



Episode 1: Land-based relations in/and digital technology

There are still significant inequalities when it comes to who has access to computer science education. In this episode, Dr. Sara Grimes (Director of the KMDI) chats with Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos, author of *The Medicine of Peace: Indigenous Youth Decolonizing Healing and Resisting Violence*,

Associate Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a Registered Psychologist in the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, and the Canada Research Chair in Critical Studies in Indigenous Health and Social Action on Suicide, at the University of Toronto about his research into land-based relations within social media platforms and other digital technologies, Indigenous STS and decolonizing methodologies, and working with Indigenous youth to tackle mental health issues, social violence, and systematic oppression.

Dr. Sara Grimes 0:02

So where are you right now, out there in this big, beautiful world? Digital technology is often discussed as though we're separate from the physical world, from the material, the analog, as something that's everywhere and nowhere. But that's not quite true, is it? I'm somewhere. So are you. So are the cables and routers and semiconductors and the various devices that connect my voice to your ears or my words to your eyes. We all have a location. We and the things we use to make this digital society are all on some part of the land. Many of us are thinking more deeply about the land these days. The rapidly escalating climate catastrophe really drives home the primacy of the natural world in our lives and wellbeing. It's hard to focus on the metaverse when the land around us is on fire or flooded.

As a white settler I, like many others, have been working through my own relationship to the land in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action. In Canada, expressing gratitude and recognizing that we live, work, and play on the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples through public land acknowledgement statements is now common, but there's still a deep disconnect between discourse and action. The ongoing pipeline dispute between Wet'suwet'en land defenders and Coastal

GasLink in British Columbia is just one example of how governments, corporations, and settlers in this country continue to deny Indigenous rights, title, and sovereignty over their traditional territories.

Land is personal and land is political. Who has access to it? What happens on it? Who claims ownership of it? What's put there? What's taken away? And who takes care of it? These politics overlap with and shape the digital world in ways both obvious and hidden. To fully understand digital society, we need a framework that considers the many ways that place matters. Drawing on Indigenous knowledge and decolonizing research methodology, Professor Jeffrey Ansloos has built a groundbreaking theoretical framework for studying the land-based nature of the internet. Dr. Ansloos is a registered psychologist, an associate professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and the Canada Research Chair in Critical Studies in Indigenous Health and Social Action on Suicide.

His research focuses on the social determinants of mental health, specifically the structural dimensions of suicide, the social, political, cultural, environmental, and technological factors involved, as well as what conditions are needed to enhance the quality of life for Indigenous youth and communities. This research has been published in numerous journals across a range of disciplines, including a 2020 article entitled "Surviving in the Cracks: A Qualitative Study with Indigenous Youth on Homelessness and Applied Community Theater" co-authored with Amanda Wager in the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, and a 2021 article in the Journal of Indigenous Social Development, co-authored with Elissa Dent, entitled "Our Spirit is Like a Fire:" Conceptualizing Intersections of Mental Health, Wellness, and Spirituality with Indigenous Youth Leaders Across Canada."

Dr. Ansloos's more recent research collaborations focus on internet technologies, including a multi-year study of Indigenous language revitalization and beading communities on Twitter. A key publication from this study, co-authored with Ashley Caranto Morford, is an article entitled "Indigenous Sovereignty in Digital Territory: A Qualitative Study on Land-Based Relations with #NativeTwitter," which was published in AlterNative, or Alter Native, an International Journal of Indigenous Peoples in 2021. Throughout his incredibly important work, Dr. Ansloos and his co-authors have established new critical approach that both builds on and advances STS theory, expanding the discussion to consider the land-based relations of digital technologies, Indigenous digital sovereignty, as well as developing an innovative, arts-based, decolonizing methodology for conducting research.

I'm Sara Grimes, Director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto and host of the Critical Technology podcast. Today I'll be speaking with Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos about his research on #NativeTwitter, his theories and approach to studying technology, and his methodology. So let's just jump right in. What are land-based relations?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 05:05

That's a good question. I feel like as it comes up in my scholarship, I'm talking about the totality of our relationships to land, water, air, the world we live in and the varying types of life that occur in these material realities, be it human and nonhuman life, other than human life. So there's a materiality to that that's very much about when we poison water, you can't drink that water, it actually makes it harmful. When we make toxic air, it makes living in that condition impossible and inhabitable.

