

Knowing Ways in the Digital Age: Indigenous Knowledge and Questions of Sharing from Idle No More to *The Unplugging*

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Unlike other minorities, questions of the Digital Age look different from the perspective of people struggling to control land and traditions that have been appropriated by now dominant settler societies for as long as 500 years.

—Faye Ginsburg

It's not over. We're not over.

—Yvette Nolan, *The Unplugging*

At the end of 2012, the Idle No More movement burst onto the public stage. Within a month, what had begun with modest teach-ins organized by four Saskatchewan women had quickly morphed into a national—and even international—movement broadly promoting Indigenous Sovereignty, empowerment, and recognition. The movement started as a means to oppose Bill C-45, legislation put forward by Canada's then-Conservative government. The 450-page omnibus bill included several proposals members of Idle No More considered detrimental to Indigenous communities. In particular, the women who began Idle No More were concerned about changes to Canada's Indian Act—an often maligned statute that sets the framework for the federal government's relationship with Indigenous peoples. Bill C-45 would have altered the Act to adjust how reserve territory could be surrendered and leased. It would also have changed the Environmental Assessment and Navigable Waters Protection Acts, removing environmental assessment requirements from some projects. In opposition to the bill, on December 10, 2012 Idle No More organized their first National Day of Action, which attracted thousands of participants and seized the attention of media across Canada. The movement remained a major topic of discussion throughout the winter of 2013 and—although its media presence peaked during those few months—continues to host protests, events and outreach within Canada and internationally.

Tracing Idle No More's tactics is a challenging task as it is a dispersed, leaderless movement that encompasses a multitude of nations, approaches, and performance forms. As the movement has spread to include both Indigenous participants from different nations and non-Indigenous allies, any discussion of Idle No More will inevitably be partial and unfinished. That said, one common thread throughout much of the movement has been the use of digital technologies, which is an increasingly common aspect of contemporary social movements. While the Idle No More movement relies on many in-person, real-time events—like round dances, flash mobs, teach-ins, marches, and protests—much of its organizing and visibility has been through new technologies.¹

When writing about Idle No More, activists, critics and organizers often refer to it as #IdleNoMore—commingling online aspects of the movement with its very identity. For example, Dory Nason, an Anishinaabe professor in the University of British Columbia's First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program, calls it “the #IdleNoMore movement” in a blog post about Indigenous

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women's roles in Idle No More. The post appears on the blog site of the journal *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (Nason 2013). On this site, all posts related to the movement include the tag “#IdleNoMore” rather than “Idle No More.” Nason's post was also reprinted in the Kinonnda-niimi Collective's book *The Winter We Danced*, which compiles Idle No More related writings from the winter of 2012–13. Throughout the book, other authors, including Glen Coulthard, Wab Kinew, and Hayden King also refer to the movement as #IdleNoMore (Coulthard 2014; Kinew 2014; King 2014).

Use of this hashtag started when the movement's co-founders began to promote events and live tweet teach-ins from late October to early December 2012. For example, on November 30, 2012 one of the co-founders, Cree Tanya Kappo (@Nehiyahskwew), wrote “Tweeting up on Sunday, December 2, the #IdleNoMore event in Alberta. Lets get it trending!” The hashtag quickly took off, with 11,416 mentions on December 10 and almost 40,000 mentions on December 21 (Donkin 2013).² As online responses to the movement proliferated, #IdleNoMore rapidly became unmoored from a single starting point and instead became a means for participants to comment on numerous threads related to the movement. The main Idle No More website and their Facebook and Twitter pages have become additional spaces for educating and organizing on a number of issues, ranging from discontent over the government's lack of consultation with Indigenous peoples to concerns over water and housing quality on reserves and ongoing violations of treaty rights. Other online spaces built into the movement include the blogs Divided No More and Decolonization, and numerous podcasts and webinars. Digital performance theorist Sarah Bay-Cheng argues that this kind of digital presence marks a form of participation where “people do not participate by being there; people are ‘there’ by participating” (Bay-Cheng 2010, 130). In the case of Idle No More, this participation extends the movement's focus on “Indigenous ways of knowing” into digital spaces, where participants can engage with the movement even when they are geographically separated from one another (Idle No More 2013). Online participation also allows for a diverse range of voices to gain prominence—which pivots away from dominant tribal political structures that tend to place men in positions of power.

Idle No More's use of technology reflects the prominent role new media can play in facilitating the sharing of information and promoting previously under-recognized voices. However, many critics counter optimism about the power of new technologies, and social media in particular, by pointing to issues such as the co-option of information, barriers to access and the increasing corporatization of the web (see, for example, Gladwell 2010; and Lovink 2011). These concerns relate to the Idle No More movement as many participants are wary about how mass media pick up the words they post and how sharing in public online spaces opens them up to racist and hateful responses. Following anthropologist Faye Ginsburg, such digital exchanges need to be viewed from an Indigenous perspective that takes into account histories of colonialism and appropriation, and the biases and exclusions embedded in the ways we talk about digital spaces (Ginsburg 2008, 139). For example, in certain rural areas and parts of Canada's far north there are locations without reliable or affordable Internet access. This lack of dependable access means populations in these areas may be excluded from digital exchanges.

In response to Ginsburg's provocation, in this essay I delve into questions surrounding Indigenous knowledge sharing by weaving together two different performative contexts: participatory media use in Idle No More and Yvette Nolan's play *The Unplugging*. Nolan, who is Algonquin, creates a work that is seemingly placed outside the contexts of mediatization and thus the reverse of Idle No More's digitally connected, boisterous actions. It is set in an undisclosed time in the future, in the

aftermath of an event that the characters refer to as “the unplugging.” After this global catastrophe—in which electricity stops functioning—an isolated community deems two older women a useless burden and banishes them (Nolan 2014, 21). And yet, while the digital realm no longer exists in Nolan’s future, the play functions as a meditation that complicates popular debates about the political utility of social sharing. Tensions between the two women, Bern and Elena, evoke contemporary debates about online sharing and whether there is a need for Indigenous communities to create and use their own spaces.

