "what is an Indian?" to "what should an Indian do?" This shift from *being* to *doing* "would mean a move away from conceptions of Indians as 'things' and toward a deeper analysis of Indians as human beings who *do* things" (p. 59). In short, the presumption that one can *be* Indian tends to fall prey to notions of the visible as a burden of proof. For example, one must have a certain skin tone, a certain color and length of hair, and be adorned in the proper jewelry to be *seen as* Indian.

1 Blood quantum, a colonized conception of race, remains a frequent battleground for Indianness. The question "so how Indian are you?"—as though a certain percentage will satisfy someone's desire for one to be a "real" Indian—exemplifies this problem. Meanwhile, tribes have varying requirements for quantum, some requiring  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  to enroll as a tribal member, whereas other tribes focus on lineage (if a direct descendent is on the Dawes Roll, you can enroll). This "proving" of race, be it through percent blood or a family name on a document, has been interrogated and challenged by many native scholars (Bizzaro, 2004; Garrouette, 2003).

Given the visible burden of proof that many Natives live with on a daily basis, it's perhaps not surprising that the most common answer I heard to my Facebook question referred to the four colors important to most tribes.<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup> Five respondents simply answered, "Red, black, white, and yellow." Another suggested it would "definitely [be] colorful, I know that one. . . . It would definitely have deeper meaning." And yet another respondent described that "I think you'd definitely have the four colors somewhere associated with it, probably eagle feathers, and, um, just overall . . . more colorful instead of the typical blue and white." These answers provide a seemingly straightforward visible way to envision how Indianness might be represented through an interface. That is, the use of a specific design element recognizable as Native—be it the four colors or an iconic image like a feather or medicine wheel—suddenly makes the site visibly Indian. Rather than the colorful feathered design suggested by these respondents (a design that to them would make Facebook feel more Indian), the design elements of many social media sites—from LinkedIn to Facebook to Instagram to Twitter—use "the typical blue and white." While the template can be changed in some sites, the default design is blue and white. In fact, these colors are so common that in some ways they become nearly invisible. While perhaps a bit audacious of a claim, in some ways blue-and-white interfaces function as the white privilege of online design. For those who enjoy its benefits, it remains invisible, a means to an end, a way of doing and being that is normalized and routinized into everyday digital practice. Similar to Dennis Baron's (2009) idea that writing technologies become invisible as we acclimate to them, or Michel Foucault's (1991) broader claims that power becomes invisible as it is diffused and embodied through discourse, the design of interfaces becomes an invisible background upon which we compose ourselves—invisible, at least, to those for whom it feels a natural space within which to interact. As Paula S. Rothenberg (2008) described of white privilege, "Many [whites] cannot remember a time when they first 'noticed' that they were white because whiteness was, for them, unremarkable. It was everywhere" (p. 2). Yet for those who desire another type of space, another way of being, this blue-and-white interface can in fact be very visible.

When faced with the question of how an interface might visibly welcome a defined population of users such as American Indians, the normalized blue-and-

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2 If you claim to be Native but don't phenotypically present as dark-haired, dark-skinned, and appropriately adorned, be prepared to be told by white folks, "but you don't look Indian."

3 Most North American tribes hold culturally important the four directions and ascribe four colors to those directions. Each direction and color comes with its own teachings and stories. My own tribe uses yellow (east), red (south), black (west), and white (north); however, other tribes (including the Navajo) use blue, white, yellow, and black.

white interface becomes visible. On the one hand, this visibility is important in that it helps us see and interrogate the design of our interfaces. Blue and white is a genre convention for social media design, and it's worth considering whom this genre convention supports. On the other hand, when the normalized interface is called into question and placed against the notion that it is somehow *not* American Indian, it is not particularly surprising that the answer to my question "what would an American Indian interface look like" became "white, yellow, red, and black." For if my question assumes that the current Facebook interface is somehow *not* Indian (and I think it does), then it asks the participant to describe what Indian looks like as represented through a visual design. The four colors and an eagle feather serve as a visible promise of Indianness.

Using particular images as a representation of American Indians speaks to Gerald Vizenor's (1999) understanding of the category "Indian" as an absence. For as he described, "Indians are simulations of the discoverable other . . . the simulations of the other have no real origin, no original reference, and there is no real place on this continent that bears the meaning of that name" (as cited in Vizenor & Lee, 1999, p. 85). The Indian as a category that bears quantifiable meaning, meaning imbued from the outside (though sometime also the inside), is a product of colonization. The absence of "Indian" as One Real Thing is often filled with stereotypical images such as the warrior or the Indian princess, or sometimes with a visual metonymy such as the teepee or the peace pipe.<sup>4</sup> Granted, these symbols do often carry significant meaning within particular tribes. Yet, assuming one symbol, such as the teepee, or one set of colors can stand in for "Indian" and thus represent all native peoples is a rhetorical act of colonization.