So there's very much a material concern there, and because it's material, there's ways in which it gets exploited economically and socially through different forms of violence. And so land is not just that material thing. I think when Indigenous scholars, particularly feminist and queer scholars, write about land-based relations, we're talking about not negating the material, but talking about potentially the spiritual quality of material things. We're saying that there is indeed a way of being with one another in relationship that nourishes life, that nourishes the potential for living in relationship to land, water, and air, the places that these people are sustained by. So it's very much fleshy and material, but I think it's also ontological. It's also making a statement to about the nature of living and being in the world.

Dr. Sara Grimes

And how does this concept help us to better understand digital technologies?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 07:03

Yeah, well, I think there's been such a tremendous story of division that we've told about, in particular new digital technologies, and new in the sense of the last few decades, the internet being one of the most important, that because we are creating environments, spaces, and indeed places that people are living and expressing and creating within that that are not necessarily always so fleshy as going for a walk outside or sitting in this room around this furniture or whatnot, because I can't touch a person that I'm speaking to over the internet, these sorts of digital environments can lose or be narrated as somehow detached from the analog spaces and the more material spaces

of technology.

I think that it's mythical. I think in some ways there's been a lot of really good scholarship in recent years that's reminded us that the internet is built, quite literally the infrastructure of the internet and really the infrastructure of all technologies, the phone I have in my hand, comes from land, it's made with products, engineered with products that take me right away back to the relational aspects of our ethical and sometimes unethical relationships to the places and spaces of our lives. And so I think that land-based relations, really the sort of relational piece that highlights how we are always implicated in relationships with, other than human life, is a really helpful intervention into our thinking about digital technologies because the abstract nature of some of the digital concepts and also the ways that the economies of digital technologies remove us from their origins at times. We buy this phone and holding in a store wrapped in a box that is made of products from all over the world, but those places are made and rendered invisible in purchasing in a sort of capitalist exchange of technologies.

And so yeah, I think land-based relations is a helpful intervention into this work because it brings us back to reflect upon the ways in which all of these transactions, all of these expressions and technologies are materially connected to real places, and by virtue of that, real people and other beings. So that's I think one way. I also think there's ways in which the sort of relational piece asks us to think about how we as people interact and what our specific responsibilities are to one another and to the places of our lives and engaging with these digital environments and increasingly new and more often invisible, like the infrastructure is increasingly invisible. I don't know where the cloud is, but I know that it is somewhere in the world, that it is located somewhere.

Dr. Sara Grimes 10:22

Your recent journal article "Indigenous Sovereignty in Digital Territory," co-authored with Ashley Caranto Morford, constructs an innovative analytic framework that shifts the focus onto these land-based relations that underlie internet infrastructures. This framework emerged out of an analysis you conducted on Indigenous language revitalization networks on Twitter and it identifies a number of important themes. I'd love it if you could tell us a little more about the framework and its applications.

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 10:53

Sure. So one of the things that we have really felt is that there is a way in which both within Indigenous studies as well as within the ways in which the internet in particular

has evolved and its sort of narration within technology studies is sometimes been conceived in a way that is... that positions itself as something other than connected to land. So at best we get language like analog or the online/offline aspects of the internet, but this has really significant implications, in particular for the political projects of Indigenous people in the sense that many of our projects, projects like language revitalization, are deeply connected to the political struggles of self-determination and the resurgence of Indigenous nationhood.

And so those struggles are concerned with opposing settler colonial impositions on Indigenous land. So when we think about the internet, and in particular the sort of emerging ICTs that follow, social media and news websites, and Twitter, these networked contexts of communication where there's evidence that mobilizations of Indigenous people socially are occurring in these spaces, an important question is how do these digital relationships and the networks that form, particularly as they intersect with struggles for Indigenous peoples' self-determination, how do they actually connect back to land not as a abstract political concept, but as an actual material reality? And does the internet actually help us, these sort of social media environments, actually nourish and strengthen that material reality or not was kind of a question that we were really interested in.

And so we look to Indigenous language revitalization as one way of doing that. And I think what we learn is really important, which is that it's kind of a mixed bag, that in fact, yes, we do see these sorts of environments as spaces which can nourish real potential for connection to community, to the actual geographical spaces of one's life that can help enhance collective action in support of land-based struggles for Indigenous peoples' self-determination. But there's also ways in which they're prone to metaphorization, they're prone to abstraction, and then in the midst of it, there's also ways in which they can be co-opted and they can become context where the same sorts of violence that's enacted within material environments of colonial projects, like illegal occupation of Indigenous land by resource companies is an example, can occur in a parallel way in a digital environment.