By placing her characters in a future dystopia without the technology at the core of debates about new media and activism, Nolan sets the stage as a blank slate from which to re-envision modes of sharing in our media-saturated world. Nolan highlights the personal and subjective nature of knowledge sharing and points to an array of pressing issues relating to how we use technology, who gets access, and whose voices get amplified in various online spaces. The play advances the possibility of more horizontal modes of sharing, where Indigenous women—often left out of dominant power structures—take on a major role in organizing and educating. This approach suggests that Indigenous perspectives might extend and challenge existing notions about the relationship between mediatization and performance as modes of social critique. Nolan’s piece veers toward the perspective that, in order to have this impact, artists, community members, and activists should continue to share knowledge even though appropriation and violence are possible outcomes.

In this essay, I work relationally by placing Nolan’s play within the larger context of *Idle No More*. Moving between these two performance forms situates theatre and performance studies as co-implicated, rather than competing methodologies. This approach also embraces Lakota Chadwick Allen’s concept of a trans-Indigenous method that does not supersede the study of particular nations, contexts, and traditions but “complement[s] these by augmenting and expanding broader, globally Indigenous fields of inquiry. The point is to invite specific studies into different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts” (Allen 2012, xiv).³ This process allows for connections between different moments and locations, while simultaneously considering nation-specific contexts. However, this method of working across has limitations, as I have selected certain voices (from particular nations) and activist moments to highlight in my analysis.

In a trans-Indigenous context, there are also many modes of Indigenous knowledge. Cree/Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach defines Indigenous knowledge as “a specific way of knowing based upon oral tradition of sharing knowledge. It is akin to what different Indigenous researchers, the world over, identify as storytelling, yarning, talk story, re-storying, remembering” (Kovach 2010, 40). The plural form of “Indigenous ways of knowing”—used within *Idle No More*—highlights how there is no singular mode of Indigenous knowledge. In the context of *Idle No More*, knowledges are formed and produced via different technologies, something that Indigenous communities have done throughout history through the development and use of new tools. In Nolan’s play, “ways of knowing” tend to relate to knowledge about land and resources; the play itself can also be read as a means of knowledge-making through its function as a storytelling device. This example shows how the theatre provides an alternative set of tools for considering how knowledge is transferred, raising larger questions about the containers that convey cultural meaning.

I come to this research as a scholar interested in performance, new media and social movements—and the potential values and pitfalls of using digital tools for activists and artists. As I delve into issues of ownership and appropriation, I am aware that I risk reinforcing the very problems I

discuss. Idle No More is a diverse and ever-evolving movement, and I want to avoid reducing it to singular events or individual voices. As I am a Canadian of settler ancestry, I aim to speak with rather than for the Indigenous scholars and activists I cite, and I do not want to impose a framework on the actions of Indigenous activists. With this goal in mind, I foreground Nolan's own readings of her text and an array of Indigenous voices from various nations in relation to Idle No More.

Questions surrounding knowledge sharing also relate to interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. In the final section of this essay, I address this kind of exchange by moving from a juxtaposition of my two case studies to a triangulation that adds in a discussion of the Toronto production of *The Unplugging*, which was produced by Native Earth and The Factory Theatre in 2015. The production became embroiled in a controversy about ethnicity and casting, which led to debates mirroring the conflict at the heart of the play. Critics of the production claimed that Bern and Elena could only be portrayed by performers who openly identify as Indigenous, which again raises questions about how Indigenous knowledge should be shared. These critiques pushed up against the explicitly intercultural approach of the production—an artistic process centred on making theatre more inclusive. In this case, the production team incorporated the Indigenous worldview of the play into the rehearsal process as a means to educate a diverse production team. This third example shows how theatre practice also raises questions about sharing, and how embodied performance is yet another container in a multifaceted media landscape that challenges how we think about knowledge sharing.

The Unplugging: A Meditation on Sharing in a Post-digital World

I first saw *The Unplugging* as a reading in 2011—before Idle No More emerged—and then as a full production at the Factory Theatre in Toronto in March 2015. The play, which premiered in Vancouver in 2012, is an adaptation of an Athabaskan story that Nolan first encountered through Velma Wallis's 1993 novel, *Two Old Women*. Nolan's version of the story has a simple, stark aesthetic. On the surface, the play falls into the camp of digital pessimism, supporting arguments that technology fails to provide space for meaningful knowledge building. The women lament the loss of both archival knowledge, lost in the unplugging, and embodied knowledge, lost before the unplugging as we shifted our focus to electronic and digital repositories. In reflecting on the unplugging, Elena tells Bern to “think of all the information that disappeared, in a blink. All the things we stopped writing down and putting in books, all the things we stopped teaching our children, all the things we need to know now” (Nolan 2014, 10). Over the course of several months, while living in an old camp in the wilderness, Bern and Elena start to re-discover “things we need to know now.” Elena has a wealth of knowledge about the land, learned from her grandmother who “never really trusted the technology” (12). She teaches Bern to hunt and use resources, and the two begin to thrive, which suggests a move away from our highly mediatized existence might lead to a more productive relationship with the land and one another.

