Being in relationship
An Indigenous conversation on technology

Adrian Jacobs, Leah Gazan, Niigaan Sinclair, with Steve Heinrichs

Adrian Jacobs is Cayuga (Six Nations) and is Keeper of the Circle at the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre. Leah Gazan is Woodmountain Lakota, a grassroots mobilizer and teacher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg. Niigaan Sinclair is Anishinaabe (Peguis First Nation), an activist and the head of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba. Steve Heinrichs, a white settler and the director of Indigenous relations for Mennonite Church Canada, got together with them to talk about technology. What follows is an excerpt of their conversation. The unedited transcript is available from Intótemak.

The word *technology* conjures up a lot of different images, definitions, and feelings. When I say the word, what comes to your mind—an image, a gut response, a story?

Leah Gazan: I consider myself a bit of a Luddite, because I prefer ways of interacting that don't use current technology like texting, social media, and e-mail. I think technology can interfere with having meaningful, intimate, and close relationships. It seems like people are not talking face-to-face as much as they used to. If it's overused, technology has the potential to push against the importance of relationships.

Adrian Jacobs: I came across this young native student in Saskatchewan who didn't do all the usual Twitter stuff: she just tweeted what was on her mind about Indigenous nationhood, the Treaties, and connection to the land. And she had a couple of thousand followers just because of what she said. It reminded me of Martin Luther King, who utilized about seven ideas and just repeated them over and over again. So I thought, I'm going to try to look at Twitter as a way to talk about a certain set of ideas, to

try to build a consensus of ideas. I looked at the 140 characters of Twitter as being a proverb, not a cliché. People started following me. And when I was travelling to gatherings like the Edmonton Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I used it to say, "I'd like to meet some folks." And we met. And some of us started talking about Bill C-51 and the Canadian government's attempts to censure Indigenous activists. In Caledonia, my home territory, their way of shutting us down around our land claim was to isolate us. But when we were all together, in connection and in relationship, they wouldn't arrest us. So Twitter helped facilitate connections and build our network to protect ourselves from Bill C-51.

Steve Heinrichs: A story that comes to my mind is one that elder Stan McKay tells. A trapper in northeastern Manitoba would take his extended family out to their winter camp each year. They would return to the village in the spring to sell their furs. One year when he returned, the fur trader convinced him to buy some new metal traps. He purchased a couple dozen and took them with him to the trap line the next winter. When his family came the next spring, they had more furs than ever before. The trapper bought some tobacco and paddled out into the lake. He placed half his traps in a bag, offered tobacco to the lake, and dropped the bag into the water. The trapper got rid of that technology, because he knew it wasn't sustainable.

Adrian: That's a Luddite response.

Leah: But that story makes sense when you look at resource extraction. A lot of our leadership is buying into this neoliberal model of advancement. But if we want to build local economies that are sustainable, they would reflect traditional ways rather than the colonial technological ways of efficiency, mass production, and speed.

Niigaan Sinclair: But technology isn't just that. Ultimately it's about engaging life and solving problems.

Leah: Yet it's immersed in a whole bunch of values, and competing values.

Niigaan: Sure, but let's look at an indigenous sense of technology. Let's consider the "shaking tent" ceremony. If you want to know

the future, such as how your family down the river is doing, but you can't get there without difficulty, you perform a ceremony that seeks to know those things, and you receive that information. People use shaking tent all the time to make major decisions, because it gives them information on how to engage creation. This is an example of an innovative Indigenous technology.

Leah: See, I would disagree with that. I think that's a Western view of ceremony, not a good example of technology. When I think of ceremonies, I think of something greater than technology or advancement as it is understood in the West. How is shaking tent a technology?

Niigaan: Because technology is about innovation: taking something and changing it, not for the better or the worse, just changing it. A drum is a good example. You learn one way to make the drum, but then you realize that a different way of making it gives a different sound. Both drums are useful.

We are in a deep spiritual crisis that was brought on by colonialism. In Indigenous ways of knowing, everything is living. Western technological ways of knowing see everything as things and objects.

Leah: But the drum is much more than an artifact, a physical thing. It's something spiritual.

Niigaan: Yes, the drum isn't simply physical. It's a spiritual entity, a being. But in an Indigenous sense, technology engages real beings and real relationships. Think of the tar sands and Warren Cariou's great graphic novel [forthcoming] about how the oil extraction there is not simply a technological invention but a being that is destroying physical, spiritual, and cultural parts of creation.

Leah: I think we are in a deep spiritual crisis that was brought on by colonialism. In Indigenous ways of knowing, everything is living. Our ceremonies are living entities. Western technological ways of knowing see everything as things and objects. That way of knowing removes us from the spirit. I can't accept that me speaking to my ancestors is a technology; that's about relationships and the heart. When we view ceremony as technology, it distorts the way we see the world and one another. We focus on the thing rather than the relationship.

What are some misperceptions and stereotypes around Indigenous peoples and their relationship with technology of which readers should be aware? And how have these been leveraged?