The visible is not necessarily a promise of any one identity. In discussing issues of racial passing in the African American community, Amy Robinson (1994) described that "in hegemonic contexts, recognition typically serves as an accomplice to ontological truth claims of identity in which claiming to tell who is or is not passing is inextricable from knowing the fixed contours of a passing identity" (p. 722). For, as she argued, "the 'problem' of identity, a problem to which passing owes the very possibility of its practice, is predicated on the false promise of the visible as an epistemological guarantee" (p. 716). The promise of the visible in an interface, while not exactly the same thing as a physical passing (though in many ways still embodied) becomes a question of how and if design carries with it an implied race and ethnicity. And, more specifically, it assumes there are clear visible choices that guarantee Indianness. I believe we should interrogate our interfaces and question any system that becomes so normalized

<sup>4</sup> That is, there is not one type of person who can stand in for what American Indian looks like, is, and does. We can't necessarily point to one image and declare, "THAT is an Indian."

so as to be invisible, yet I am hesitant to say that American Indians cannot and do not make a white-and-blue interface their own. In fact, there is a long history of post-colonized American Indians taking agency over new technologies. As Kade Twist (2000) described, “Indian people have always made new technologies reflect their own respective world views.” That being said, as Angela M. Haas (2005) asserted, there is a great “rhetorical and cultural value of online digital rhetorical sovereignty” for American Indians. That is, there is power in composing the self within a design of one’s own making.

To be fair, it is entirely possible that the participants who suggested that a Facebook designed by and for American Indians would include images of eagle feathers or the four colors were speaking from a tribal sensibility whereby these images are incredibly significant for many of their own spiritual practices. And, in this way, these visual cues in an interface may signify a space that is native-friendly. Yet, such answers indicate a somewhat serious problem—not so much with the answers themselves, but instead with my question. My question, “what would Facebook look like if it were designed by and for American Indians?” presumes that, first, it is not; second, it led participants down a path whereby I requested a visible promise of Indianness. I suggested that there was a way that one can *be* Indian and thus be visibly recognized through an interface.

While in some ways different than a body physically appearing “Indian”—be it through phenotype or wearing the right clothes or jewelry—the idea that a design can be Indian is intimately connected to issues of embodiment and race. Many native scholars have discussed in great detail the issues surrounding American Indian identity and representation (Clifton, 1990; P. Deloria, 1998; V. Deloria, 1990, 1998; Garrouette, 2003; Mihesuah, 1996). While not always in full agreement, these scholars do agree that stereotypical visual representations—the noble savage, the wise medicine man, the Indian maiden—serve to distance, or in Malea Powell’s (2002) words, “unsee” the contemporary Indian. As native artist and scholar Erica Lord (2009) described, these images function as “an attempt (even if unconscious) to keep the Native in the past, easily recognizable, simple, and, essentially, separate and different from ‘us’” (p. 315). An interface tailored to visually appeal to one set of users falls prey to similar issues, as it suggests an interface can embody a recognizable and uncomplicated visual racial identity.

Returning to Lyons’ (2000, 2010) and Cushman’s (2008) suggestions that we understand Indianness as something one *does* (that is, through a certain set of actions or relations) as opposed to something one *is* (through being a certain skin tone or blood quantum) shifts how we understand race as embodied, and also shifts how we might understand the interface as visually composed for one set of users. Acknowledging how one might go about *doing* Indian instead of *be-*

*ing* recognizable as Indian via the interface suggests a rephrasing of my question from “what would Facebook *look* like?” to “what would Facebook allow you to *do*?” In spite of not asking this question, this is precisely how some respondents answered.

## DOING/ACTING INDIAN

Carnegie (2009) asked us to think of the interface as an exordium in the ways that Cicero envisioned the exordium; that is, an interface can exist to make the audience/user “well-disposed, attentive, and receptive” and “open to persuasion” (p. 171). Thinking about the Facebook interface as exordium, as something that might persuade us to represent ourselves in a self-determined way, or relate to one another in particular ways, then my question about an American Indian interface should focus less on *being* Indian and more on how the interface positions American Indians and what it allows them to do.

