

Indigenous Women and Online Activism: Facebook and Twitter Uses to Counter Sexual Violence in the Wake of the Val-d'Or Police Scandal¹

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ABSTRACT: The authors examine how social media contribute to the fight of Quebec's Indigenous women. After the Val-d'Or scandal, which hit officers of the Quebec Police with allegations of sexual assault against women from the Cree and Anichinabe nations, the researchers conducted an ethnographic observation of the Twitter and Facebook accounts of leading activists and associations of Indigenous women who used social media to denounce this police violence. The analysis, together with multiple interviews, shows that the variety of actions taken online provides an unprecedented visibility of their struggles and opportunity to promote their voices. These actions are proving to be effective means of decolonisation of the patriarchal social order and forging a "space for the cause of Indigenous women" online.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous women, Val-d'Or police scandal, sexual violence, digital activism, individual and collective action repertoires, Facebook, Twitter

On October 22, 2015, a report of Radio-Canada's investigative program *Enquête* caused a stir in Quebec. Several Indigenous women from Val-d'Or openly accused officers of the *Sûreté du Québec*² of physical and sexual abuse. During the following months,

38 complaints were filed with the Director of Criminal and Penal Prosecutions of Quebec (DPCP): 14 allegations of rape, 15 of excessive use of force and nine of sequestration.³

The seriousness of the allegations prompted several Indigenous leaders and Quebec Indigenous women's rights associations to invest in social media. By doing so, they denounced the sexual violence their *sisters* were—and still are—facing and urged the Quebec government to open a public inquiry.

Their digital activist practices⁴ on Facebook and Twitter, which were reported and amplified by traditional media, influential figures, and Quebec women's groups, have shed light on the systemic violence Indigenous women suffer today.⁵ Online activism helped create a collective consciousness that ultimately forced Quebec's Premier, Philippe Couillard, to establish a *Commission of Inquiry into the Relations between Indigenous Peoples and Certain Public Services in Quebec* (Commission Viens⁶) on December 21, 2016. He had initially ruled out the possibility of a commission.

Following the works on digital feminist activism which insist on the potential of social media to “serve the cause of women,”⁷ we look at Facebook and Twitter's role in the fight led by Indigenous women from Quebec in the wake of the Val-d'Or scandal. It seems particularly heuristic to analyse social media uses of leaders and associations defending Indigenous women's rights, because an effective appropriation of digital technology seems to increase their power to act and opens up a wide range of possibilities.

We will try to answer the following two questions:

- 1) What were the digital activist practices, feminist leaders, and Indigenous women's rights associations used to condemn sexual violence against their sisters and to demand that a commission of inquiry be established?
- 2) More broadly, what role does online mobilisation play within the Indigenous women's movement, a movement which is “expanding and reinventing itself in a feminist and decolonising perspective” as Widia Larivière⁸ claims?

GENDERED WEB USES IN THE INDIGENOUS CONTEXT

Our research is positioned at the crossroads of Indigenous feminist studies and research on gendered uses of digital technologies, thus advocating an intersectional and decolonial approach.

FROM SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO GENDERED TECHNOLOGIES

A growing body of research on digital feminism⁹ exposes alternative web uses that challenge patriarchal power structures. According to findings in the sociology of social movements,¹⁰ digital tools allow feminist activists to organise and follow events in real time, to publicise their struggle, to communicate with people interested in their cause and “to create or maintain specific feelings of belonging.”¹¹

Digital feminism is in line with Donna Haraway’s¹² cyberfeminist movement. As part of the emergence of the third wave of feminism, this movement points to the possibilities offered by technology to combat sexism and racism encoded in computational structures.¹³ Technology is, therefore, revealed as a “source of power” enhancing the agency of the women who appropriate it.¹⁴

For Marie-Anne Paveau,¹⁵ feminist activism and the Internet are developing in a reciprocal relationship. She underlines to this end that, “if social media seem to transform the methods of access to feminist discourses and its formal devices, in return and at the same time, feminist militant practices are transforming social media.”¹⁶

In an analysis of contemporary feminist discourse in French-language web spaces, Paveau¹⁷ observes that activists intertwine different types of textual positions and graphic elements, modifying both the pragmatic and the grammatical aspect of the messages transmitted on digital platforms. These practices require a skilful use of digital language (hashtag (#), URL links, addressing (@), photos, videos, emoticons) which can bring out new, unique forms of feminist activism, thus activating “a space for the cause of women.” Developed by Laure Bereni,¹⁸ this concept leads us to rethink the architecture of the women’s movement through its heterogeneity and the plurality of social fields that animate it (institutions, associations, universities). Bereni¹⁹ emphasises the strength of the women’s movement’s varied and multiple worldviews to create a “transversal mobilisation” of solidarity around a common cause.

TECHNOLOGY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND DECOLONISATION

The concepts presented above result from studies that focus mainly on the struggles of white Western women. In order to better understand the context of Indigenous women, we chose to adopt an intersectional and decolonising approach fuelled by Indigenous feminist theories.²⁰ This approach offers a radical critique of sexual violence and places gender and race issues at the heart of colonial politics. Thus, according to Perreault,²¹ the sexual violence Indigenous women face “is not limited to gender, inter-individual relationships, or structural inequalities, although they are necessarily linked.” This violence emanates first and foremost from state colonialism and the introduction of its patriarchal social order which has deconstructed traditional Indigenous societies and has resulted in the systemic discrimination and physical abuse of Indigenous women (because they are women and because they are Indigenous). To put an end to this violence, we must therefore seek to transform and decolonise the patriarchal social order and the social relationships that determine it.²²

In order to study Indigenous women’s digital activism, we consider it crucial to cross this approach with our cyberfeminist reading and thus consider the latter in the light of the concept of “decolonizing technologies” as proposed by researchers Marisa Elena Duarte and Morgan Vigil-Hayes²³: “What decolonizing technologies have in common is that they afford dimensions of human utterances and those utterances define the justice of relationality in spite of the persistence of colonialism.”

