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Activist Literacies: Validating Aboriginality Through Visual and Literary Identity Texts

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Abstract

Framed at the intersection of activist and Indigenous research methodologies, this article explores the way two First Nations senior high school students made sense of their visual and literary identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011). An Ojibwe artist-in-residence at an urban secondary school in southwestern Ontario and a university-based researcher facilitated the creation of these texts, which helped students form concrete understandings of their life experiences as rooted in social, cultural, political, and historical understandings. Dialoguing about students' visual and literary identity texts proved to be an innovative and engaging way to explore what it means to place Aboriginal students' identities at the center of the curriculum. Insights into the students' experiences are detailed in terms of context, process, output, and impact.

Key words: identity texts; Indigenous methodologies; activist literacies

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Identity is by far the most important thing that anyone would have to be able to understand if wanting to have any connection with an Aboriginal student.

~ Cassandra Bice-Zaugg, 2012

Prologue

While articles written primarily for academic audiences do not normally begin with a prologue of introductions, following Indigenous Methodologies expert Margaret Kovach's (2009) lead, we have chosen to introduce ourselves to provide you, the reader, with sufficient identity markers so you may situate us within the work. Additionally, our introductions signal that this work reflects many stories—individual stories connected in a larger one—about identity creation, recreation, and validation. Two university-based researchers, Kristiina and Jim, and two First Nations secondary school students, Cassandra and Adam, have collaboratively written this article. It is important to note that while this article only acknowledges four authors, many others were instrumental in making the project a reality¹.

Cassandra

[In Ojibwe] *Aanii, Cassandra Bice-Zaugg ndishinikaaz Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nations ndoonjaba Anishinaabe Mukwa² doodem.* My name is Cassandra Bice-Zaugg. I am from Mississauga of the New Credit First Nations, Ojibwe is my Nation and I am from the Bear Clan [translation from Ojibwe]. I live in, between, on, and off reserve—I have one foot in the bush and one in the city. It is like being in-between two different worlds. Who I am sometimes gets lost in the space dividing these worlds. But as I travel on the road of my life journey, my true identity becomes stronger and clearer thanks to my life experiences and strong role models.

Adam

[In Ojibwe] *Aanii, Boozho, Makwa Oshkwenh ndishinikaaz, Baker Lake First Nations ndoonjaba. Anishinaabe, Makwa doodem.* Hello, Bear Claw is my name, Baker Lake First Nations is where I'm from. Ojibwe is my Nation, and I'm Bear Clan [translation from Ojibwe]. I'm a city kid, but I love to spend time up north. I feel more alive when I'm in the woods than in the city. While I have all of my material needs met when I'm in the city, when I'm in the woods I feel more traditional. I need to fish to eat and to cut wood for fire that is lit with the paper-like bark of the Birch tree. When I'm up north I feel at one with nature and connected with my Anishinaabe ancestors. I am part of my community.

¹ Many individuals made the Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives project possible. We recognize the following individuals for their insight, wisdom, and dedication: Elder Rene Meshake, Elizabeth McQueen, Eric Flemming, Chrystyna Murphy, Rod Nettagog, Josh Dockstater, Elder Jean Becker, and Dr. Carole Leclair

² Both *Mukwa* and *Makwa* (as noted in Adam's introduction) are dialectical spellings for the word "Bear." We have chosen to maintain the dialectical spellings in order to demonstrate the diversity of the Ojibwe language.

Kristiina

My name is Maria Kristiina Montero Haapala. I am a first generation Canadian with close ancestral ties to Finland and Spain. I was raised to respect and value the languages, cultures, and religious traditions of my ancestral countries, as well as those of Canada, my birth country. My parents typified the 1960s immigrant story: they sought to find better economic and educational opportunities for their children. I was educated in the Canadian public school system. With significant unease, I admit that I do not remember learning about Aboriginal Peoples in school. I vaguely recall having learned about Louis Riel, a political leader of the Métis people, in ninth grade history, but nothing more. I did not learn about the land treaties negotiated between the Crown and Canada's First Peoples, Residential Schools³, the role of Aboriginal people in the War of 1812, or anything else of consequence. I did not know about the peace of smudging, the power of the beat of a First Nations drum, or the cleansing of mind, body, and spirit during a sweat. Unfortunately, my story is not unique among non-Aboriginal people of my generation or those preceding mine; however, I hope that my kind of story will be an anomaly in future generations.