However, the women's peace is interrupted by an interloper who appears to be the opposite of Bern and Elena in every way. He is young and male. Yet he claims to have one thing in common with them—that he was cast out from the same community. The man—Seamus—tells the women that since they left the community, inequalities have only increased, with the main man in charge—Laird—proclaiming himself the sole leader. He claims the community is now focused on hoarding weapons and protecting themselves from the outside. Seamus says he tracked the women down to learn from them. He declares he is prepared to take on this knowledge in the context of “the

unplugging” as it “kind of wiped me clean, and I can start learning all over again. But important things this time, not just video games and Twitter, but things like what time of day it is from the sun, and what we can eat from the land” (Nolan 2014, 42). Again, this section implies that much has been lost with increasing mediatization—things that could only be found if we look back to earlier, pre-digital practices.

Seamus’ appearance leads to the main tension in the play, as a rift forms between Bern, who wants to help him, and Elena, who is suspicious of his intentions. Bern ends up teaching Seamus skills such as hunting, finding water and knowing what plants are edible, much of which she learned from Elena. Bern believes that the knowledge is not theirs to keep—if they keep it for themselves they banish Seamus and reproduce the system that rejected them. Elena, on the other hand, rejects Seamus’ requests, fearing that he wants to steal their knowledge and take it back to the community. When Elena’s prediction proves true and Seamus suddenly departs, the debate between the women boils over:

ELENA. Now that you have taught him everything you know, everything I taught you. He’s gone back, bearing that gift, to that place, that place that spat us out like rotten meat. It is his passport back in.

BERN. So what if he did, Elena. They need to know . . . It wasn’t ours to keep . . . the knowledge, the things I taught him, the things you taught me, maybe he will go back and teach your daughter . . .

ELENA. teach them? How long before they show up here with weapons to take it by force? (Nolan 2014, 57–58)

Though the entire play occurs in a world without recent technological advances, the debate between the two women echoes many anxieties surrounding the role new technologies play in social movements. For movements like Idle No More, where a large amount of digital content is shared via corporately owned websites like Facebook and Twitter, there are downsides to open access—such as misinterpretation and appropriation. Sharing information in publicly accessible online spaces has also made the Idle No More movement open to dissent and responses from those who do not support their tactics or goals.⁴ Individual users can respond to pro-Idle No More tweets with critiques, which has led to the circulation of hateful language and Indigenous stereotypes.⁵ While other social movements also deal with these issues, I follow Ginsburg in insisting that this sharing also poses unique challenges for Indigenous peoples who live with ongoing histories of appropriation and colonial violence. Kimberly Christen highlights how the dangers of sharing via new media are particularly acute for Indigenous peoples. She notes that many Indigenous communities view the concept of open access to information as “just another colonial mash-up where their cultural materials and knowledge are ‘open’ for the profit and benefit of others, but remain separated from the sociocultural systems in which they were and continue to be used, circulated, and made meaningful” (Christen 2012, 2879–80).⁶

In line with Elena’s concerns, there are other drawbacks to utilizing visible and open communication systems, like the social media platforms that became central to Idle No More’s sharing. An April 2013 report by Global News revealed that federal officials in the office of Aboriginal Affairs had been following the #IdleNoMore hashtag closely. According to documents acquired by Global News’ Rebecca Lindell via the Access to Information Act, officials regularly monitored the hashtag use and included specific tweets in reports about the movement sent to high-ranking government officials (Lindell 2013). In 2015, reports also emerged that the Aboriginal Affairs department had

shared information with Canada's spy agency, CSIS, and CSIS had sent reports about planned protests back to Aboriginal Affairs (Barrera 2015).⁷

In response to dangers like surveillance and violence, digital scholar Geert Lovink advises activists and communities to participate in offline, local organizing to avoid being watched (Lovink 2011, 159). He believes that organizations must move toward “tighter structures that can facilitate and coordinate collaborative work on cultural, political, and educational projects” (167). This need for “tighter structures” points to a dilemma in an increasingly digitized world: should communities and organizations use publicly accessible sites—where they often open themselves up to broader involvement, but also hateful, unproductive dialogue—or, alternatively, find more secluded places to exchange information? How does performing with digital tools both lead to new political possibilities and also limit or endanger users? How can artists and activists balance the importance of visibility and the value of anonymity for organizing? These questions circle back to Bern and Elena's debate about whether to share their knowledge with Seamus—as doing so might lead to violence and the destruction of the new life they have built for themselves. The dangers that come along with digital sharing also bolster the anti-technology stance taken by the characters early in the play.

While the first half of *The Unplugging* suggests that an open approach only exposes Indigenous communities to potential violence and appropriation, the play also complicates a simple protectionist solution. In the end, Seamus returns to the women and admits he did take their knowledge back to the very community that banished them. However, he now claims Laird is dead and the community wants the women to return as elders who will lead by choosing to share their knowledge (Nolan 2014, 66). He also tells them he has brought Elena's daughter and grandson with him to the camp. The play concludes with Bern and Elena deciding to go with Seamus. Elena excitedly prepares to meet the visitors—the eagerness to be reunited with her family quickly overcoming her suspicion of Seamus. As the play ends before this reunion, there is a chance that Seamus can still not be trusted. Yet, Bern and Elena believe him and trust that their community has changed its ways. Their decision means Bern's viewpoint overcomes Elena's, as the two do not want to reproduce the gate-keeping of knowledge and resources that contributed to their own banishment.