Indigenous activists’ internet use differs from dominant uses. According to Duarte and Vigil-Hayes,²⁴ decolonising technologies promote the creation of an environment that restores the dignity of Indigenous peoples in the absence of institutionalised listening structures. In their opinion, it is surprising to see that the simple use of hashtags like #indigenous can contribute to mobilising Indigenous groups (and rally a fringe of public opinion) around discriminating political issues:

[The] understanding that a hashtag affords responsive actionable communication between [Indigenous rights] defenders points to a mutual experience—a shared language of the senses—cohering and emerging among diverse geographically widespread actively decolonising peoples.²⁵

It, therefore, appears particularly interesting to mobilise this concept to study how leaders and Indigenous women's rights organisations in Quebec are trying to decolonise the patriarchal social order by attacking the Val-d'Or scandal using Facebook and Twitter.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of our research project is twofold: on the one hand, it includes a virtual ethnographic observation and on the other, comprehensive interviews.²⁶

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Our virtual ethnographic observations are based on an “immersion”²⁷ in the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the leaders and Indigenous associations who were at the frontlines of digital activist practices to condemn the abuses inflicted by the Val-d'Or police force. Our study focused on the accounts of leaders Natasha Kanapé-Fontaine (Innu), Maïté Labrecque-Saganash (Cree), Widia Larivière (Anichinabe), Melissa Mollen Dupuis (Innu), and Michelle Audette (Innu), as well as, on the accounts of the following associations: Quebec Native Women, Idle No More Quebec,²⁸ and the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre (CAAVD). Amongst all leaders and associations taken into account in our study, only the CAAVD operates outside of Montreal (in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region). Our analysis does not claim to be representative of all current Indigenous movements around sexual violence; rather, it targets the leading figures behind those calling out the Val-d'Or police scandal.

The materials used for the ethnographic observation are manual screenshots of the Facebook status and the most significant Twitter messages published by leaders and associations between October 22, 2015—the day *Enquête* aired the report—and December 28, 2016—the day of the launch of the Viens commission.²⁹ Our analysis targeted the content of publications (topics and issues covered), the multimodal tools used (videos, photos, URL links, hashtags, references to users), visual identities (cover photos, profile photos, personal biographies) and targeted audiences (activists, politicians, journalists, citizens). We considered Facebook and Twitter: first, because

the mobilisation took place on both platforms, and second, because studies show that use as well as audiences differ depending on the platform.^{30 31}

COMPREHENSIVE INTERVIEWS

Comprehensive face-to-face, telephone or Skype interviews (at the convenience of respondents) with leaders and designated spokespersons from associations took place in spring and summer 2018.³² While our ethnographic observations enabled us to describe and better understand how Indigenous leaders and associations employ technical communication possibilities, the interviews led to a broader examination of the meanings behind these preferred uses,³³ exposing the activists' strategies behind their online actions. Teun Adrianus van Dijk³⁴ reminds us that individual actions are shaped by "subjective constructions," which are interwoven with the actual web uses. Before this background, our respondents were asked about the following:

- 1) Their motivations for using Facebook and Twitter for militant purposes;
- 2) their reasons for using one platform over the other;
- 3) their perception of the role online mobilisation plays in prompting government action;
- 4) ways in which their activist practices are transformed by social media;
- 5) ways to prevent or deal with online violence.

THE HEIRARCHICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND RESPONDENTS

Throughout the process, we questioned our position of power in relation to our respondents. We were aware that our status as "white westerners" could imply a relationship of colonial domination. As Isabelle Clair³⁵ points out, the researcher "always occupies a position of power" with regard to the respondents:

[He or] she defines his or her research object, sets up social relations of which he or she alone knows the finality, and which primarily serve his or her own interests ... he or she holds the pen when making results public that describe the lives of others, and all this while he or she

works to update hierarchical orders that he or she considers illegitimate (our translation).

It is true that transforming the voice of Indigenous women on social media into a research topic is in itself an operation of power. We were not unaware that this article, created with the help of their testimonies, would be beneficial to our careers.

For the sake of honesty and to build a solid bond of trust with our respondents, we discussed these hierarchical orders with them, because they inevitably cross the investigative relationship. We have therefore entered into a “socialisation process.”³⁶ By doing so, we approached our respondents recognising these biases, expressing that our research was born out of “indignation”³⁷ and stressing that while we were “white westerners,” we still remained “women.” We made sure to explain that we would like to learn more about the modalities of their gender experience as Indigenous women. Our respondents appreciated this humble posture³⁸ and opened up to us. This allowed us to gain a better understanding of their social reality and to adapt to the use of certain words in the questions asked. Two of the most significant examples concern the words “cultural genocide” and “feminism.” Immediately, we felt uneasy about these terms. The respondents explained to us that Indigenous assimilation policies pursued by the Canadian government since the nineteenth century must be considered a “genocide” and not a “cultural genocide,” because the violence exercised through the Indian Act and residential schools³⁹ went beyond the destruction of Indigenous cultures and languages as it was aimed at eradicating Indigenous peoples by targeting women (and children). When asked whether they called themselves “feminists,” the vast majority of our respondents⁴⁰ argued for a conception of feminism as “Indigenous feminism” and not “Western feminism.” This distinction is based on the following explanation: Indigenous feminists want to return to a “golden age”⁴¹ of equity and complementarity between women and men within their communities, which was destroyed by the colonialist imposition of the patriarchal system. Western feminists, on the other hand, are fighting against patriarchy to achieve gender equality, without any pre-colonial history. For our respondents, it is thus imperative that Indigenous feminist struggles adopt a decolonising perspective, because Indigenous women were the “first and main victims of the devastating consequences of colonial patriarchy.”⁴² While we assumed that the term “cultural genocide” was taken for granted and that the respondents shared

a “feminism” similar to ours,⁴³ the process of socialisation allowed us to better understand gender related specificities in this area of research.