So an interesting example of this is while there's been tremendous activism within Canada against the expansion of resource extractive industries and the transport of crude oil over Indigenous territories and crude natural gas over Indigenous territories, there is real ways in which those companies being opposed make use of targeted advertisements, targeted counter-narratives within networks of Indigenous language revitalization of those very nations. There's ways in which those same practices can

become near to those spaces. So yeah, I think because of that, we have to apply our critique over our promotion of the things of the internet in ways that are as nuanced as the expressions of potential violence actually are.

There's great evidence, for example in these language networks, that Twitter is a place of potential for reconstituting connection to community, to enhancing one's affiliation to struggles for self-determination and Indigenous peoples' sovereignty. But it's also a place where the very same people doing that work can become targeted for various forms of violence. Because of that, I think the framework allows us to think about the internet more accurately as connected to these important material, and also we argue in that paper ontological claims about the nature of land-based relationships, that by attending to the ways in which we narrate language and the stories of language, we can learn and connect to a new way of being in relationship with place. But yeah, it's I think a pragmatic appraisal to space and a call to appreciate its complexity.

Dr. Sara Grimes 16:25

What are the key takeaways of this work for technology scholars or others who are trying to get a better understanding of digital technology and its role in society?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos

Yeah. Well, I think one thing that strikes me is that there's no politically neutral technology. All technologies are developed in a manner that further a political goal, and we're all going to agree or disagree on whether those goals are good or bad, or moral or ethical. But I think that if people are invested in the creation of technology that wants to be complicit in the liberation and freedom and self-determination of Indigenous people and the enhancement of Indigenous people's rights, design of technology needs to become much more anchored in a pragmatic appraisal of colonial violence and committed to a different set of ethics that I think ask us to think much more about the infrastructure of the internet, ask us to think much more about the ways in which the policy that governs digital spaces and technologies, like the ones we've studied in this paper, the ways that those policies have to be designed and thought of in ways that actually further the interest of the people it's intended to serve.

And then to be receptive to the inevitable reality that no matter how well intentioned we are in our design, we are always likely to become complicit in the very violence we're critiquing. And so attending to the... not being kind of dismissive of that, but to really make reflection on the ethics of our technology and the ethics of the uses of our

technology, really a central and iterative aspect of our work. I think the other thing is, I think in a time of profound planetary distress, that we are invited, through the contributions of Indigenous feminist and queer scholars, to think and take very seriously the significance and potential planetary impacts of technological innovation that I think is something probably needed now more than ever in a time when our planet is experiencing the degree of precarity which it is, and attending to that in a way that isn't just reductive, but that speaks about the life of the planet, that speaks about our responsibilities to be in good relationship with our planet, I think is something that the paper also points us towards.

Dr. Sara Grimes 19:26

The article also emphasizes the transformational potential of digital technologies, and here I'm thinking about your argument that "online learning is not inevitably disconnected from analog space and place," but you also warn that this potential is limited by barriers to access as well as "the broader milieu of coloniality within cyberspace." Can you please speak a bit about this tension and the systematic inequities it emerges out of?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 19:59

I think that it's not lost on me that within my lifetime, there's been a tremendous shift within how information is exchanged. And what I hold in my hand in this phone was the story of sci-fi when I was a child, but what we experience as normative today was just unimaginable about that long ago. And the same is true of more recent developments in digital technologies, particularly in ICTs like social media and the use of live streaming video and all these sorts of things that are just... they have utterly shifted everything about how we interact and I do think signal a profound transformative potential in terms of thinking about learning, thinking about organizing, thinking about change, and the pursuit of justice in our communities and our societies.

But what this research has sensitized me to more and more is that, what I've mentioned a little earlier, that technologies are developed by people and that those people can be... even the AI that they develop to develop technologies, have within it embedded values, embedded politics. And that shouldn't surprise us, that what we create mirrors and extends the forms of social organization, structuring and the unique violence that permeates our life offline, if we're ever offline anymore, I'm not sure, but certainly permeates our analog day-to-day experiences. And so yeah, we shouldn't be shocked that racism, that misogyny, that coloniality are expressed within these spaces, and that

happens in a lot of different ways. We certainly noted in our paper the ways that that has translated into even just the biases around whose languages are represented in technology, how technologies interpret or read or censor Indigenous people's languages, which is a design flaw that can be addressed most certainly. But at its very basis, it assumes something about who the internet is for.