If Seamus' story is to be believed, the community's shift reflects a new appreciation for knowledge from below. This kind of horizontal knowledge-making is also a strength of Idle No More, particularly through its participants' use of social media, which circumvents traditional mass media and amplifies voices not normally heard (Callison and Hermida 2015b; Kinev 2014). While the play does not address online sharing directly, Elena's move from protectionism to sharing opens up her community to previously sidelined voices. Uses of the #IdleNoMore hashtag demonstrate how such horizontal networks can be built via digital tools. Social scientists Candis Callison (Tahltan) and Alfred Hermida outline how various voices gained prominence within Idle No More not through traditional institutional authority, but “by the degree to which they were retweeted,” which reflects a process of knowledge making (and affirming) from below (Callison and Hermida 2015b). The two studied 743,365 tweets using the #IdleNoMore hashtag from December 2012 to January 2013. In their analysis of this data—with a particular focus on retweets—they conclude that “the crowdsourced elite . . . is composed of a greater proportion of indigenous individuals who are usually absent from mainstream media representations” (Callison and Hermida 2015a, 710). This amplification of under-heard voices challenges Lovink's suggestion that activists would benefit more from anonymous, offline organizing and Elena's protectionist stance from earlier in the play. Instead, Idle No More's public actions—including those online—have increased the visibility of

Indigenous peoples. This visibility is a key tactic for holding the government and general public accountable for ongoing histories of racism and environmental abuse. For example, the movement has organized a number of national days of action with rallies and demonstrations across Canada—events that gain media attention due to the sheer number of participants taking over public spaces.

This flipping of power structures via new media supports Ginsburg’s understanding of how Indigenous users can take up digital tools to challenge troubling dominant discourses about mediatization. Ginsburg notes that commonly used phrases “Digital Age” and “Digital Divide” rely on definitions that problematically place the global North as the centre of digital practices and obviate questions of power and control that are especially keen for Indigenous communities whose traditions continue to be appropriated and commodified without their permission (Ginsburg 2008, 129–32).⁸ At the same time, she believes that these limited definitions create opportunities for expanding our current understandings of digital spaces. So, when Indigenous artists, activists, and organizers—like those involved in Idle No More—take up digital tools and share online, they dismantle the assumption that Indigenous communities are out of step with current times and open up seemingly narrow definitions, making them fluid rather than fixed through the integration of alternative perspectives (129). She argues that this kind of engagement in new media spaces can be linked to “the broader issues of self-determination, cultural rights, and political sovereignty, and may help bring some attention to these profoundly interconnected concerns. Indigenous media offer an alternative model of grounded and increasingly global relations created by indigenous people about their own lives and cultures” (141). Callison and Hermida’s study shows how this “alternative model” can work in practice when digital engagement raises the visibility of under-represented demographics.

Within the Idle No More movement, this shift has been seen in the prominent role women have played—both in person and online.⁹ The movement, which was started by four women, has been continually propelled forward by female voices and has an eco-feminist bent, with participants at least initially fighting against legislation that would erode Canada’s environmental protections. Anishinaabe writer and artist Wanda Nanibush argues that, “like the drum at the centre of the round dances is the heart of the mother earth, the women maintain the heart at the centre of the movement” (Nanibush 2014, 342). She claims this relates to Idle No More’s grassroots nature, as this is a location from which Indigenous women have historically worked.¹⁰ Nolan observed such dynamics in her own experiences at Idle No More events. She admits, “I [was] astonished to hear male elders at Idle No More gatherings telling the men to get behind the women, literally and figuratively, because the women were now leading” (Nolan 2015, 9). Part of this surprise is likely because Nolan claims men tend to self-identify as elders and leaders of the community, while women do not (Nolan 2016). Following Peggy Phelan’s provocation that visual representation—particularly when it comes to women’s bodies—does not automatically give those who are normally underrepresented political influence, I want to avoid oversimplifying the complex ways that this increase in representation has played out (Phelan 1993, 26). Yet, following Nanibush and Nolan’s experiences, the activities taken up by women in the movement—from organizing teach-ins and marches to giving speeches and writing tweets and blog posts—have the potential to challenge norms concerning who performs in particular ways and particular locations.

This shift relates to the concept of “horizontalidad,” which has become a marker of contemporary social movements. According to social movement scholar Marina Sitrin, the term emerged out of protests in Argentina in 2001 but can also be linked to many other contemporary political movements in different geographic locations, such as the work of the Zapatistas and the Occupy

movement (Sitrin 2007, 2012). Sitrin describes horizontalidad—translated as horizontalism in English—as a mode that “[constructs] new types of networks that reject the hierarchical—‘power-over’—template bequeathed to them by established politics in favor of organization on a flatter plane, with the goal of creating a ‘power-with’ or more egalitarian model” (Sitrin 2007). Key to this new kind of network is a tilting from vertical to horizontal exchanges. While Idle No More has goals related to change within existing political structures, the movement also incorporates horizontalism through the foregrounding of female voices and distribution of events.

The Unplugging also features voices frequently omitted from media representations and sidelined in discussions about digital cultures. In the play, the two older women go from being thrown out to becoming a kind of “elite” through their knowledge about the land and survival. In her book *Medicine Shows*, which traces Indigenous performance in Canada, Nolan notes “the core values of women, consensus, generosity, elder respect, and connection to land all formed the base of the world that Bern and Elena begin to build together”—a “world” that they then share with Seamus and presumably their community (Nolan 2015b, 92). While Elena takes on the role of the leader by teaching Bern the skills she learned from her grandmother, Bern takes on a leadership role when Seamus enters the scene and she teaches him about the land. This chain of knowledge sharing works to dehierarchize information and moves it from the older women to a younger man.