If our status as “white western researchers” did introduce a hierarchical relationship with our respondents, we believe that the following variables helped position ourselves in a more egalitarian way: our age (same age group as respondents), our gender (Indigenous women tell us that they “feel understood on the issue of sexual violence” because we are also women, although we are white) and our status as doctoral students (not professors, which would be associated with a certain level of authority). Finally, results from both the ethnographic observation and the comprehensive interviews were analysed together with our respondents. We adopted an ethical ethnographic research approach that involved validating the results in cooperation with the Indigenous women who participated. Some re-read the article and provided us with comments and suggestions. They also plan on promoting the results in their own circles and communities.

We decided to publish the names of associations and Indigenous leaders who agreed to participate in our ethnographic observation. Our respondents expressed their wish to be associated with the study, mentioning that their digital activism must serve “the cause of Indigenous women.” Naming them was an important way of recognising their efforts to gain visibility and attract the attention of decision makers. That being said, while the respondents can be recognised via their Facebook and Twitter posts, we made it impossible to attribute the interview responses to a specific respondent, since they struggle with cyberharassment and are often placed under police surveillance and face death threats. We thus acknowledge Laura Nader’s⁴⁴ warning when she underlines the risks of overexposing people from vulnerable groups, because “everything you say about [them] could be held against [them].”

RESULTS

Results from the virtual ethnographic observation show that leaders and Indigenous women’s rights groups took to Facebook and Twitter as soon as the scandal broke with the broadcast of the report. Individually, but relying on each other (retweet, sharing, likes), they mobilised around specific online operations to denounce and fight the sexual abuse Indigenous women suffer.

PREFERRED ACTION REPERTOIRES

In reference to the Weberian principle of the ideal type, we set out to identify distinctive features of online activist practices during the period we studied. We wanted to offer a range of individual and collective action repertoires⁴⁵ allowing us to bring together all the activist practices of our corpus. Sidney Tarrow⁴⁶ defines an action repertoire as the development of specific activist tactics in order to raise awareness about a particular cause, generate social mobilisation, and achieve political gains. These tactics can be used online as well as offline.

We have established four main categories of action repertoires as shown in the following paragraphs:

- 1) Offer support to victims and/or express solidarity;
- 2) encourage and highlight participation in collective action;
- 3) influence and/or weigh in on government action;
- 4) document the cause, break down prejudices.

Please note that they do not claim to be exhaustive or exclusive (some publications overlap two repertoires of action).

OFFER SUPPORT TO VICTIMS AND/OR EXPRESS SOLIDARITY

The first action repertoire is about offering psychological and/or legal support to victims as well as about expressing deep solidarity with them. One of the most common uses has been to provide telephone numbers for support lines and email addresses to report sexual assault. “For us, that was fundamental because we knew other Indigenous women were in a similar situation to those who testified for *Enquête*. It was our first action,” said one of the spokespersons for an Indigenous women’s rights group. Support is offered mainly on Facebook (Figure 1), but also on Twitter (Figure 2). “I knew I could reach more victims on Facebook. It is a broader platform than Twitter which mainly brings together elected officials,” said another respondent.



Figure 1: CAAVD Facebook Post



Figure 2: QNW Tweet

In addition, associations and leaders such as Maïtée Labrecque Saganash (Figure 3) have personally shown their pride and solidarity with their *sisters* in Val-d'Or.



Figure 3: Tweet by Maïté Labrecque-Saganash

This surge of solidarity is also reflected in the use of symbolic graphic images that honour the victims. The Quebec Native Women Association (QNW) features the works of Native artists Steven Paul Judd (Figure 4) and Maxine Noël (Figure 5), which were created in the wake of the disappearances on the “Highway of Tears”⁴⁷ in British Columbia and are now part of the mobilisation surrounding the Val-d’Or scandal. “We like to use these images, it’s a way of decolonising. The image of the Indigenous Superwoman shows an image of a strong and resilient woman, unlike the circulating idea of the weak woman,” says one respondent. These remarks are in line with the conclusions of Julie Bruneau⁴⁸ according to which Indigenous art addressing violence against Indigenous women has a strong political and militant dimension, because it allows them “[to] claim, [to] revalue and [to] redefine the roles they wish to occupy in both their communities and in social life.”⁴⁹



Figure 4: QNW Tweet



Figure 5: QNW Tweet

ENCOURAGE AND HIGHLIGHT PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

Social media are also used to promote participation in collective action, including solidarity marches for victims. This kind of action falls under a second repertoire. For

example, the Idle No More collective of Quebec immediately passed on information about the CAAVD Candlelight Vigil held in Val-d'Or on October 24, 2015 (Figure 6). Others used the same platform to share the atmosphere that reigned at these vigils, as Widia Larivière did during the solidarity gathering at Place-des-Arts in Montreal (Figure 7).

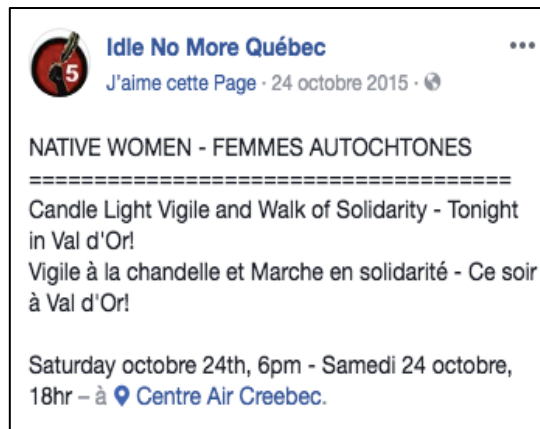


Figure 6: Idle No More Quebec Facebook Post



In the tweets *Figure 7: Facebook post by Widia Larivière*

Audette

of Michèle

(Figure 8)

and Melissa Mollen Dupuis (Figure 9), Internet users are directed to the vigils' Facebook pages, bridging the two platforms. One respondent explained why:

It was the publicity of the vigils on the event pages that got the case 'spinning'. In addition, we reached out to people from remote regions of Quebec [...] They were not able to attend but expressed their solidarity to us from a distance.