Jim

My name is Jim Cummins. Like many Canadians, I was born and grew up outside of Canada, in my case, Ireland. I left Ireland to pursue Ph.D. studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in the early 1970s. I spent two years back in Dublin in the mid-1970s before coming back to Canada as an immigrant. The collective history within which my own identity is embedded involves a continuous struggle for independence and self-determination against an oppressive colonial power. Independence was achieved in the early 1900s but at a cost. The famine of the mid-1800s reduced the Irish population from eight million to four million through death and emigration; the Irish language all but disappeared and is still only a shadow of its former presence despite intensive efforts at revitalization. Initially, my academic work proceeded in isolation from this collective cultural inheritance. I carried out research on the effects of bilingualism and bilingual education focusing on the cognitive aspects of these processes. It was only in the 1980s when I became involved in the ongoing debates on bilingual education for Latino/Latina students in the United States that I began to realize that societal power relations were fundamental to everything that goes on in schools. Underachievement among socially marginalized groups who had been and still were subject to intensive racism was largely a result of the fact that schools reflected and transmitted this racism directly to students and communities. It follows that "instructional effectiveness" requires that schools actively challenge the operation of coercive relations of power. Yet, this perspective is totally absent from the mainstream "educational reform" or "school improvement" literature. It is almost as though

³ As noted by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's (2008) official apology to Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, the Indian Residential School System of Canada was created as a way to "remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, and cultures and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal... One hundred and thirty-two federally-supported schools were located in every province, except Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island... The Government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed, and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents, and communities. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools... The legacy of Indian Residential Schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today." Indian Residential Schools operated in Canada from the 1870's through to 1996, when the last residential school was closed (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, n.d.).

words like “power” and “identity” have been blacklisted and “invisibilized” by policy-makers. When Kristiina first showed me the art and literature created by students in the Native Studies program, they spoke to me not only as works of extraordinary insight and beauty, but also as a powerful and eloquent repudiation of the shallowness of educational policy-making in many parts of the world. I feel grateful and privileged to be connected to this project in a very minor way.

Introduction

Institutions of formal schooling largely fail to provide Aboriginal⁴—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—students with the educational environments and experiences they require to be successful (Dion, Johnston, & Rice, 2010). Many Aboriginal students, particularly those enrolled in urban schools, do not see themselves represented in the curriculum and are not provided with safe spaces to explore and express their Aboriginality. Placing Aboriginal students’ identities at the center of the curriculum will conscientiously support their sense of well-being and belonging (Dion et al., 2010). When Aboriginal students are provided opportunities to express their cultural, social, and historical identities as part of a rigorous curriculum, their identities will be validated, which will help to empower them to engage in and take ownership of their learning. When educators find ways to validate students’ identities, their classrooms can be transformational and empowering spaces, especially to those who are marginalized and disenfranchised in formal educational contexts.

Social mobility in North American societies is largely gained through formal education (Brade, Duncan, & Sokal, 2003). Having a strong sense of Aboriginal cultural identity is an important predictor of the academic achievement of Aboriginal youth in Canada and the United States (Brade et al., 2003). However, because most Aboriginal youth must navigate through an educational system that promotes mainstream cultural and social values, their Aboriginal identities and self-worth risk erosion when subject to *cognitive imperialism*. Battiste (2000b) defines cognitive imperialism as follows:

a form of cognitive manipulation to disclaim other knowledge bases and values...the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence...Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference. (p. 198)

Schools are primary sites of cognitive imperialism, particularly when teachers’ mainstream cultural customs impinge on students’ distinct traditions. Education is cognitive imperialism when, for example, Eurocentric values, philosophies, histories, and practices dominate instruction; Aboriginal histories are denied in schools or added as a footnote in history; and

⁴ In Canada, the term “Aboriginal” refers to all Indigenous people. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: (a) First Nation, or Indian, as defined by The Canadian Constitution Act, 1982, section 35. First Nation people are either status (registered with an Indian band or community) or non-status (not registered by are members of an Indian band or community); (b) The Métis, who, in the first instance, are descendants of European fur traders and First Nations women and; (c) Inuit are the Indigenous people of the North. These are three distinct peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs. There are more than one million people who identify themselves as an Aboriginal person and they live in urban, suburban, rural, and remote locations across Canada.