Niigaan: Technology as a term is wrapped up in modern power. Technology is not just computers; it is innovation. The biggest argument against Indigenous peoples is that we had no invention. Meanwhile we contributed the most innovative boat ever seen in the world, the most innovative organic agricultural techniques, the most innovative techniques in astronomy. We were scientists first and foremost, because we had to know how to feed ourselves, make a home, and create a relationship with the land. Technology, in the Western sense, is wrapped in nineteenth-century Victorian understandings of invention that portray Europeans as geniuses and Indigenous peoples as savages. But we always had technology. We are the most technological beings that have existed in North America, and we have the longest running science project on the continent.

The biggest argument against Indigenous peoples is that we had no invention. But we always had technology. We have the longest running science project on the continent.

That being said, I agree with Leah that technology can fracture relationships. Technological innovation is driven in large part by capitalism, and it is valued insofar as it can help people rape and pillage the land. This is proof that modern approaches to technology have run amok and are divorced from an Indigenous sense of how to live a sustainable life. The ways Indigenous peoples use technology are an extension of things we have done for thousands of years that helped us live in mutuality and reciprocity with all beings around us. So you look at the canoe, which came out of thousands of years of technique, experimentation, and innovation. Europeans encountered the canoe and started travelling the world with it. But that canoe was developed to create relationships with those down the river and with the fish and the currents. Now Indigenous peoples are using cell phones to extend relationships. So there are ways of using, appropriating, and innovating with technology in Cree, Anishinaabe, Indigenous ways.

Leah: Misconceptions around Indigenous technology have to do with the power of appropriation wielded by colonial society.

There are so many technologies, like the tent, that we don't get credit for. Views of technology are also bound up with cultural ideas of what constitutes sophistication. Local practices are actually sustainable. So yes, there are lots of misperceptions, and a deep disregard for the longstanding ways Indigenous peoples have related to the land.

Canada has a history of cultural genocide, and its drive to assimilate Indigenous peoples has not come to an end. Treaty obligations remain unfulfilled, and theft of native lands continues. Is there a relationship between those realities and the ways of modern technology?

Niigaan: There has been no more significant technological method of divorcing Indigenous peoples from our lands than writing. Indigenous peoples had writing, but it was perhaps unrecognizable to Europeans in their cultural and social milieu. But that didn't mean it wasn't an Indigenous technology. Ceremony is technology. Songs are technology. Writing is technology. To pin these things to a "Western view," as perhaps was done earlier, is to make the classic mistake of seeing Europeans as the centre of all things, when we as Indigenous peoples have our own ways of being that are on a par with—and I daresay, even exceed—European invention. The problem arises when one group imposes its understanding on another, as Europeans did with writing, using their squiggly lines as an expression of power that removed Indigenous peoples from their land and their resources and even their bodies. Now we call this "capitalism" and a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality, as if all writing were valued in the same way. It isn't. We still have to go to courts to prove our land claims, our cultural claims, our historical claims, and we have to use European methods of writing to do it. Meanwhile, our writing on sand, earth, and parchment, on birch bark and animal hide are denied, devalued, and obscured as much as our "oral traditions" are. We must see beyond what we have inherited.

Writing has been the most significant technological method of divorcing Indigenous peoples from our lands. Non-Indigenous people used writing, wrapped up with power and institutions and the rule of law, to make claims of legality.

Adrian: We disappear by just not being afforded space to participate in the technologies of the dominant society. At Caledonia, for example, there were people who lived right across the road from the native community who knew nothing of our history. A Six Nations education Side Table said, "We need to educate everybody about the land claim history." Led by the superintendent of education at Six Nations, they brought a proposal forward to the Grand Erie District School Board to include Six Nations history of the land along the Grand River in the high school curriculum. The school board said "No. It's too controversial." They didn't want to stir up feelings. We disappeared simply by not being given space. In Ottawa, the Parliament building is stacked full of books accounting violation after violation against Indigenous peoples, and it doesn't go anywhere. Store it, and keep it out of the public eye.

Leah: Our oral knowledges were rejected in favor of written technologies used in institutions like residential schools where they tried to destroy our cultures, languages, and deep connections with our lands and territories. And today we see the colonial government imposing technological relationships with our lands that once again force us into assimilation. The current conservative government is starving us out by cutting funding to essential services to force us to buy into extractive technologies and aggressive resource development. The way that technology is wielded by colonial powers disrupts relationships with the land and, if a traditional way of life is not protected, has the potential to result in cultural genocide. For example, I was out at Grassy Narrows First Nation this past month, fasting on the blockade that was set up to prevent clear-cut logging that has resulted in mercury poisoning of their waters. The aggressive colonial technology to clear-cut forests has disrupted traditional fishing, hunting, and relationships with the surrounding waterways and lands. If this practice is not stopped, it will eventually lead to the complete disruption of the cultural practices used by the peoples of Grassy Narrows for hunting, trapping, and ceremonial practices.

The government is forcing us to buy into extractive technologies and aggressive resource development. The way technology is wielded by colonial powers disrupts relationships and produces cultural genocide.

In the past the state said, "This land is not being farmed, it isn't being improved, so there is no legal claim on it, and thus we settlers can take it." What technical language does the state use today to justify this disruption and dispossession?