Figure 8: Tweet by Michèle Audette



Figure 9: Tweet by Melissa Mollen Dupuis

Facebook and Twitter have finally been used to solicit signatures on petitions. Widia Larivière urged her subscribers to sign a petition (Figure 10) launched by FAQ in November 2016. This petition aimed to create an independent provincial judicial inquiry commission. It collected more than 7,000 signatures and was submitted to the Quebec National Assembly in February 2017. The sharing of petitions makes it possible to federate support from a distance in a short time,⁵⁰ and to alert public opinion: “Gaining attention to the petition from media, elected representatives of the opposition, human rights organisations pays more than the signatures. The pressure exerted on the government then becomes stronger.”



Figure 10: Tweet by Widia Larivière

INFLUENCE AND/OR WEIGH IN ON GOVERNMENT ACTION

Speaking out publicly to influence or weigh in on government action, or both is the third action repertoire we observed. Leaders and associations do not hesitate to challenge elected officials—directly or indirectly—and to suggest measures to end sexual violence and strive for reconciliation. As commissioner of the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*,⁵¹ Michèle Audette has been

particularly active in this regard. In a tweet (Figure 11) showing her in a television interview, she asks for an “immediate game plan” to avoid another scandal. She took the opportunity to mobilise the host of the show (@DenisLevesque) and the Native Women's Association of Canada (@NWAC_CA), as well as the hashtag #polqc which refers to the latest political news in Quebec.



Figure 11: Tweet by Michèle Audette

The day after *Enquête*'s broadcast, which moved Lise Thériault, Quebec's Minister of Public Security to tears, Maïtée Labrecque-Saganash immediately questioned her tears on Twitter (Figure 12). Speaking to the latter by naming her personally (@LiseT_ALR), the Indigenous activist said the minister had been aware of the abuse allegations since May 2015.



Figure 12: Tweet by Maïté Labrecque-Saganash

Using the hashtags #FemmesAutochtones (Indigenous Women) and #Enquete (name of the investigative program), Melissa Mollen Dupuis requested in a tweet (Figure 13) that police forces be trained on Indigenous realities. In the same vein, QNW suggested (Figure 14) Indigenous history to be taught in middle school.



Figure 13: Tweet by Melissa Mollen Dupuis

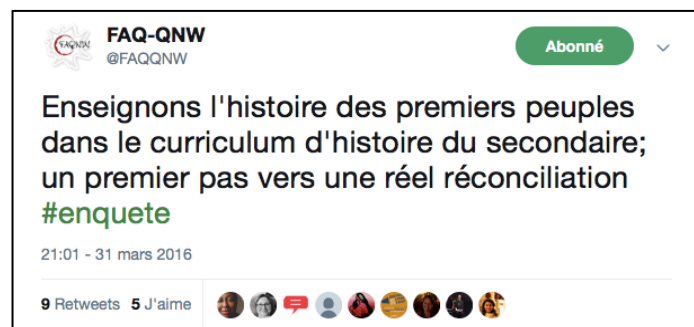


Figure 14: Tweet by QNW

These political demands were mainly made on Twitter. One respondent suggested in an interview that the nature of this platform matters: “If you want to talk to politicians, media, opinion leaders, this is where you go.”

DOCUMENT THE CAUSE, BREAK DOWN PREJUDICES

Leaders and associations have also sought to raise awareness, document the cause, and break down prejudices. On Twitter, Michèle Audette (Figure 15) shared a report by the Human Rights Watch organisation on police interventions and Indigenous women in northern British Columbia, which shows how Indigenous women in this Canadian province are under-protected by the police and the subject of outright police abuses.



Figure 15: Tweet by Michèle Audette

In the same vein as the previous example, Idle No More Quebec published a tweet referring to a selection of films from *Wapikoni Mobile*⁵² produced by Indigenous women that focus on their reality (Figure 16). The films offer an insight into Indigenous women’s culture and describe their daily lives.



Figure 16: Tweet by Idle No More Québec

ACTIVIST AND SUPPORTER PROFILES

The profiles of activists with a Facebook or Twitter account provide us with information on how they present themselves to others.⁵³ Usually composed of a cover photo, a profile photo and a short biography, these profiles constitute, according to Haud Guéguen and Camille Paloque-Berges,⁵⁴ “an identification matrix for users, which therefore implies taking this socio-technical category seriously in order to question the type of presumed identity conception of identity that it tends to convey.” Our analysis reveals that, during the studied period, leaders and associations used different components of their profile to provide support to victims and identify themselves as activists.

COVER PHOTOS

The cover photo was the most prominent tool to convey a message during the scandal. Articulating graphic elements, texts, and hashtags (#onvouscroit [we believe you], #solidaritéIkwé⁵⁵ [women’s solidarity]), the cover photos are essentially intended to express solidarity (Figure 17), but also to assert their identity as Indigenous women and the share of discrimination that this implies (Figure 18). One of our respondents explains: “The cover photo is your personal banner, you want it to shine, you want to send a strong message, you want to stand out with an original graphical design.”



Figure 18: Widia Larivière's cover photo on Facebook

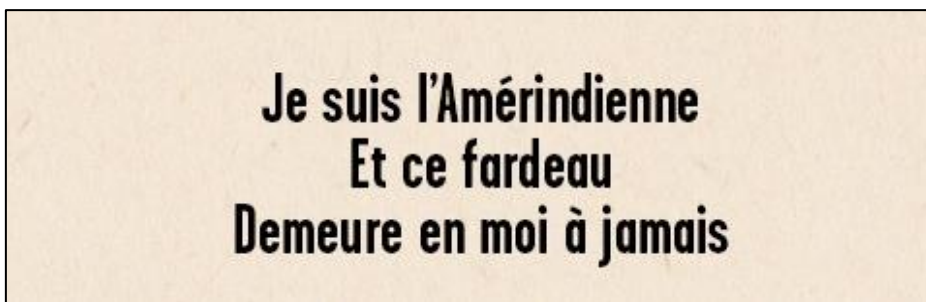


Figure 18: Widia Larivière's cover photo on Twitter

PROFILE PICTURES

The profile picture was also used to show solidarity with the Indigenous women from Val-d'Or. Melissa Mollen Dupuis (Figure 19) changed her profile picture a few days after the report aired. Depicting candles and a pumpkin bearing the effigy of the Idle No More movement, her photo was intended as a nod to her participation in the vigil organised in Rimouski on October 30, 2015. A short message highlighting the strength of numbers to “Give voice to our #StolenSisters” accompanied her photo.