This sharing also potentially relates to settler-Indigenous relations, as it is unclear what Bern and Seamus’ ethnic backgrounds are. In an interview with the author, Nolan claims that, while Elena is definitely Indigenous, the backgrounds of the other two characters are intentionally ambiguous. She notes that Bern “could be [Indigenous] but doesn’t necessarily have to be” and that this “ambiguity is purposeful because this play is about [Canada]” (Nolan 2016). In Nolan’s view, Bern’s unclear background has the potential to illuminate a history of Canadians denying their Indigenous heritage (particularly in the wake of the government-led cultural genocide enacted through the residential school system). On the surface, Seamus appears to be non-Indigenous through his discussion of names. He claims his Irish name came from the fact that “my folks had a thing for the old country—though they were born and bred here” (Nolan 2014, 34). Then, when attempting to get Bern to tell him her name, he reveals his embeddedness in white culture by stating “that’s your opening to say—my name is—Cathy or Stephanie or Michelle or whatever” (35). However, Nolan points out that, like Bern, the script does not explicitly situate him as non-Indigenous. In fact, she originally wrote the part with actor James Cade in mind. Although Cade self-identifies as Irish, he also has some Indigenous heritage (Nolan 2016).

The intentional ambiguity about Bern and Seamus’ ethnic backgrounds means the horizontal knowledge sharing that occurs in the play can be received as either a form of educating settlers or as a means through which the characters reconnect with their Indigenous roots. Whether she identifies as Indigenous or not, Bern adopts Elena’s knowledge as her own. When Bern first meets Seamus she claims that *mukwa*—a term she learned from Elena—means bear “in my language” (Nolan 2014, 31). This knowledge then spreads from Bern to Seamus through his eventual adoption of Anishinaabe phrases throughout the play—a staging of how re-performing moves knowledge through different bodies. When he first meets Elena, Seamus shows what he has already picked up from Bern, asking “meegwitch. That’s right, isn’t it? Thank you?” (41). When he returns at the end of the play, his adoption of the language becomes more confident (65). However, the knowledge Seamus gains is deeper than just language, as he learns the importance of elder knowledge, community building, and respect for the land.

The need to share knowledge goes back to Nolan's claim that the play is "about Canada" rather than about Indigenous communities. This statement implies that the play works on multiple levels—as a response to inter-Indigenous relations as well as settler-Indigenous relations. Although *The Unplugging* has an open-ended final scene, the play generally shows the sharing of information in a positive light and complicates a simple cyberdystopian narrative. Nolan's other writings support an optimistic reading of the conclusion. In her book *Medicine Shows*, she discusses the Algonquin concept of the "eighth fire"—"a wish that now is the time for the Indigenous people and the settler communities to work together to achieve justice, to live together in a good way" (Nolan 2015b, 117).

Nolan partially links this shift toward open dialogue to Idle No More, noting that many non-Indigenous Canadians joined the movement and became educated about Indigenous issues as a result (117–18). Co-founder Sylvia McAdam notes this is a major goal of Idle No More, as "whether the Canadian citizens know it or not, Indigenous sovereignty and Treaties are the last stand protecting our lands and waters. It is our task and our duty to inform everyone that this is NOT about us and them. We must do this in a way that is peaceful and collectively done with all people" (Harden 2013, 70). An overview of Idle No More tweets reveals how the movement's use of social media frequently ties into the goal of educating settlers who may not already be familiar with Indigenous perspectives (75). For example, Anishinaabe musician, broadcaster and politician Wab Kinew's (@WabKinew) Idle No More tweets frequently appear aimed at a general audience that needs to be convinced of the movement's value. On January 3, 2013, he tweeted "Indigenous cultures have a lot of wisdom and beauty to offer the world #idlenomore" and "When every child has the same opportunity to succeed we are all better off #idlenomore." Callison and Hermida rank Kinew as the third most retweeted account during the movement's most active online period, from December 2012 to January 2013, which suggests that these tweets were widely read by Twitter users. Another popular Idle No More tweeter, Kahnawake Mohawk Russ Diabo, used tweets to educate users about the history of the federal government's Aboriginal policies.¹¹

While the play suggests that audiences view social sharing in a positive light, Nolan also highlights the importance of how this sharing is framed and who gets a voice in the process. Meeting Seamus opens the women up to the possibility of sharing their knowledge—though with the danger that it may be appropriated and even used against them. Juxtaposed against Idle No More—specifically the movement's use of online spaces—the play raises urgent questions about how information circulates. Elena's concern about the community using weapons against them alludes to how appropriation of knowledge can work as a form of violence. A return to Ginsburg's provocations about how we discuss the digital connects these concerns to Indigenous interventions online, which have the potential to reframe understandings of what a digitally connected world looks like. Much like Bern and Elena upend the premise that they lack utility, Idle No More participants push back against so-called digital divides when they not only use, but also appropriate, emerging technologies. They also potentially pave the way for sidelined voices to be amplified and brought to the fore.¹²

Casting Complexities: Diametric Responses to the Question of Sharing

Questions about sharing—what to share and who gets ownership over it—are not limited to digital spaces. Rather, they extend into other areas of an increasingly multifaceted media landscape. In 2015, debates about sharing spilled onto the stage with the Toronto production of *The Unplugging*. The show was co-produced by the Factory Theatre, which focuses on new Canadian plays, and Native Earth, the oldest Indigenous theatre company in Canada (of which Nolan was Artistic

Director from 2003–11). Such a uniting of companies is increasingly the norm in Toronto, particularly in the intercultural theatre scene. Ric Knowles refers to this as an “intercultural performance ecology,” which has become a “complex web of interconnections among individuals and companies working in solidarity across their acknowledged differences to challenge the hegemony of whiteness on the city’s stages” (Knowles 2010, 75). The production was directed by Factory’s current Artistic Director, Nina Lee Aquino, a Filipino-Canadian who worked for Native Earth when Nolan was Artistic Director, and who considers Nolan an “artistic mentor” (Aquino 2016). Aquino was also Artistic Director of fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company from 2002–10.