Niigaan: The government uses "get with the program" language. I went up to Opaskwayak Cree Nation when I was seven or eight years old. I remember going to people's houses and there were no televisions in their homes, mostly because they were poor. Now you go there and every house has a satellite dish. That's the get-with-the-program kind of movement, and it's everywhere. It sounds like this: "Why can't you people get with the present? Get off the land, get a computer, watch TV." There's nothing wrong with these things, but capitalism needs endless consumption to fuel profit. That's just not an Indigenous sense of sustainability. Today I also see this in the education department and in popular media. The get-with-the-program message is used to drive economic and resource extraction agendas. So when we think of Grassy Narrows First Nation and their issue with deforestation and with mercury poisoning from factories, the biggest argument I hear from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous leaders is: "Well, there's just no other way to create an economy. So you gotta do it. You have to exploit it." It's like Calvin Helin dangerously recommends in his book (*Dances with Dependency*): "You've got it, so use it." Create the pipeline. Why? Because you can, you have to. The world is going in that direction. But there are also those voices, more and more of them, saying, "No, that's not the answer."

Leah: It's buying into that neoliberal definition of success, which is rooted in money and wealth. It's a spiritual crisis, a poverty of spirit. When I was at Grassy, I had to keep a fire going for four days, twenty-four hours each day, because I didn't have a fire-keeper. And I managed it. Now that fire is a technology, giving me light and warmth and protection, feeding my spirit. But does it interfere with my relationship with the land? No. But the mercury poisoning—caused by forest corporations' clear-cutting—does, and a pipeline does. Those are bad technologies. Maybe not even technology, just stupidity. And the fire, I would say it is a being. It's not just a physical thing. It's not a mere object or thing. I have a relationship with it.

What practices do you or others in your community have that help guide—or restrain—your relationship with technology?

Niigaan: Life begets life. Things that respect, honour, and cherish life are what guide my action in the world. I learned that both from Anishinaabe traditions and from my mother, who was raised Catholic. Her biggest teaching was, "You never impose yourself on other people, because then you hurt them, you hurt the relationship, and end things." And the teaching of Christ is "Life begets life. Give life to beget life." So does this technology give life? Does money? Do the tar sands?

It's difficult trying to navigate this world being a rejectionist, because creation is full of contradictions. I use oil. I use a car. I use a phone. I'm trying to do less damage in the way I use these things. The electricity that powers the light that is on in this room right now comes from dams in the north that are destroying the lives of Indigenous communities. But you do the best you can. We live these contradictions every day of our lives, whether we are Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

Leah: We use technology all the time. But as far as exploitative technology is concerned, because I've been taught certain teachings in the ceremonies around the land, and because my role as a woman, as a water-carrier, is to care for the land, I have chosen to abstain from various opportunities that are funded by dangerous and destructive technologies. Because for me to take that would be a contradiction of who I am as an Indigenous woman and my role to protect waters. My cultural and spiritual values certainly guide me in how I think about this stuff. So even though I do text and use Facebook, I prefer the phone and face-to-face conversations to technologies that distance us one from another. Although everybody drives a car—and that's considered normal—that doesn't make it okay. That's just rationalizing destructive behavior that's based on insecurities and an empty spirit. When I'm in ceremony with women, I am reminded how profoundly innovative and life-giving things that have been defined as not-technology are in terms of keeping our communities going.

Some North American communities, like the Amish, have longstanding, collective ways of discerning whether to embrace,

experiment with, or reject various technologies. Do you know of Indigenous communities that practice something like this?

Leah: That's the great debate in our communities right now. You have those who want to honour and protect our traditional relationships with the land and what some call "resources." And then you have the neoliberal push toward unsustainable extractive methods, because some have embraced colonial definitions of wealth, which is linked with technologies of efficiency and speed (and not patience, gentleness, and balance).

Adrian: The Haudenosaunee creation story speaks of Sapling, the good twin, and Flint, the one who messes things up. That messing up is associated with domination of creation. The elders always warned about those who would come and try to make them dominate the world. That's the colonial way. Whereas our people practiced fifty-year rotations of our hunting and gathering areas in order to give those relations rest, the way of domination tries to extract with utmost efficiency. Even good Mennonites I know, who have pretty good relationships with the land, are driven to get as much out of the land as possible, out of every square inch. They treat it like a slave, not a fellow person. There's no gifting back. Jewish tradition says that agricultural techniques must give place to Sabbath rest. They were not to harvest the corners. There's no place for that today.

Communities in specific places have the most intimate understanding of the land and their relationships. We need to honour the knowledge that's in those places.

It isn't helpful to put our Indigenous communities into oppositional categories of "sell-outs" or "Luddites." Communities and elders in specific places have the most intimate understanding of the land and their relationships. We need to honour the knowledge that's in those places. In my community, the people draw on traditional stories—of Sapling, for example—because those relatives from the past helped us learn how to grow corns, beans, and squash together. That was a technological innovation and a spiritual gift. That technological tradition informs the people of that place. We need to honour that, and come alongside folks as allies, sharing our information and gifts and technologies, as they discern contemporary realities and challenges in those places.