I think the other thing we see is that there's often a tension between the sort of open access, democratizing story of the internet as a sort of commons, and then the ways in which it's spoken of as a space of potential organizing and movement for particular groups of people. And I think those are the moments when, particularly companies, corporate entities who have to make policy decisions around how to navigate discrimination and racism in their own technologies, have to sort of think through and negotiate the tension of whether a technology is actually for everybody or if it's for the majority, or if it's for people with power and whether the policies that are governing and the protocols that govern digital environments are designed in ways that privilege certain people over others.

So these are... I guess what I'm saying isn't new, there's lots of writing and thinking around the sort of social inequities and oppression that are produced and designed. I think as a person who uses the internet, what it requires of us is to become critically sensitive to the fact that these spaces that we call and frame as commons are actually governed at their core by the interests of corporate entities, companies, and because of that are saturated very deeply in a particular set of social and political values, and this is where I start to sound much more maybe conspiratorial, but I do believe that they are largely governed by their own capital interests. And that acknowledgement should give us caution. I don't know that it should always lead to disengagement, but I think at the very least it should lead into a much more pragmatic and maybe cautious use.

Dr. Sara Grimes 24:50

I don't think you sound conspiratorial at all. Your arguments confirm and build on those of other fantastic scholars doing critical race studies of digital technologies and the information society more broadly. I'm thinking here of Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*, Marisa Duarte's *Network Sovereignty*, Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*.

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 25:10

Yeah, no, I think mean there is now lots of evidence pointing to the uses of these

technologies in surveillance and racialized policing. There's lots of... there's an emerging body of literature, as you indicated, that highlights the harms. I'm not of the full withdrawal perspective that sometimes is the resulting position of those who maybe critically interrogate these platforms, but at the same time, there are certain lines that should be drawn. But I also think we have to rethink the myth of these technologies and their kind of mythical... the mythical stories we tell about them and to ultimately ask whose interests they serve.

Does talking about platforms that allow for open conversation about issues and the free exchange of ideas, is that really true or is that a story we tell ourselves about technology that it's really evidence of successful marketing as opposed to maybe the actual nature of the environment? It's very true that we see a lot of evidence in our research that certain voices, certain politics, particularly those which serve the interest of white straight men in North America are not surveilled and censored in the ways that Black and Indigenous and other movements are, and communities. So yeah, at some point we have to think through and have a more honest telling, particularly within technology studies about the nature of the racialized, colonial, capitalist, straight, masculine sort of political interest that some of these stories about the internet serve.

Dr. Sara Grimes 27:16

I'd like to take a step back to talk about your broader research, much of which focuses on Indigenous health, social policy, suicide, and suicide prevention. This is actually how I was introduced to your scholarship, by the way, through your innovative work with Indigenous youth. I was particularly inspired by your use of arts-based research, specifically community theater as a meaningful way of learning about youth experiences with homelessness. I'm referring here to your article "Surviving the Cracks," co-authored with Amanda Wager. A key contribution of that article is how arts-based research can be mobilized as a "decolonizing methodology." Would you mind describing what you mean by that?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 28:01

I think a lot of times people conflate colonization with just being critical or just being oppositional, and I think that it is true that critiques of colonialism and anti-colonial scholarship is at its core opposing a type of authoritarianism. But decolonizing methods, in my reading and in my understanding, how I've come to understand them, are those that are directly challenging the legitimacy and the authority of coloniality at the level of the state, at the level of policy, at the level of services, technology, you name it, and

enacting resistance to it. Now, those enactments can look like lots of different things.

I guess in the context of arts based research, I understand it as being one, by using methods to produce knowledge, by using knowledge creation as a means of speaking about the world and speaking about our ways of surviving and thriving in this world, we are using methods that have been, to large part of the history of science, not permitted, not seen as valid means of producing knowledge. And so by enacting those pathways, by vitalizing our relationship to those forms of production, we are resisting the sort of narrow definitions of science. We are resisting the sort of colonial notions of what is constituted truth, and as we do it, we're also vitalizing our connection and our relationship to diverse forms of knowledge.

And so yeah, in this particular work that you're referring to, we saw the ways that Indigenous young peoples, who are systematically and disproportionately overrepresented in crisis populations, how their own words, how their own stories were also excluded from the large knowledge base surrounding their own lived experiences. This sort of negation, this absence, and this disappearing of Indigenous young peoples' own lived experiences in the inquiry of their own lives was wrong, seems like a tactic that disappears Indigenous people, which is something that is at its core deeply colonial. And so the use of arts based methods was a means by which young people could speak, could resist, could make their voices heard. And in the process of doing so, we also noted that many of them, in sharing their stories together, were deeply politicized in their critique. And we certainly see the ways that have led to broader forms of mutual aid and direct action and collective action and organizing against not only the sort of injustices of housing policy in British Columbia at that point in time, but more broadly within the nation state of Canada.