Even though the production was comprised of companies and a production team with deep roots in Toronto’s intercultural and Indigenous theatre scenes, it became entangled in a controversy about casting practices that played out in various media spaces. As someone outside the process, I do not want to sensationalize this painful moment for many in Toronto’s intercultural theatre community. I am also aware that discussing the controversy in the context of an academic article risks reducing it to an anecdote when in reality it was a complex and personal event for those involved. Yet the allegations made and debates that occurred provide a window into perspectives that push up against Nolan’s tentative optimism about ways to move forward with a more open sense of sharing. The controversy that erupted mirrors Bern and Elena’s debate about who gets to share in certain types of knowledge making as critics argued about who should participate in what they considered to be a solely Indigenous experience.

This version of *The Unplugging* stirred discontent after *Toronto Star* theatre critic Richard Ouzounian wrote a preview for the production entitled “The Unplugging Tells an Indigenous Story, but the Actresses are White.” The production had two actresses who did not openly identify as Indigenous, Allegra Fulton, and Diana Belshaw, playing Bern and Elena respectively. In the article, Ouzounian interviews Aquino, Belshaw and Fulton about the choice to cast the women as Bern and Elena. While the headline locates them as “white” actresses, in the article itself Ouzounian points out that Belshaw has some Maori heritage. He does not address Fulton’s Spanish heritage, nor mention that the actor playing Seamus, Umed Amin, is Middle Eastern—backgrounds that point to the production’s expressly intercultural approach to sharing the stage. Instead, the article implies that the casting decision, which Aquino and Nolan made along with Native Earth, was about Caucasian actresses taking parts from Indigenous performers (Ouzounian 2015).¹³ This example reveals how older media forms continue to influence conversations around inclusion and sharing as the preview sowed discord within Toronto’s intercultural and Indigenous theatre communities.



Allegra Fulton, left, as Bern, and Diana Belshaw as Elena in the March 2015 Factory Theatre production of *The Unplugging*. Photo by Akipari. Courtesy of Nina Lee Aquino and Factory Theatre.

After Ouzounian's piece was published, the story quickly took off, with other media outlets covering it and debates and accusations taking place on social media, most notably Facebook. One prominent critic of the casting was Métis actress Tantoo Cardinal, who argued that Caucasian actresses would never be able to properly embody Indigenous experience. In an interview with CBC she states, "I don't care how talented you are, you will never convince me you are Indian. I have not seen a non-Indian actor catch nuance that needs to be there . . . the complexity required is knowing something about our communities and our experiences historically" (quoted in Wheeler 2015). Cree actress Michelle Thrush makes a similar argument, claiming that non-Indigenous performers are missing the stories from their "blood," their "DNA" (ibid). Thirty-nine critics of the casting decision—from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds—sent an open letter to the Factory and Native Earth, in which they support their position by outlining histories of colonization and racism (Aquino 2016).

Debates about casting practices in Canada are far from new. In "Realisms of Redress: Alameda Theatre and the Formation of a Latina/o-Canadian Theatre and Politics," Natalie Alvarez carefully outlines the history of debates on this topic, covering Canadian theatre from the 1960s onwards. Alvarez focuses on the problem of realism and how it can be used to create roles for minorities

while also keeping them from taking on many others. She notes that “the contingent ‘fact’ of one’s race is always being indexed within realism’s illusionism precisely because it is a contingent fact—one to which one belongs but to which one doesn’t wish to be reduced” (Alvarez 2012, 161). In thinking about a way out of this bind, Alvarez proposes the potential of an “indexical realism” that acknowledges this fact but also how performers fail to fully embody racial imaginings embedded into realist texts. Alvarez argues that this failure has the potential to rework “realism’s politics of visibility” by “enjoining the spectator to take account of what is always missing and never wholly recuperable in representation” (162). This provocation encourages a new way of thinking about how we read ethnicity on the stage.

Nolan’s work aligns with this kind of “indexical realism” through its intentional ambiguities regarding ethnicity. While Nolan keeps Bern and Seamus’ ethnicities open, the characters have not always been received this way. Media articles about the casting controversy work under the assumption that both Elena and Bern are Indigenous and thus should be played by Indigenous performers, which shatters *The Unplugging’s* polysemy. Critics of the Factory production casting also brush aside the belief that interculturalism makes theatre more inclusive and instead point to a belief that Indigenous stories can only live in the bodies of Indigenous performers.

In contrast to this argument, the production deliberately engages with intercultural approaches to theatre-making. The production fit into the Factory’s recently updated mandate—developed when Aquino took the position of Artistic Director—of “[celebrating] diverse theatrical voices and culturally diverse artists” as both the cast and creative team came from a range of ethnic backgrounds (Factory Theatre 2016). This foregrounding of interculturalism raises questions about how this kind of “working in solidarity” impacts Indigenous theatre. Aquino claims that the casting choices were made out of necessity and that it was challenging to find either Indigenous or multicultural actresses who were the right age for the parts due to a range of factors including availability, ability, and desire to play the parts (Aquino 2016; Wheeler 2015).¹⁴ Aquino has stood by the decision and notes, in an interview with the author, that she was surprised that the open letter would target her as an Artistic Director of colour whose work has always been about inclusivity and sharing the stage interculturally. She also felt that, much like Bern and Elena, she and Nolan were made invisible, as very few people engaged her directly in conversations about their critiques. In addition, many of the letter’s signatories did not even see or read the play (Aquino 2016). Instead, many critics made accusations on Facebook, which led to “bullying” and “lateral violence” amongst members of Toronto’s intercultural theatre community (ibid.).