Indigenous content is marginalized or absent ([Battiste, 2008](#)). Aboriginal students need to see more of themselves represented in the curriculum and have their holistic and collectivist learning styles considered ([Kanu, 2002, 2011](#); [Toulouse, 2006, 2011](#)). While we do not believe that today's teacher consciously seeks to cognitively dominate any of her or his students, the colonial stance in schools, as described earlier, is unconsciously perpetuated by the fact that pre-service and in-service teachers currently have limited opportunities to learn about Indigenous pedagogies, ways of knowing, Aboriginal perspectives in historical and contemporary society, issues of power, theory, cognitive imperialism, and anti-oppressive education; moreover, they are not given opportunities to understand how to transform a Eurocentric curriculum, or understand why teachers should engage in such a transformation ([Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010](#); [Battiste, 2008](#); [Kanu, 2011](#)). As a result, an already marginalized Aboriginal youth population is further alienated from mainstream curriculum and schools.

High school attrition rates for Aboriginal youth are considerably higher than for non-Aboriginal⁵ youth. According to Statistics Canada ([2010](#)), the dropout rate among Aboriginal youth aged 20-24 was three times higher—22.6%, compared to 8.5% for non-Aboriginal people. A growing body of research demonstrates that Aboriginal students' positive notions of their cultural identity are critical to school success ([Toulouse, 2006](#)). Equally critical in the development and maintenance of positive Aboriginal cultural identities among Aboriginal youth are the quality of relationships between students and their teachers and support staff ([Russell, 1999](#)), as well as integration of culturally responsive teaching practices in mainstream curriculum ([Antone, 2003](#); [Brade et al., 2003](#); [Goulet, 2001](#); [Kanu, 2002](#); [Swanson, 2003](#)).

Engaging in Activist Research: Validating Aboriginal Identities in Schools

The general public often criticizes university-based researchers for living in an overly theoretical, isolated, metaphorical ivory tower, disconnected from the realities of “real” people living in the “real” world driven by marketplace economies; intellectual life is often viewed as an unaffordable luxury ([Bérubé & Nelson, 1995](#); [Giroux & Giroux, 2004](#); [Kyle, 2005](#); [Talbert & Salvio, 2005](#)). In response to this “crisis of legitimacy” there is a call for academics to act as public intellectuals ([Cantor & Levine, 2006](#); [Cohen & Eberly, 2006](#)) by extending the arms of research “to not only reach outside the university, but actually interact with the public beyond its walls” ([Cushman, 1999, p. 330](#)). Marc Renaud, President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1997-2005), was documented as having said that the “traditions of the university to ‘publish or perish’ have been globally tested and that the new agenda for universities will need to be ‘go public or perish’” ([Battiste, 2000a, p. xx](#)). One way researchers can “go public” and engage as public intellectuals is through activist research, a field largely

⁵ In this article, as the term suggests, non-Aboriginal denotes all other people living in Canada who are not Aboriginal—First Nation (status or non-status), Métis, or Inuit. This term is used to identify people who immigrated to Canada, either through distant or recent immigration and whose identities, languages, cultures, experiences and histories have not been colonized by “settlers.” Aboriginal, thereby, refers to the people, and their descendants, who were deeply rooted and had a settled Indigenous presence in Canada before contact (LaRoque, 2010). Aboriginal People have been directly implicated by colonial and imperial “policies of devastation” such as those that threatened and continue to threaten Aboriginal rights to education, child welfare, Aboriginal languages, identities, agriculture, land rights, and freedom of movement, for example (Episkenew, 2009). Aboriginal refers to “the thoughts and experiences of the people of the Earth whom Europeans have characterized as primitive, backward, and inferior—the colonized and dominated people of the last five centuries” (Battiste, 2000a, p. xvi). Non-Aboriginal refers to all others.

informed by critical theorists who formally call for social and cultural transformation (see for example, [Banks, 1993](#); [Freire, 1999/1970](#); [Gay, 2010](#); [hooks, 1994](#); [May & Sleeter, 2010](#)).

Both institutions as well as individuals have taken up the call to become public intellectuals and engage in scholarship. At the institutional level, one can find the emergence of many centers for public scholarship or public inquiry. See for example The Center for Service Learning and Community-Based Research at Penn State (<http://www.bk.psu.edu/academics/31728.htm>); Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a consortium of universities and organizations dedicated to advancing the public and civic purposes of the humanities, arts, and design (housed at Syracuse University <http://imaginingamerica.org>); and The Center for Public Scholarship at The New School, New York, NY (<http://www.newschool.edu/cps/>). At the individual level, publications have been produced to explore how research is created and used to create positive social change. For example, Paris and Winn (2014) compiled a collection of essays written by scholars in education on humanizing approaches to qualitative and ethnographic inquiry with youth and their communities; and Mutua and Swadener (2004) created a collection of texts that describe how scholars of color, and their allies, are the “colonized who feel the consequences of the Eurocentric, scientifically driven epistemologies in which issues of power and voice are drowned by the powerful ‘majority’ players reflecting the ‘masters’ ideology” (p. ix). The focus of public scholarship in general, and humanizing research specifically, is to “end a long history of colonizing approaches to research, policy, and practice in communities of color and other marginalized communities” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). Central to this type of scholarship is reciprocity of relationship building and dialogue that is carried out with dignity and respect.