Dr. Sara Grimes 31:50

Most recently I had the great pleasure of reading "Our Spirit is Like a Fire," co-authored with Elissa Dent, in which you interviewed 15 Indigenous youth leaders working in community health, mental health, and suicide prevention organizations across Canada to find out more about their ideas about the intersections between mental health and spirituality. It feels like there's a deep connection between the key findings discussed in this article and your previous arguments about the land-based nature of the internet. For instance, in terms of challenging colonialism and hegemonic settler concepts and tracing how enormously valuable Indigenous knowledge and approaches are for challenging the status quo. What is the bigger picture you're trying to reveal through

your work?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 32:41

Well, I actually really love this question. I think at its core land is what it's all about. Yeah, I think the bigger picture I'm trying to reveal through my work, it's going to be the subject of my next book, is that you cannot understand, conceptually or practically, issues of importance to Indigenous communities and people with relationship to social welfare, health, mental health, economics, technology, you name it, without understanding the broader ecological structures that nuance our understanding of those issues. And then as well, that those particular issues can, as much as they need to be shaped by this broader conceptualization of land, that by attending to those specific issues like mental health or spirituality, we can also learn something really important about the environment.

So I think in both directions, it is a structural plan. It is to say that our relationship to these environments, our relationship to the material spaces of where we make our lives, the ways that this land, this water, the air we breathe nourishes our futures, is an absolutely central part of understanding these other issues and that we need to interrogate the negation or the sort of obscuring of these material, and land, and spiritual relationships to places and space and ask whose interest it serves.

I think that from that particular article, what I feel so immensely aware of is that the young people who shared their stories with us really made known to us the ways that these relationships to place are made precarious by various forms of social violence, and that has ripples of impact on health, that has ripples of impact on connection to communities, family life, social welfare, economic status, and so forth, but that we can't ultimately address these things. We can't meaningfully enact change until we address the precarity of our relationship to place and to land. And so yeah, I think the bigger picture I'm trying to reveal in my work is perhaps it is a normative argument that for us to be invested in the health and wellbeing of Indigenous young people, we have to be the co-conspirators in the defense of Indigenous peoples' lands.

Dr. Sara Grimes 35:40

My last question is the one I'll be asking all of my guests this season, what should we all be thinking about when considering the political dimensions of digital technology?

Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos 35:51

I think we should always be thinking about the political dimensions of digital technology. So I think one of the greatest challenges I feel in this question at this time is how do we answer this question beyond the imagination of white neoliberal imagines? How can we become more radically related to the politics of technology? And to do that, I think we need to take a very close look at the role that capitalism plays in limiting our imagination and producing very harmful and extractive inevitabilities. I think we also need to think about the role that racism plays in not only access, but in the design of technologies.

I think that Indigenous peoples' engagements and complex entanglements in digital technology highlight the revolutionary potentials of the uses of digital technology, but also remind us very importantly that we're not building digital technologies as an escape pod to abandon a ravaged planet, but that we need to think about how technology can support the vitalization of life here and now. And as such, to make much more explicit our political ethical commitments to one another, to planet, and to do that in a way that is front-ending our work. It invites us to be more principled, more relational, more accountable, and I think ultimately it also enters a dose of maybe humility to reckon with the fact that inevitably the things that we create are going to... we're going to have to negotiate the ways that they become complicit in systems of oppression that are much older than the creation of the technology, or endeavoring to build or to make use of. And so if we want to be concerned about justice and a better world, we have to front end and build into our processes context of that type of ethical reflection and community accountability.

Dr. Sara Grimes 38:26

A big thanks to Professor Ansloos for joining us today. Please follow the links in the podcast description to find out more about Dr. Ansloos's research, the publications mentioned in today's episode, as well as information on where to send your questions or comments. The Critical Technology podcast is produced by me, Sara Grimes, with support from the KMDI. Audio mix and sound design by Mehrdad Ranjbar. Music by Mick-Lee Smith. Theme song by Taekun Park. Our logo was designed by JP King, and the artwork for today's episode was created by Kenji Toyooka. Please subscribe to stay up to date on new episodes and posts as they become available. And thank you for listening.