Figure 19: Melissa Mollen Dupuis' profile picture on Facebook

BIOGRAPHIES

Although rarely used on Facebook, Twitter's personal biographies are used by some Indigenous leaders⁵⁶ to claim their identity and activism, but also to present themselves as committed to the cause. Maïtée Labrecque-Saganash (Figure 20) thus presents herself as a "child (Eenou)" from the Cree Waswanipi region and an "activist"; Melissa Mollen Dupuis (Figure 20) as an "Innu" spokesperson and co-instigator of "Idle No More" who "has no time to mess around !!!"



Figure 20: Maïtée Labrecque-Saganash's and Melissa Mollen Dupuis' Twitter bios

FACEBOOK AND TWITTER, TRIGGERS TO INTERFERE WITH PUBLIC DEBATE

When asked about the role online media plays in the mobilisations after the scandal, our respondents unanimously said that without Facebook and Twitter the pressure exerted on the Couillard government would never have been able to reach such a scale: “Facebook and Twitter were hubs [...], because they increased our visibility and created a feeling of solidarity in Quebec, Canada and even the world. As long as you are visible, you can influence the government,” said one of them. Emphasising that her generation was born with social media and knows how to strategically use it, the respondent added that, “unlike traditional media, social media is not blocked. It is a democratic space where we can speak our truth and shout our identity.” Focusing on the horizontality of exchanges⁵⁷ and playing with the logics of each platform's uses (more professional functions on Twitter and more conversational ones on Facebook), one respondent summarised the way in which she managed to take advantage of social media:

I published relentlessly on Twitter, directly addressing media, politicians, those in power, so that they can interview me. ... On

Facebook, I played the same game, but with citizens and in a more flexible tone.

This approach, which starts from an individual initiative and then relies on an operational core of other leaders and associations and on larger circles of subscribers, is in line with works in sociology of social movements such as Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon's⁵⁸ observations.

FULL APPROPRIATION OF DIGITAL LANGUAGE SKILLS

The virtual ethnographic observation revealed an impressive ability of leaders and associations to exploit the technical potential offered by Facebook and Twitter. Our respondents say they value the use of diverse digital language attributes to the greatest extent possible in order to create their own activist universe.⁵⁹

We play with social media. It feels natural, we do graphics, hashtag campaigns, memes. It is a medium that serves to decolonise, in our way. You could say that there is a real universe of Indigenous women on Facebook and Twitter.

Hashtags are particularly popular in our sample. Table 1 lists all hashtags used during the studied period. In addition to those associated with the scandal (#Femmesautoches [Indigenous women], #onvouscroit [We believe you], #ValdOr, #SQ⁶⁰), there are hashtags linked to the pan-Canadian fight to counter sexual violence against Indigenous women (#Soeursvolées [StolenSisters]), while others refer to media reports (#enquête) and some serve to index the publication in the political threads of Quebec or Canada (#polqc).

| Table 1: Hashtags of our sample | |
|---|---|
| Val-d'Or Scandal | #Femmesautochtones #onvouscroit #ValdOr #SQ |
| Pan-Canadian fight against sexual violence against Indigenous women | #OnGuéritEnsemble #justicemaintenant #endviolence #MMIW #AMINext #Decolonize #IdleNoMore #MaisieOdjick #ShannonAlexander #Indigenous #SpeakingRights #SolidaritéIkwé #Eradiquerlaviolence |

| | |
|----------|---|
| | #SoeursVolées #JeFaisMaPart #NotYourPocahontas #IndigenousRightsAreHumanRights |
| Media | #enquête #TLMEP #tj22h #tj18h #rdi2460 |
| Politics | #assnat #polqc #polcan #assembleedeschefsduquebec |

The hashtags associated with the scandal turned out to be “anchors”⁶¹ helping leaders and associations to coordinate and synchronise solidarity vigils: “During the vigils, I provided information in real time via #ValdOr to those who came to join us, I posted videos, linked photos”, explained one respondent. In general, leaders and associations have taken advantage of the “linguistic creativity” hashtags offer⁶² to convey positions (#justicenow, #eradicateviolence) and fuel controversy (#AMINext, #NotYourPocahontas). “Sometimes I spontaneously use hashtags. Hashtags which can be puns, emotions, rants. It’s my way of taking a stand”, said another respondent. These spontaneous hashtags, which started as an individual initiative picked up by leaders and associations, were sometimes massively adopted by other Internet users and went viral: “Hashtag initiatives do not always work, but when they do there is a mass effect, resulting in an unexpected boost.”

OPENING UP A “SPACE FOR THE CAUSE OF WOMEN”

Our respondents said they felt very strong female support for the activist practices they applied online:

We realised that, by taking the lead on Facebook and Twitter, we were not only retweeted by Indigenous activists and associations, but also by known Quebec feminists, television stars, students, columnists. We felt a strong and genuine solidarity emerge.

This surge of solidarity opened up what we call a “space for the cause of Indigenous women,” an expression inspired by Bereni.⁶³ The concept, as explained above, reflects the situation experienced during the Val-d’Or scandal. Even though leaders and associations claim an Indigenous feminist perspective that differs from some Western feminist world views, they argue for the need to join forces to counter sexual violence. One of our respondents said:

I am the someone who advocates for Indigenous feminism. One thing is certain, it is to my advantage to work hand in hand with all feminists. If we don’t join forces, we may lose the battle [against sexual violence].

ONLINE ACTIVISM IN ADDITION TO OFFLINE ACTIVISM

While online activism has made Indigenous women’s struggles visible, these practices do not replace offline actions. Rather, there is an entanglement of practices,⁶⁴ but one where Facebook and Twitter use is expanding and renewing several means of action. A respondent explained that “social media are an extension of [her] commitment. They are used to promote activities carried out in the field and to improve their organisation.” Another respondent goes further: “To stop using it would be to lose my visibility, and visibility is 50% of the work of activism.” In addition to the lobbying efforts on social media to reach mainstream media and politicians, a spokesperson for an association explained that Facebook facilitates the dissemination of information to communities: “The centre has a health clinic, an accommodation centre, we offer access to legal services. Facebook allows communities to be better informed with regard thereto.”

