

A Paradigm Shift: Indigenous Peoples in the New Millennium

Among the Navajo on the reservation where I live, amidst the winter frost and chill, we are engaged in traditional winter storytelling. *Shihastoi*¹ delight in sharing stories of old, tales of coyote and his scheming, and other traditional lore. Once the grandfathers don this persona, no narrative is left untold; even the *Hajinei* or the Emergence stories are brought forth. These stories tell of the Navajo “emergence” from world to world. Throughout our journey, the Navajo people have fashioned traditional tales and accounts revealing our origins, as well as those of many other creatures and beings. In the *Diné*² creation story, there are four or five worlds: the Black, the Blue, the Yellow, the White and/or Glittering world. I have often heard that we are currently living in the Glittering world (depending on whose *chei*³ is consulted), as exemplified by the glisten and gleam of modern technology.

While technology was slow to arrive on the Reservation, rapid and wide-ranging technological advances have brought the Navajo Nation swiftly and inexorably to the doorstep of the modern, often-beguiling Western world. In recent years, these advances have dictated that even those community members living in the deep recesses of the Navajo Nation are not immune to technology’s wonders. Today, somewhere at their winter sheep camp, *Shimasani*⁴ and *Cheii* are listening to the radio station KTNN, the voice of the Navajo Nation.

The existence of media, like cell phones and the Internet, has brought the Navajo people, along with others around the globe, into the 21st century. In its most useful form, technology has been put to service revitalizing Navajo and other tribal languages and cultures,

¹ Refers to maternal male Navajo elders

² Navajo name for themselves

³ Maternal grandfather; he usually takes on the role of storyteller.

⁴ Maternal grandmother

acting as a medium for linguistic and cultural vitality. Continuously threatened since the colonization of the Americas, notably by government attempts at forced assimilation during the boarding school era, our traditional languages and practices require our unwavering attention. However, with the presence of multimedia platforms, preservation is more achievable and Native issues are increasingly foregrounded. American Indians are using apps, websites, and television programs as vehicles to document, preserve and share Indigenous language, culture and issues. For example, in 2011, First Nation Experience or FNX became the first 24-hour television network geared toward an Indigenous audience (Guskin & Mitchell). The programming includes Native produced or themed documentaries, Native arts, and a dramatic series, all illustrating the lives and cultures of Native peoples around the world (“About Us” *First Nation Experience*). Another example includes the Rosetta Stone Endangered Language program that works to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages. Native communities like the Iñupiaq, Mohawk, Chitmachá, and Navajo have partnered with Rosetta Stone to release Levels 1 and 2 of the software language program (“Endangered Languages” *Rosetta Stone*). Multimedia platforms have opened new spaces for learning Indigenous language and culture as well as reaching broader audiences with information about Native issues.

However, the benefits of technology have been accompanied by less positive effects. Like most tribal peoples, the Navajo are animistic believers. Our traditions and culture have been shaped by the presence and awareness of life and spirit all around us and also present in our native language. Language is imbued with a spirit of immense power; to speak a word is to give that word life, each pronouncement must be instilled with respect. It is here that technology fails us, seeming to belittle the sacredness of language and removing from it the immediacy and intimacy that can only be achieved through living human interaction, often between

grandparents, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Although groundbreaking technology has allowed for contemporary Indigenous peoples to reconnect to their Native roots, heritages, and cultures, one of its unintended consequences has been to devalue the human presence in language and culture. Dialog is a staple of indigenous identities. Traditional life lessons passed on orally from Navajo elders to daughters and sons, nieces and nephews, and other family members cannot be separated from the expressions, gestures, laughter, tears, and life experience that accompanies these lessons. It is true that technology has helped contemporary Indigenous scholars to engage more fervently in cultural practice, from ceremonies to storytelling. But for many elders, as well as for many young Navajo people who look to them for guidance, technology has created an empty space where physical presence once resided. It is no wonder that some persist in cursing technology under their breaths, as it seems to threaten their very existence. Navajo youth often seem to rely more on Googled websites than on those whose myriad experiences form the continuity between individuals, generations, and communities.

Presently, there are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples worldwide, each with distinct cultures, traditions, histories, and individual stories. The development of technology has allowed Indigenous peoples to reach greater audiences, and those audiences in turn take greater note of Indigenous people's knowledge, values, frameworks, and narratives. Our Indigenous knowledge increasingly takes the national and international stage as we participate in global struggles for civil and human rights, environmental sustainability, justice, and equity. We are more visible and our voices resonate with more authority on every continent, as well as here in this country.

Nonetheless, I feel deeply fortunate when I enter the reservation, where service connections grow fainter and technology loses its appeal and sway. Then I experience another, truer connectivity sitting by the fire with my grandfather, listening to his stories. No longer is time of the essence. No longer must emails, phone calls, and text messages be promptly answered. A nagging sense of having been rude, disrespectful, or uncooperative by ignoring technology and its demands wanes and disappears. This is a world I cherish, where my ancestors are alive in the sound of my grandfather's voice and where the rush of linear time surrenders to stillness.

Indigenous peoples are tasked with navigating two worlds, the Western world and our Native one. As we advance into the future, we are strengthened by the heritage that we carry with us, one that informs our thoughts, words, and actions. The Navajo philosophy of *K'e* guides our relationships and interactions, creating a universe of connectivity. In his book *Navajo Courts and Navajo Common Law: A Tradition of Tribal Self-Governance*, Raymond Austin defines *K'e* as the understanding that "all beings in the universe are interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent; thus, all beings are relatives in a theoretical sense" (83). He explains that our relationships encompass all levels, including the human, the universal, and the spiritual. The Navajo idea of connectivity is transcendent; it is the epitome of genuine connectivity that extends beyond technology to every dimension of the greater world. In a wonderful illustration of the weaving together of the natural world and the world that humans have fashioned, a Navajo elder explained that the 'new' technology was not at all surprising to him. The florescent lights of the modern buildings were simply manifestations of the sun, now shining indoors.

In conversation by Miranda Haskie, she shares her view of technology: "Before all of this (she gestures to computer and entire room) we lived in a one room Hogan, and we listened to

Cheii as he told stories through maii'⁵, about how he's always showing off, in the Coyote and lizard story⁶, he does it, everyone gets out of the way and then he messes up. He was taught humility. [Nowadays] we live in separate homes. We resort to technology. We don't listen to grandpa or grandma." For countless generations, Navajos have gathered around fires, listening spellbound to stories both entertaining and instructive, many reserved for winter months when particular animals are deep in hibernation. For us, fire is a source of knowledge, thus making it a prime setting for powerful teachings, one of which is that fire itself, like knowledge, is sacred. Both sustain and enrich life. Treated recklessly, however, both can inflict needless harm. As human beings, whether we fan the sparks of fire or power-on the electronics that surround us, we need to be guided by humility, never forgetting our limits, our responsibility to Mother Earth, and our inextricable bond to one another.

⁵ Coyote

⁶ In the winter story "Coyote and the Lizards," coyote wants to join the lizards in sliding down a hill on a rock slab. The lizards tell him that he should not do it; however, Coyote still wants to participate. He tries to sled, but gets hurt. These stories are meant for entertainment and instruction.

Works Cited

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