Aquino, Nolan, and Native Earth all wrote responses to the allegations. In Native Earth’s statement, the theatre’s board of directors apologize for the hurt these casting decisions caused—noting “mistakes have been made”—and promise that the company would “never again be involved in a production that allows an Indigenous character to be portrayed by a non-Indigenous actor” (Native Earth Performing Arts Board 2015). This differs greatly from Aquino and Nolan’s approaches. In a blog post on Native Earth’s website, Nolan defends the decisions made and discusses the play itself, which she notes is “about generosity, and building community, and understanding how we are all connected, backwards and forwards through time, to those who came before us, and those who are yet to come, and to each other, all of us who are living here now, trying to find a good way forward” (Nolan 2015a).

Aquino wrote a response to the letter sent to the Factory and Native Earth. In her letter, which she did not post publicly, Aquino argues that a production is about more than the cast and that, in this

case, the rehearsal room was predominantly made up of artists from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds. Aquino also discusses the process at length, noting that the team aimed to “take the Indigenous worldviews, principles and values that were embedded in the playwright’s work and *learn* from them, have them guide the way we carry out our rehearsals and shape the show. We were operating under the spirit of generosity, community-building, interconnectedness and renewed respect and awe for the land that we stand on and live in” (Aquino 2015). Aquino’s statement returns to the content of Nolan’s play—which had been ignored in the mainstream media articles about the controversy—situating the rehearsal space and process as a location for sharing across different ways of knowing.

The difference in Aquino and Nolan’s writings and the response from Native Earth shows how there is not necessarily a solution that addresses all the views on this topic. Rather, Indigenous communities—and ways of knowing—are heterogeneous, embodying a range of different viewpoints about how and what to share. While some Indigenous artists see value in carving out Indigenous-only spaces for sharing, others place importance in finding solidarity with other minoritized populations. This complex matrix of relations exists within other mediatized environments as well. Just as the casting controversy over the Toronto production of *The Unplugging* did not lead to a one-size-fits-all solution, Idle No More did not heal all wounds nor address every injustice possible. Those pressing for change via the #IdleNoMore hashtag have not united behind a single opinion or value, but rather promote multivalent calls for action on government proposals, as well as broader, long-term changes.¹⁵ There is also divergence on what tactics are most effective—as seen in disagreements over whether Assembly of First Nations Chiefs should meet with then Prime Minister Stephen Harper in January 2013.¹⁶

Yet, following the narrative of *The Unplugging*, and Aquino and Nolan’s statements, even with divisions and disagreements there are radical possibilities tied to working and sharing across difference. Such approaches may be messy and unpredictable, but they also offer the prospect of tilting existing power structures. The very act of performing—whether through activist acts online or through a theatre production like *The Unplugging*—can bring forth and amplify previously discounted perspectives. As Aquino (2016) notes, reducing the production to the casting meant that “no one wanted to step back and look at the big picture,” which was about embracing an “Indigenous worldview” and “being transformed by the land.” In the case of both Idle No More and *The Unplugging*, this “big picture” includes bringing under-acknowledged Indigenous worldviews to the fore, which have the potential to invert dominant communication structures and challenge dominant narratives about mediatization and sharing. In the final moment of *The Unplugging* Bern and Elena take a leap—opening themselves up to potential violence and appropriation, to the possibility that they are wrong about their community’s changed ways. They choose to act and take this chance because they see potential in connection and in sharing knowledge laterally.

Notes

1. While round dance practices vary throughout North America—with different nations having diverse reasons for taking part in the dance—the form is frequently inclusive and celebratory. This has made it a popular way for Idle No More to engage a range of participants. As Ojibway/Métis comedian Ryan McMahan notes, “it’s a beautiful, peaceful and inclusive action. We are being led by our drums. It’s perfect. It’s accessible. It’s transportable. It’s cheap” (McMahan 2012).

2. The movement mainly uses the hashtag #IdleNoMore on social media sites to spread news, organize events, and champion political causes; however, additional hashtags have also been created to promote

specific days of action, such as #J11 (January 11) and #J28 (January 28). Other popular hashtags connected to the movement include #rounddancerevolution, #dividednomore and #idleknowmore.

3. A trans-Indigenous methodology is not without its detractors. For example, Cree/Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach argues against using pan-Indigenous approaches. She believes a “pan-Indigenous approach . . . attempts to homogenize our tribal practices” and that “when considering Indigenous epistemologies, Indigenous people contextualize to their tribal affiliation. We do this because our knowledges are bound to place” (Kovach 2009, 37). However, I find that Allen’s definition of trans-Indigeneity acknowledges this tribal specificity while also finding value in juxtaposition.

4. Other online spaces also allow for anonymous hate speech—a problem that led the CBC to temporarily close comments on stories within the Aboriginal section of their news website in November 2015. As of May 2016, many of the stories in this section continue to be closed to commenters (Fenlan 2015).

5. For example, on January 11, 2013, a tweet from the official Idle No More Twitter page (@idlenomore4) stated “#IdleNoMore is 4 everyone. It is not just an ‘Indian thing’!!! #J11” In response, a user with the handle @WTF_Eh tweeted “Yikes. U guys are really scraping the barrel for support. Do you even know what you want or do you just like banging your drum?” Anti-Idle No More tweets are not limited to response tweets. One of the most active users of the #IdleNoMore hashtag was by the (now defunct) right-wing Sun News Network, whose Twitter page continually disparaged the movement (Callison and Hermida 2015, 708). Twitter also became a space for speaking back to such critics. In January 2013, Twitter user Toby Rollo (@TobyRollo) started the #Upsettler hashtag, which poked fun at users who dismissed Idle No More’s goals and tactics. In one of his many tweets using the hashtag, Rollo writes: “#Upsetters are agitated by what they call ‘reverse racism,’ which is like real racism only without a history of genocide and colonialism.”