Finally, echoing Aurélie Arnaud⁶⁵ and Widia Larivière,⁶⁶ one respondent pointed out that social media values the role Indigenous women play in Indigenous rights struggles: “Women are the ones who carry Indigenous rights struggles ... In 1990, it was Ellen Gabriel in Oka; today it’s us with Idle No More and Val-d’Or.” With women

playing the lead role in their mobilisation processes (online and offline), Indigenous efforts to fight the harmful consequences of Canadian colonialism clearly demonstrate that the decolonisation movement will not happen without women.

PERVERSE EFFECTS: CYBERBULLYING AND SURVEILLANCE

Online activism, however, has its share of perverse effects.⁶⁷ In addition to the visibility brought to their struggles on Facebook and Twitter, leaders and associations said they were regularly victims of cyberviolence⁶⁸: “Everyone can hide and verbalise harmful violence. I even receive death threats,” revealed one of them, who said she was very shaken by the various forms of intimidation exercised against her, to the point that she had already considered quitting social media. The gendered violence these women face online, which may be considered a continuation of domination inherited from colonialism, can have serious psychological consequences. One respondent told us that the repeated attacks, especially from men, on her identity as an Indigenous woman combined with the monitoring⁶⁹ of her activity on Facebook and Twitter plunged her into depression: “Every day social media reminds me that I am colonised. I had so many downfalls, I had panic attacks, burnouts... I never wanted to go back to the Internet again ... Every day is a struggle for survival.”

For a short while, we thought about shutting down our Internet activities, but we agreed in a meeting not to respond to our detractors and to deflect this violence. Result: we decided to relay the messages of those who showed us sympathy instead.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We were pursuing two objectives with our article. The first one was to typologize the digital activist practices of leaders and Indigenous women’s rights associations to denounce sexual violence. Our research shows that leaders and associations have fully appropriated the digital language of Facebook and Twitter and that they are relying on various individual and collective action repertoires to fight this violence. If these action repertoires (offering support to victims, encouraging participation in collective action, influencing government action, documenting the cause) roughly correspond to the

activist practices highlighted in scientific literature on online social movements,⁷⁰ especially literature about feminist uses of Web 2.0,⁷¹ the repertoires in question nevertheless present peculiarities of Indigenous women's online discourse. Indeed, by relying on the use of a diversified digital and graphic language of political nature (hashtag campaigns, exploitation of symbolic artistic works referring to their culture, etc.), leaders and associations are shaping their own digital universe. We thus draw a parallel to Paveau's⁷² cyberfeminist study which emphasises that a skilful handling of digital codes can lead to the emergence of new forms of feminist activism, thereby reflecting its originality and specificity.

Can we thus speak of "digital Indigenous feminism"? The expression is not necessarily self-evident, given the tensions associated with this terminology⁷³ but, in view of the definition of "Indigenous feminism" provided by some of the respondents in interviews and the activist practices they have implemented on Facebook and on Twitter, it certainly appears so. Our respondents say they distinguish themselves from Western feminists. For them, as for theorists of Indigenous feminism,⁷⁴ Indigenous feminist struggles must address the role played by sexual violence in the perpetuation of the colonial order and its patriarchal organisation, and this happens first and foremost through decolonisation. Based thereupon, they used Facebook and Twitter as "technologies of decolonisation."⁷⁵ In the absence of listening structures and in the face of persistent prejudices, the two platforms have served as support, as a "source of power"⁷⁶ to condemn sexual violence and document the devastating effects of colonialism, sexism, and racism against Indigenous women.

Our second goal was to reflect on the role online mobilisation plays within the Indigenous women's movement. Expanding on the militant operations carried out on the ground, the Indigenous feminist action deployed on social media has several advantages: it allows leaders and associations to mobilise more easily, to reach victims, and to provide their struggles with immediate visibility vis-à-vis mainstream media and the government, even though it may be fleeing. Above all, Indigenous feminist action makes it possible to create new solidarities, not only among Indigenous women, but also with other Internet users who join and participate in the mobilisation both online and offline. This opens up a "space for the cause of Indigenous women"⁷⁷ where Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists from a multiplicity of social spheres (associations, parties, unions, institutions, universities) unite against sexual violence affecting Indigenous women across the country.

Nevertheless, and in accordance with Duarte and Vigil-Hayes's⁷⁸ research, even if social media proved to be an important space of social emancipation for Indigenous women, these platforms also happen to be a place of violent, hateful, racist, and misogynistic comments from individuals who threaten and attack them. The latter often act on condition of anonymity or through false profiles. Bullying, death threats, surveillance—online violence is insidious and often destructive. Considering the harmful effects of cyberharassment on our respondents, who are politicised and educated Indigenous women with the technical skills necessary to block and report hate speech, one wonders to what extent this backlash could affect Indigenous women with less education and less web skills, but willing to speak out on Facebook and Twitter.

Finally, the leaders and associations in our corpus form a militant operational knot that acts mainly from Montreal, except for the CAAVD. Relying first on individual initiatives and then on each other to redistribute their publications within wider circles of followers, they generate a web mobilisation that is spreading its wings⁷⁹ and which, in our case, ended up overtaking Montreal. By focusing briefly on said mobilisation structure, we were able to take note of a certain activity—although less sustained—emanating from Indigenous women living outside Montreal (Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Côte-Nord and Nord-du-Québec regions). A detailed analysis of their online activism could be instructive, knowing that the realities of women in remote communities differ from those in urban areas (less efficient internet connections, lower education, higher rate of violence, different linguistic issues [more English speakers]).

Indeed, the proximity of our results with other works on digital activism led by “white” feminists could be linked to the fact that almost all women who participated in our research live in urban centres and evolve in proximity to other Quebec feminists who join their struggle. To better explore the topic, we encourage works that overcome this limitation of our research in order to be able to paint a more complete picture of the militant uses of social media by Indigenous women in Quebec.