The concept of *doing* Indian still contains the possibility of essentializing what counts as Indian insofar as certain actions (powwow dancing, basket weaving, wild ricing, etc.) might be seen as something a Real Indian does. As one respondent described, laughing, “it would look ghetto, and what I mean by ghetto [laughs] is that it wouldn’t look like a white person designed it! It would have ‘teepee creepin’ as an option for your away message, ‘snaggin’ would also be an option, all the status updates would be about frybread, going outside, eating frybread, making frybread, chillin’ at someone’s house.” While partially a tongue-in-cheek answer given how often the respondent laughed during this answer, there is a sense here that certain actions equate with Indianness. What I find interesting about this answer is that she considers both the interface design—options related to her sense of what American Indians do—as well as the content that people post within the interface. Similarly, another respondent suggested how the interface might allow users to compose themselves and their relations in ways important to American Indians (specifically Ojibwe): “Creating ways that it could allow for Ojibwemowin or different cultural stuff, like the sharing groups . . . that’d be nice.” In both cases, the respondents imagine an interface that doesn’t necessarily look a certain way but that allows and encourages certain actions important to a group of people. Another respondent appeared excited by the idea that a social media site might be designed by and for someone like him, and after spending a few seconds smiling and pondering, he said, “I think it’d be neat, it definitely wouldn’t be, um, so formal.” I wasn’t clear at first if he meant the design or the content, but in a follow-up question it became clear he wished for a social media space where users would be more playful and informal, not trying so hard to compose a perfect and uncomplicated sense of self.

The idea that a social media site wouldn't be so formal, would allow for various cultural connections between people, would have built-in away messages that use the vernacular of many American Indians, and would allow for the use of native languages indicates that some respondents understood the idea of a space designed *for* a certain group to mean much less about *looking* American Indian and more about *doing* (even if in a bit of a tongue-in-cheek way, as the "ghetto" response implied). Lyons' (1996) work on rhetorical sovereignty seems particularly apt in considering what American Indians might want from composing within social media. Lyons asked a broader question of composing: What do American Indians want from writing? His answer is "rhetorical sovereignty," which he defines as "the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (pp. 449-450, emphasis in original). In describing sovereignty as it relates to Indian nations, Lyons suggested that "the sovereignty of individuals and the privileging of procedure are less important in the logic of a nation-people, which takes as its supreme charge the sovereignty of the group through a privileging of its traditions and culture and continuity" (p. 455). That is, the individual's communicative acts gain importance as they are understood as furthering, and positively transforming and sustaining, the group's culture. A space that affords and encourages American Indians to compose and relate in a self-determined way, one that supports and sustains one's culture, seems an important way of *doing* Indianness within a social media space.

In addition to affording rhetorical sovereignty, a social media interface that is welcoming to American Indians would also allow for a sense of relationality. As perhaps a side note, but worth mentioning as I am somewhat flattening indigenous epistemology to be one thing (tribal customs and belief systems do vary), consider American Indian philosopher Viola F. Cordova's (2007) suggestion that while tribes do certainly vary, this doesn't mean the category of American Indian is an empty one. She suggested that while at the beginning of the colonization of the Americas, "there was no such thing as the singular notion of all indigenous peoples being 'Indians,' there is now such a thing" (p. 102). She went on to state that

this has come about through the fact that Native Americans find that, despite forced attempts to assimilate them conceptually as well as physically, they have more in common with other indigenous groups, regardless of their obvious differences, than they do with the conceptual framework of the European colonizer. So it is possible to identify some of the

conceptual commonalities shared by Native Americans. (p. 102)

Cordova suggested that one of these conceptual commonalities is the idea of relatedness: “A statement that ‘all things are related’ reminds us that we are not separate from all other things and that our actions have far-reaching consequences” (p. 30). Phillip J. Deloria (1999) echoed this notion, saying that “everything in the natural world has relationships with every other thing and the total set of relationships that make up the world as we experience it” (p. 34). These relations and the “we” within these relations are not static, nor are they relegated to just humans. Everything is related, and our place within these relations is constantly shifting. Issues of identity and truth are terms best understood through how we conceive of our relations. In most native thought, “the identity of any particular entity in the world can never be discovered by distilling the essence out of a particular object such that one could arrive at an eternal *eidōs* that shines out of this particular encapsulation; rather, identity emerges through the constant act of relating” (A. Arola, 2011, p. 567, emphasis in original). While we can’t know what an American Indian is insofar as we might want to perceive him/her as an autonomous entity in the world, we can know ways of being and doing that tend to be more enacted within Native cultures. One of these fundamental ways of being and doing is acknowledging the web of relations that make us who we are.