6. There have been many high-profile instances of Indigenous cultural appropriation in the past few years, from the trend of non-Indigenous music festival attendees wearing headdresses to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics’ controversial use of an Inuit Inukshuk as its logo to the fashion retailer Urban Outfitters’ use of Navajo designs. There is even a website—Native Appropriations—that tracks many of these appropriations of Indigenous objects (Keene 2016).

7. Monitoring has been an issue for other social movements, including Black Lives Matter and Occupy—both of which had their social media use tracked by government agencies (Government Surveillance of the Occupy Protests 2014; Joseph 2015). Like Idle No More, both Occupy and Black Lives Matter have also dealt with appropriation and concerns over how mainstream sources cover events. One notable example is the promotion of the #alllivesmatter hashtag, which is often used to undermine the specific context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

8. Ginsburg’s provocations align with Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s critique of the way digital spaces create new online borders of access for artists and activists. He asks: “what are we really talking about when we use terms like global or access? Whose global project are we talking about? Access to what? Cyberspace reproduces almost identically the geopolitical cartography of nonvirtual reality. There are borders and there are people south of the digital divide” (Gómez-Peña 2005, 54). While Gómez-Peña asked these questions in 2005 when the Internet was much less accessible worldwide, his comments continue to have traction as certain locations have more reliable access to digital tools and the corporatization of the web has led to geoblocking based on national borders.

9. The major role played by women is not unique to Idle No More. For example, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was also started by women. Like Idle No More, BLM also has a strong digital component, with the official website referring to the movement as #BlackLivesMatter.

10. Anishinaabe elder Chickadee Richard also describes this link between women and land. She believes that by having women take on prominent roles, like they did in Idle No More: “We will also begin to understand how women connect us to Mother Earth. Like our Mother, women deliver to us everything we need, they provide for us and nurture us into maturity. This is demonstrated in the work women have always done, especially through the way women take care of water. In ceremony women carry water, teach about it, and

study its sacredness—exploring what it means to us. They show us that how we live with water is how we carry our life” (Richard and Gazan 2014, 135).

11. While I cite two male voices that attempt to educate the general public through Twitter, in line with my arguments about the major role women have played in Idle No More, Callison and Hermida also name a number of women influencers in their study.

12. Even before Idle No More took up social media tools, this practice could be seen in projects that carved out online space for Indigenous groups and causes. One example is CyberPowWow, an online space for discussion and sharing art created by Mohawk artists Skawennati Fragnito and Ryan Rice, and Eric Robertson in 1997. The project—subtitled “An Aboriginally Determined Territory in Cyberspace”—was first developed through the computer program Palace, which has chat rooms where users can interact with one another through visual avatars. CyberPowWow’s chat rooms displayed digital artworks, which were unveiled at semi-annual art exhibitions. The opening of the exhibition was a hybrid in-person and virtual event, with users having the option of either logging into Palace or interacting at an in-person site in Montreal or Saskatoon. For the second iteration of the project, the group created their own chat site as unaffiliated Palace users had been interrupting their discussions. The CyberPowWow project continued until 2004, with an in-person and virtual exhibition launch every two years (Lewis and Fragnito 2005). In many ways, CyberPowWow’s appropriation of new technologies acts as a precursor to Idle No More’s use of the social web. While ostensibly a solely Indigenous space, much like Idle No More, the project was open so anyone with Internet access could log on, create an avatar, and join the discussion.

13. In an interview with the author, Nolan claims that the sensational headline and story focused on the casting, rather than the play’s content, was a “preemptive strike” by Ouzounian, who has a history of giving harsh reviews to Indigenous and intercultural performances in Toronto. She believes that the Indigenous theatre community reacted in exactly the way Ouzounian had intended, showing that “we could be manipulated by someone who hates us” (Nolan 2016). Aquino agrees, in another interview with the author, noting that she was confused as to why the Indigenous theatre community, whose work had often been critiqued by Ouzounian, were now listening to his take on the production (Aquino 2016).

14. For her part, Belshaw claims that she “didn’t feel like I was playing a First Nations person” but rather “a person whose culture was very close to my understanding of the world.” She also points out that the production elements did not seek to realistically portray the traditions of a specific Indigenous nation, but rather worked from the lived experiences of the entire production team (Belshaw 2016).

15. Idle No More co-founder Tanya Kappo blames the mainstream media for characterizing the heterogeneity of the movement as an example of how it failed. She notes that many participants flocked to social media because this kind of negativity pervaded other media spaces. She states, “I think the media really played a role in characterizing disagreement and lending to this idea that First Nations people, Indigenous peoples should always be united in some way. But why? Who says that? Whose rule is that? That was never the case” (Kappo 2014, 70).

16. Idle No More protests continued while the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Shawn Atleo (Ahousaht First Nation) met with Primer Minister Harper in January 2013. One prominent critic of the meeting was Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence, who was in the middle of a six-week hunger strike at the time. Spence began the hunger strike to coincide with Idle No More’s first day of action and became an icon for the movement. Her hunger strike was linked to several goals, including a show of solidarity with Idle No More, a protest against Bill C-45, and a demand for Prime Minister Harper and the Governor General to meet with Indigenous leaders. Spence rejected the meeting invitation, as the Governor General, David Johnston, would not be in attendance. For more on this event from the perspective of an active Idle No More participant, see White 2014.

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