Public scholarship, also viewed as activist research, is not limited to the study of “activists,” and it does not mean that activist researchers need be considered activists, either (Hale, 2001). Activist research can be viewed as a way to make the world a better place by engaging with practical problems whose solutions are of interest to a larger community (Calhoun, 2008). To this end, activist researchers align with a community’s common political goal or struggle and work toward social change by explicitly addressing the root causes of inequality, oppression, violence, and related conditions of human suffering (Cushman, 1999; Hale, 2001, 2006; McIntyre, 2006; Schechter & Ippolito, 2008). Essential to activist research are the notions of researcher reflexivity, dialogue and reciprocity. These features help ensure that a mutually beneficial relationship is developed and maintained among participants at all stages of the inquiry—“from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (Hale, 2006, p. 97).

Particularly when working with Indigenous peoples, “White” or “outsider” researchers, or those functioning from a Western paradigm, are often criticized for observing, recording, categorizing, and passing judgment for the colonial and imperial histories they bring to the research (Bishop, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 1999). Such stances reduce tribal knowledges, languages, and cultures to commodities and treat Indigenous Peoples as objects of investigation in order to further a Western research agenda without regard for those being studied (Bishop, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 1999). Research approaches congruent with the ethical and community dynamics of research with Indigenous peoples employ data collection methods that emphasize the development and maintenance of relationship in ways that encourage “participants to share their experiences on their terms” (Kovach, 2009). Addressing the importance of relationship in Indigenous research, Smith (2005) noted:

“[f]or Indigenous and other marginalized communities, research ethics is at a very basic level about establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships, not just among people as individuals, but also with people as individuals, as collectives, and as members of communities, and with humans who live in and with other entities in the environment” (p. 97).

Upholding such participatory values allows the essential characteristics of Indigenous research methodologies to emerge: *respect* of cultural integrity, *relevance* of perspectives and experience, *reciprocity* of relationships, and *responsibility* through participation ([Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991](#)).

As non-Aboriginal university researchers working with Aboriginal youth, the work is framed at the intersection of activist and Indigenous research methodologies, where reciprocity of intent and purpose, and dialogue are paramount. Kovach ([2009](#)) posited that although qualitative and Indigenous research methodologies share space within academic research dialogue, and policy and practice, they are distinguished in two fundamental ways: (a) Indigenous methodologies are guided by tribal epistemologies—the ways of knowing through the languages and cultures transmitted by the Elders; and (b) they “resist the culturally imbued constructs of the English language” (p. 30). We are, therefore, acutely aware that our research and practice is not, and cannot be, wholly Indigenous because of our limited primary knowledge of tribal epistemologies and Indigenous languages. However, all non-Aboriginal participants in the project are positioned as Aboriginal allies and commit to join the social movement that understands the critical role public education plays in healing Aboriginal youth from the brutal legacy of Indigenous colonization ([Toulouse, 2011](#)). Moreover, we recognize the significant role teachers play in creating equitable and inclusive classrooms for all children.

Framing literacy as a social practice ([Barton, 1994](#); [Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000](#); [Gee, 2012](#); [Street, 1995](#)), Holland and Skinner ([2008](#)) argue that the way people use literacy as part of social movements to effect social, cultural, and political change have received little attention. They suggest that the literacy activities (e.g., writing letters to politicians, informational newsletters to mobilize community members, blogs, twitter feeds, artistic murals etc.) can be viewed as artifacts of identity (re)formation that have a transformational power. The notion of activist literacies, therefore, can initially be defined as an examination of the way texts (broadly defined) are used to further social movements as connected to one’s community-based identities that encompass social, psychological and historical layers (see for example, [Holland & Skinner, 2008](#); [Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012](#)). Understanding the power inherent in Aboriginal identity texts is an important vehicle to help transform a school curriculum to respond to Aboriginal students’ social, emotional, and academic needs in a mainstream-centric school system. Identity texts showcase the intellectual, literary, and creative talents of Aboriginal youth, and in so doing, they challenge and repudiate the devaluation of student and community identities in most mainstream schools and in the wider society