If enacting Indianness involves understanding oneself within a web of relations, then an American Indian interface would acknowledge these relations, and acknowledge that our selves, our families, our cultures, our homelands are only knowable insofar as we have an understanding of the whole in which the thing participates. That is, “the universal is (rejected) in lieu of knowledge of the network that [the thing] sustains, and that in turn sustains [the thing itself]” (A. Arola, 2011, p. 567). An American Indian interface, then, isn’t so much about visually presenting as Indian as it is about doing Indian, about encouraging composing practices within a preexisting and shifting web of relations. This type of interface would afford opportunities for rhetorical sovereignty, for one to compose and understand oneself within a web of relations where things only have meaning insofar as they are connected to other things.

## THE INDIGENOUS NETWORK: BEING AND DOING

Shortly after my interviews with powwow participants about what an American Indian Facebook would look like, I received a request from a native friend to join the Indigenous Network. The Indigenous Network was a social networking site “powered by the indigenous to share their culture and promote solidarity”

(Indigenous Network, n.d.). Essentially, it was a social networking site designed by and for American Indians and other indigenous peoples. Angelica Chrysler, from the Delaware Nation in Ontario, Canada, created the site as a way for native communities to reach out to each other “inspiring action for common goals” (Indigenous Network, n.d.).

In many ways the site looked and acted like a more flexible version of Facebook (see Figures 11.1 and 11.2).



Figure 11.1: Main Page of Indigenous Network.

Similar to Facebook, users had a home screen that displayed other user activities (Figure 11.1). The design used blue and white but also included a banner photo of an eagle wing, providing both the genre expectation for color on a social media site as well as a visible promise of Indianness. Users also had a profile page that displayed activity directly posted by and to the user herself (Figure

11.2). Unlike Facebook, however, a user could choose her profile template (notice mine used a concentric leaf pattern) and, similar to the MySpace options of the early 2000s, it was also incredibly easy to post and share music. The media (such as music, art, or videos) that a user posted were automatically accessible to all users for viewing and listening. Additionally, the activities—including the media posted by users—displayed on the home screen were from all users of the network, not just those designated as one’s friends in the network. This sharing from one-to-many both on the home screen itself (what the design affords) and the links themselves (what the functionality affords) embodied a very indigenous sensibility. It automatically put one in relation to others in the space, even if you hadn’t actively made someone a friend. You were, by nature of being there, visibly part of something bigger than yourself.



Figure 11.2: *My Indigenous Network profile page.*

This interface not only put one in a visible relationality with others, it relied on a built-in spirit of sharing and reciprocity. As Cordova (2007) explained, one aspect of a Native American worldview is questioning “what is the good of having anything if you can’t share it?” (p. 65). Sharing is necessarily related to the notion of being-in-relation insofar as, as Cordova explained, “If humans were solitary individuals, then there would be no need for cooperative behavior and there would be no social groups. . . . it is ‘natural’ for humans to be cooperative” (p. 184). And while she used the term “humans” here, she defined this characteristic as an ethical rule of Native American society, which she set against

a Western/Christian perspective. Not that those raised in the latter can't, and don't, learn to be otherwise. Yet, the idea of a sharing society is in many ways an indigenous way of being, and was a way of being embraced by the Indigenous Network. One's postings were constantly in-relation-to everyone else's. I find this aspect of the design and functionality to be inspiring and exciting, yet much of it was possible because of the small numbers of Indigenous Network participants. (Imagine seeing every link *every* single Facebook user posted!)

In May 2012 there were 257 Indigenous Network users. While there was nothing preventing non-indigenous users from using the space, all participants had, up until this point, filled in the question, "What Nation/Tribe are you from?", leading me to believe that all users were indigenous. There is power in affinity groups and cultural empowerment, and a space designed by and for indigenous users definitely has its place. Yet, unfortunately, this limited audience for the site is where the Indigenous Network broke down for me. It took me a while to notice, but after eagerly signing up, I realized I would go weeks at a time without checking the Indigenous Network; those weeks became months, and truthfully until I started writing this chapter in spring 2013 it had been six months since I last logged in. I noticed that my friend who invited me to join has not logged on in over 11 months. And today, as I continue working on this chapter in 2015, I came to discover the Indigenous Network is no more. It folded in April 2013, lasting only two years. The space, while intriguing at the onset, did not keep our attention. In spite of appearing to be and do Indian, it was not an online place to call home.