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NOTES

¹ The original version of this article can be found here: Anne-Marie Pilote and Lena A. Hübner, “Femmes autochtones et militantisme en ligne : usages de Facebook et Twitter pour contrer les violences sexuelles dans la foulée du scandale policier de Val-d’Or”, *Recherches féministes* 32, no. 2(2019), 167–196.

² The *Sûreté du Québec* is Quebec’s provincial police force.

³ Only 2 of the 38 allegations resulted in criminal charges. Ultimately, none of the Val-d’Or police officers were charged.

⁴ Marie-Anne Paveau, “Féminismes 2.0. Usages technodiscursifs de la génération connectée”, *Argumentation et analyse du discours* 18, no. 1(2017), 1–27.

⁵ Violence against Indigenous women is not a new phenomenon in Canada. It is rather a sociohistorical consequence of Canadian colonialism. For a detailed analysis of how gender violence became central to the colonial project, see Andrea Smith, Julie Perreault, and Joyce Green (see endnote 20).

⁶ The main mandate of the Viens Commission (2017–2019) was to determine the underlying causes of all forms of violence and systemic discrimination against Indigenous people—especially women—in relation to certain public services.

⁷ Josiane Jouët, Katharina Niemeyer and Bibia Pavard, “Faire des vagues. Les mobilisations féministes en ligne”, *Réseaux* 35, no. 201(2017), 21–59, www.cairn.info/revue-reseaux-2017-1-page-21.htm; Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose, “Speaking ‘Unspeakable Things’: Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture”, *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 1(2018), 22–36, <https://www.tandfonline-com.proxy.bibliotheques.uqam.ca/doi/full/10.1080/09589236.2016.1211511>

⁸ Widia Larivière, “Les luttes autochtones sont féministes”, *Relations*, no. 790(2017): 22, our translation.

⁹ Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose, “Speaking ‘Unspeakable Things’”; Josiane Jouët, Katharina Niemeyer and Bibia Pavard, “Faire des vagues.”

¹⁰ Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon, *Médiactivistes* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010);

Fabien Granjon, "Résistances en ligne: mobilisation, émotion, identité", *Variations*, no. 20(2017), www.journals.openedition.org/variations/819

¹¹ Fabien Granjon, "Résistances en ligne": par. 14, our translation.

¹² Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹³ Sadie Plant, "Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality", in *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, ed. Lynn Hershman Leeson. (Green Bay: Bay Press, 1996), 37–42; Susan Hawthorne, et Renate Klein, *CyberFeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity*. (North Geelong: Spinifex Press, 1999)

¹⁴ Judy Wajcman, "La construction mutuelle des techniques et du genre. L'état des recherches en sociologie", in *L'engendrement des choses. Des hommes, des femmes et des techniques*, ed. Danielle Chabaud-Rychter and Delphine Gardey (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2002), 70.

¹⁵ Marie-Anne Paveau, "Féminismes 2.0"

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, our translation.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Laure Bereni, "Penser la transversalité des mobilisations féministes: l'espace de la cause des femmes", in *Les féministes de la deuxième vague*, ed. Christine Bard (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 27–41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28

²⁰ Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and the American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005); Julie Perreault, "Femmes autochtones: la violence coloniale et ses avatars", *Relations*, no. 789(2017), 19–21; Joyce Green (ed.), *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Blackpoint: Fernwood Publishing, 2017).

²¹ Julie Perreault, "Femmes autochtones", 35, our translation.

²² Joyce Green (ed.), *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*

²³ Marisa Elena Duarte and Morgan Vigil-Hayes, "#Indigenous: A Technical and Decolonial Analysis of Activist Uses of Hashtags across Social Movement", *MediaTropes* 7, no. 1, 177.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Our project obtained the approval of the Institutional Ethics Committee for Research Involving Humans (*Comité institutionnel d'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains*) of UQAM.

²⁷ Jouët, Katharina Niemeyer, and Bibia Pavard, "Faire des vagues."

²⁸ Idle No More Quebec is the Quebec branch of a peaceful national Indigenous movement in Canada. The Quebec initiative, led by Widia Larivière and Melissa Mollen Dupuis, defends the rights of Indigenous women, the environment, and Indigenous cultures.

²⁹ We analysed about 350 publications.

³⁰ These two aspects vary in particular due to the specific writing and editing rules of each platform (for example, the limited number of characters on Twitter—140 at the time of data collection—and the possibility of creating an event on Facebook) as well as the types of audiences that develop on these platforms (people with power on Twitter [elected officials, journalists, influential personalities] and “ordinary citizens” on Facebook) and whom one wishes to target.

³¹ Cécile Dolbeau-Bandin and Béatrice Donzelle, “En campagne sur Twitter: au risque de l’empowerment?”, *Les Cahiers du numérique* 4, no. 11(2015), 91-118; Sandrine Roginsky, “Les députés européens sur Facebook et Twitter: une ethnographie des usages”, *Communication & langages*, no. 183 (2015), 83–109.

³² In total, seven one-hour interviews were conducted (four with activists, three with associations).

³³ Sandrine Roginsky and Sophie Huys, “À qui parlent les professionnels politiques?”, *Communication* 33, no. 2(2015), www.journals.openedition.org/communication/6051

³⁴ Teun Adrianus Van Dijk, *Society and Discourse. How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁵ Isabelle Clair, “Faire du terrain en féministe”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 3, no. 213(2016), 70, www.cairn.info/revue-actes-de-la-recherche-ensciences-sociales-2016-3-page-66.htm

³⁶ Amélie Le Renard, “Partager des contraintes de genre avec les enquêtées. Quelques réflexions à partir du cas saoudien”, *Genèse* 4, no. 81(2017), 128–141, www.cairn.info/revue-geneses-2010-4-page-128.htm

³⁷ Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologists: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up”, in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 279–293.

³⁸ Éric George, “Éléments d’une épistémologie critique en communication. Au carrefour et au-delà de l’école de Francfort, des cultural studies et de l’économie politique de la communication”, in *Critique, sciences sociales et communication*, ed. Éric George et Fabien Granjon (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2014), 97–136.