Fundamental to our collective activist research is the understanding that educators must engage in authentic pedagogical practices, rooted in funds of knowledge ([Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992](#)) that serve to “affirm students’ identities as highly able individuals, with agency in their own learning and something of value to offer” ([Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 7](#)). As Cassandra emphatically noted, “Identity is by far the most important thing that anyone would have to be able to understand if wanting to have any connection with an Aboriginal student.” We sought to understand what happens when Aboriginal students are given the opportunity to

dialogue about their identities as part of a rigorous curriculum. In our work, we explored the way two First Nations senior high school students, Adam and Cassandra, dialogued about their Aboriginal identities throughout their visual and literary artistic experiences in the Native Arts and Culture course. By dialoguing about the identity texts they created, the students articulated deep and sophisticated understandings of what it means to be young First Nations adults living in an urban center. As noted by Cummins and Early (2011), “[t]he identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light” (p. 3).

Dialoguing about students’ visual and literary art proved to be an innovative and engaging way to explore what it means to place Aboriginal students’ identities at the center of the curriculum, as will be further articulated in the *Impact* section of this article. In this article, we detail how the identity texts helped students form concrete understandings of their life experiences as rooted in social, cultural, political, and historical understandings of their life stories. In particular, the students’ insights as mediated through visual and literary art helped them verbalize important focal points for their present and future lives. Insights into their experiences are detailed in terms of context, process, output, and impact.

Context

The Native Studies Program has existed at Four Directions (pseudonym) Secondary School, located in an urban center in Ontario, Canada, for nearly ten years. The program functions as part of the regular school day, offering credit courses related to Aboriginality. The courses, which are open to all students in grades 9 through 12, include the following: Expressing Aboriginal Cultures, Cultural and Aboriginal Issues in Canada, Issues of Indigenous Peoples, Native Studies Media Art, Aboriginal Teachings and Worldviews, Foods and Regalia, Contemporary Aboriginal Voices (English), and Ojibwe. In addition to culturally relevant programming, the Native Studies Program is connected to the Native Youth Advancement Program, funded through community, provincial, and federal grants, which offers Aboriginal students numerous services at the high school, including a nutrition program, academic assistance, access to tutors, social and personal counseling, cultural support services, access to technology, and organized culturally relevant events and activities.

The program does not assume that participating students have knowledge of their Aboriginal histories, ceremonies, languages, and cultures. In fact, many, if not most of the Aboriginal students participating in the program have grown up, to a large extent, in an urban environment, removed from Aboriginal communities. For many of these students, their life scripts were written under the highest levels of poverty in Canada, and many will be the first in their families to graduate from high school. Many have romanticized Reserve life as a place of refuge; while at the same time, they have not even visited the Reserve that lies within a 30-minute drive from their urban center. These students represent a melting pot of Nations: from the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations to the Anishinaabe of Wikwemikong or Moose-Cree. Common to all of the students is that they have a deep hunger for a sense of place as they connect to, discover, and rediscover their Aboriginal roots. Adam confirms this hunger:

I grew up in Toronto all my life. I was raised by my mother’s [White] family. My father left me before I was born, so I knew nothing about my [First Nations] culture. I knew I was First Nations. I knew I was Native. Coming to this school and the amazing Native program here has helped me find who I am.

The program works to affirm students' Aboriginal roots through, for example, the study of Aboriginal authors, playwrights, poets, and musicians; singing, dancing, and drumming; learning about the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Wisdom, Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Humility Truth); engaging in literary and visual art, including painting, videography, 'zine projects, and print-making. The students are provided with opportunities to discover and re-discover their ancestral roots and express what they have to say about the land, environment, culture, and politics of the urban spaces they occupy.

Process

The community-engaged project, titled *Songide'ewin* (translation from Ojibwe: Strength of the Heart): *Aboriginal Narratives* was carried out through consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal secondary students and their teachers, and teacher education candidates. Collectively, we wanted to find ways to bring Aboriginal youth and non-Aboriginal pre-service teachers together to learn about each other in a non-hierarchical manner. Initially, the idea was to have the pre-service teachers engage the students in audio-recorded oral history interviews, but because the Elders perceived this idea to approximate colonial research stances, we agreed to learn from each other through a painting experience where the hierarchical relationship of student and teacher was minimized—we all became students and teachers of art.