## **FACEBOOK AS ALWAYS ALREADY INDIGENOUS?**

So if stand-alone social networking sites like the Indigenous Network aren't sustainable, can preexisting social media sites provide a space for rhetorical sovereignty? While seven of my interview participants provided answers that suggested a design could somehow be Indian, and three suggested a site could somehow enact Indianness, two participants challenged the notion that a site designed by and for American Indians would look any different. One looked a bit perplexed at my question, answering, "Honestly, I think it would look exactly the same as it looks now." Another elaborated on this point by saying that "Natives are pretty good at taking existing technologies and using them to their advantage, so I guess I don't really know if it would be different." At the time I found these answers curious, but the more I've worked with and reflected on this material, the more these answers make perfect sense.

Being raised by an indigenous mother and a father of European descent in a Western culture means I tend to have a mixed way of being. Yet, my mother's

influence was quite strong and I do often find myself, for better or for worse, understanding myself as I exist in relation to and with the world around me. I often find it difficult to disentangle myself from the larger community of which I'm a part. For example, I recently met with my chair to discuss taking on a larger administrative function in the department. He asked if I really wanted the job, and I described in detail how I only wanted it if it was best for the department and for our students. He kept returning to the question, "but do *you* want it?" I honestly found it impossible to answer this question without returning to understanding myself as but a piece in the larger whole. I found myself exclaiming to my chair, "but I don't exist apart from this!" Returning to Adam Arola's (2011) description of indigenous thought: "The universal . . . is [rejected] in lieu of knowledge of the network that [the thing] sustains, and that, in turn, sustains [the thing itself]" (p. 567). The network that sustains me, that I cannot understand myself without, changes based on my particular context, but it often includes my colleagues, the 26 people I went to school with from K-12 in a small rural town in Upper Michigan, my immediate and extended family, my college roommates, my first boyfriend, my graduate school buddies, my co-authors, my students, my friends both old and new. This network also includes my hometown, Lake Superior, the Palouse hills, the chickadees, the magpies, the black bear, my dog, the pool I swim laps in, my car, my laptop, and all the others. This network is large and shifting, and at different times in different places it functions in different ways. Yet this is my network, and nearly all of the humans from this network exist on Facebook. When I compose on Facebook, the interface positions me in relation with my relations, thus making Facebook for me an arguably indigenous space, one that provides a sense of being-in-relation to one another and sharing amongst these relations.

If we think about Indianness as something that one does instead of something that one is, and if we think about those characteristics that distinguish indigenous cultures and epistemologies, we must also think of the interface not as something that can necessarily visually promise a sense of Indianness, but as something that allows for indigenous ways of being and doing. While the Indigenous Network's sharing functionality encouraged indigenous ways of being, separating oneself out from all of my relations—be they indigenous or otherwise—brackets my relations to one slice of who I am. The fact that the Indigenous Network is no more indicates I was not alone. And even though Facebook is a corporate entity designed within a Western culture, as the Seminole-Creek art historian Mary Jo Watson put it, "what makes Indian people so unique and so persistent is their ability to take foreign material, or a foreign technology, and make it Indian" (as quoted in Haas, 2005, n.p.). Similarly, Lyons (2010) described his conception of the x-mark (that is, the signature made by many

American Indians on treaties) as “more than just embracing new or foreign ideas as your own; it means consciously connecting those ideas to certain values, interests, and political objectives, and making the best call you can under conditions not of your making” (p. 70). The interface is but one player in a web of relations, one that may not be of one’s own making but can be put into relation with ideas, people, and the world in a very indigenous way. The act of posting a social networking profile allows, in danah boyd’s (2007) words, users to “write themselves and their community into being” (p. 2). However, composing the self is never an act free of context. In the case of social networking, the interface provides a visual context wherein the self is composed. And while the interface affords certain opportunities and understandings—consider the Indigenous Network’s entry page which visually represented all user’s posts (a one-to-all relationship) versus a news feed in Facebook which visually represents a predefined subset of posts (a one-to-some relationship)—indigenous users will always already place themselves in-relation-to so long as a space allows for it.

What would Facebook look like if designed by and for American Indians? An American Indian interface doesn’t necessarily have to be red, white, black and yellow, nor does it have to include eagle feathers, nor does it necessarily mean that one will talk about frybread (but it might) or that it will “have a point” (but it might) or that one will talk about teepee creepin’ (but it might), but instead it means an acknowledgement of the network that I sustain, and that sustains me back. And, you know what my network looks like? It looks a lot like Facebook. Miigwetch.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Miigwech means “thank you” in Ojibwemowin.

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