³⁹ For a more detailed analysis, see Perreault (see endnote 20).

⁴⁰ Feminism is a contested term (Léger and Morales Hudon, see endnote 73), and not all Indigenous women identify with it. Two of our respondents refused to be labelled “feminists” arguing that the word is a “Western import” and does not exist in their language. Rather, they define themselves as “activists” for Indigenous women's rights. One specified that the term “implies that Indigenous women have always been mistreated by their communities, although they held important decision-making positions before colonisation.”

⁴¹ Aurélie Arnaud, “Féminisme autochtone militant: quel féminisme pour quelle militance”,

Nouvelles Pratiques sociales, no. 271(2014), 213.

⁴² Green also defends this position (see endnote 20).

⁴³ While it may be rare to be able to reveal yourself as a feminist in the field, we did not hide it, because most of our respondents had previously claimed their position online or during media interviews (for more information see: Geneviève Pruvost, *Profession: policier. Sexe: féminin*. (Paris, Éditions de la Maison de l'homme, 2007).

⁴⁴ Laura Nader, "Up the Anthropologists", 290, our translation.

⁴⁵ Fabien Granjon, "Les répertoires d'action télématique du néo-militantisme", *Le Mouvement social*, no. 200(2002), 11–32, www.cairn.info/revue-le-mouvement-social-2002-3-page-11.htm

⁴⁶ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ The "Highway of Tears" is a stretch of the A-16 highway crossing the mountains from east to west in British Columbia, Canada, where nearly 40 young women, mostly Indigenous, have disappeared or been found murdered since 1990.

⁴⁸ Julie Bruneau, "Walking with our Sisters: une commémoration artistique pour le féminicide autochtone, en marche vers la décolonisation", *Recherches féministes* 30, no. 1(2017), 101–117

⁴⁹ Ibid., 113, our translation.

⁵⁰ Robret Boure and Franck Bousquet, "Enjeux, jeux et usages d'une pétition politique en ligne", *Réseaux*, no. 164(2010), 127–159.

⁵¹ This independent pan-Canadian investigation (2015–2019) looked at disappearances and killings of Indigenous women, including those on the "Highway of Tears," from 1980 to 2012.

⁵² Wapikoni Mobile is a traveling film studio that criss-crosses Indigenous communities in Quebec.

⁵³ Sandrine Roginsky and Sophie Huys, "À qui parlent les professionnels politiques?"

⁵⁴ Haud Guéguen and Camille Paloque-Bergers, "Pour une analyse critique de la catégorie de 'profil' sur le premier Web", Paper presented at the symposium *Attention(s) aux internautes* (Institut des sciences de la communication—Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 11 mai 2015 et PROFIL, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre, 20 mai 2015), <https://profil.passes-present.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Genealogie-profil-pagesperso.pdf>

⁵⁵ *Ikwé* means "women" in Algonquin.

⁵⁶ The biographies of the Indigenous women's rights associations are neutral. One respondent indicated that this neutrality is due to their dependency on government loans, requiring unbiased self-presentation.

⁵⁷ Coralie Le Caroff, "Le genre et la prise de parole politique sur Facebook", *Participations* 12, no. 2(2015): 109–137, www.cairn.info/revue-participations-2015-2-page-109.htm

⁵⁸ Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon, *Médiactivistes*

⁵⁹ Marie-Anne Paveau, "Féminismes 2.0"

⁶⁰ SQ stands for Sûreté du Québec, the Quebec police force.

⁶¹ Mélanie Millette, Josiane Millette et Serge Proulx, “Hashtags et casseroles: de l’auto-organisation du mouvement social étudiant”, *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 6, no. 2(2012), www.wi.mobilities.ca/hashtags-et-casseroles-de-lauto-organisation-du-mouvement-social-etudiant, our translation.

⁶² Marko Vidak and Agata Jackiewicz, “Les outils multimodaux de Twitter comme moyens d’expression des émotions et des prises de position”, *Cahiers de praxématique* 66, no. 1(2016), 1–19.

⁶³ Laure Bereni, “Penser la transversalité des mobilisations feminists.”

⁶⁴ Jouët, Katharina Niemeyer and Bibia Pavard, “Faire des vagues.”

⁶⁵ Aurélie Arnaud, “Féminisme autochtone militant.”

⁶⁶ Widia Larivière, “Les luttes autochtones sont feminists.”

⁶⁷ Marisa Elena Duarte and Morgan Vigil-Hayes, “#Indigenous.”

⁶⁸ According to a Statistics Canada study, Indigenous women are the group most at risk for cyberharrassment in the country. For more information see: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2018001/article/54973-fra.pdf>

⁶⁹ The Privacy Commissioner of Canada has shown that Indigenous activists are subject to systemic surveillance, both online and offline, by the federal government: http://www.priv.gc.ca/en/news-from-the-commissariat/speeches/2016/sp-d_20161205_pk

⁷⁰ Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon, *Médiactivistes*; Fabien Granjon, “Résistances en ligne”

⁷¹ Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose, “Speaking ‘Unspeakable Things’”; Josiane Jouët, Katharina Niemeyer and Bibia Pavard, “Faire des vagues”, Pilote and Hübner (forthcoming).

⁷² Marie-Anne Paveau, “Féminismes 2.0.”

⁷³ Marie Léger and Anahi Morales Hudon (ed.), “Femmes autochtones en mouvement: fragments de décolonisation”, *Recherches féministes* 30, no. 1(2017): 3–13.

⁷⁴ Andrea Smith, *Conquest*; Julie Perreault, “Femmes autochtones”; Joyce Green (ed.), *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*.

⁷⁵ Marisa Elena Duarte and Morgan Vigil-Hayes, “#Indigenous.”

⁷⁶ Judy Wajcman, “La construction mutuelle des techniques et du genre”, 70.

⁷⁷ Laure Bereni, “Penser la transversalité des mobilisations féministes”, 27.

⁷⁸ Marisa Elena Duarte and Morgan Vigil-Hayes, “#Indigenous.”

⁷⁹ Josiane Jouët, Katharina Niemeyer and Bibia Pavard, “Faire des vagues.”