As part of the Native Arts and Culture course, Elder Rene Meshake⁶, Ojibwe artist, author, storyteller, and community activist, facilitated an exploration of Aboriginal worldviews, teachings, and expressions of identity using symbols, stories, colors, and cadence with acrylic paints on canvas. A non-hierarchical dialogic space was created so that in the artistic silences, all artists could reflect on their deepest spirits and souls, allowing for their true, uncensored selves to appear on canvas. Students conceptualized and created paintings through which they explored different aspects of their cultural, linguistic, and/or musical heritages. For example, students explored the meaning and significance of symbols representing their clans (e.g., Bear, Wolf, Turtle), their vision of the Creation Story, or other important cultural artifacts (e.g., Eagle Feather, Beaded Headdress, Flying Eagle). Adam described the painting experience as follows:

Making the painting was just pure fun. We started with a blank canvas and put some modeling paste on it, here and there, on random areas. Then we put this brown stuff [burnt umber wash] over the canvas to accent the silly putty stuff and automatically the eagle jumped out [to me]. I'd be working on my painting, then I'd jump over to another table, come back to my table and [get feedback from Rene], then he'd run over to another guy. [Rene] was everywhere and anywhere. It was just a lot of fun with Rene.

Rene, a self-taught artist, had a significant presence in the classroom. He encouraged students to paint, but did not impose his ideas or structure on any person. He began working with the students by briefly telling them about Medicine paintings (pictographs at Agawa Canyon) and referring to the Teaching Rocks (petroglyphs) located northeast of Peterborough, Ontario. He talked about the stories that one tells through art and how one must surrender to the unknown when creating artistic compositions. After we each swirled and stroked modeling paste on to our

⁶ More information about Rene Meshake's professional work can be found at <http://www3.sympatico.ca/renemeshake/>

canvases, he encouraged us to view the images created through different angles and positions of light. He encouraged us to “listen” to the paintings and find ways to add colors and textures that would enable others to hear what the paintings had to say. Rene had a relaxed demeanor. He told students his stories—stories of his personal struggles with his own Aboriginal identity resulting from years of being told his Native words, arts, writings, and music were *dirty, evil, and pagan* by those who ran the Residential School he attended as a child. He also talked about how he began to rediscover his Aboriginality through the teachings of the Medicine Wheel and through art. Students listened to Rene as they painted. They paused to ask questions, and they responded to his stories through their own artistic creations.

Following the painting experience, a different group of students enrolled in an eleventh grade, open enrollment Aboriginal English course were invited to respond to a painting of their choice from an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1994) by paying specific attention to the feelings and ideas evoked during their interaction with the painting. These feelings and ideas laid the foundation for written responses. Through these organized activities, project participants invested their identities to create literary and artistic works, or *identity texts* (Cummins & Early, 2011). The artistic process and ensuing reflections created opportunities for participants to discover, imagine, recognize, and name their identities in concrete ways.

Output

Close to 50 Aboriginal identity texts—paintings and poetic responses—were created and displayed in three Ontario art galleries between May 2012 and April 2013. The art gallery exhibits were an important way to communicate to the students that their work was valued beyond the confines of school. At the inaugural exhibition at The Robert Langen Art Gallery in Waterloo on May 22, 2012, students were invited to an opening reception to celebrate their creations. When students saw their work hanging in the art gallery they were impressed, to say the least. Adam was quoted in *The Cord* newspaper, as saying:

It’s overwhelming...I didn’t think it would come to be in a gallery like this and I had no clue it would be this big. The paintings are all so beautiful and seeing them like this in a gallery is just, “Whoa!” (Fauteux, 2012).



Figure 1: Interior view of *Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives* Art Exhibit at The Robert Langen Art Gallery, Waterloo, Canada, May 22, 2012. Photo credit: M. Kristiina Montero

Once the excitement of public recognition subsided, students were interviewed to explore their experiences when asked to create self-expressions of their Aboriginality. Intuitively, we knew

that the visual and literary artistic processes had an impact on the students, but it was not until we had open conversations with the students that the depth of the experiences was exposed. It is important to note that the process of creating the visual and literary art took well over a year. During this time, we developed relationships with the students—we took time to talk with students, paint with them, and write with them. When it came time to interview the students on film, they trusted us to respect their cultural integrity as we had already demonstrated that we valued their perspectives and experiences, and that our intention was to give back to them as individuals and as a larger community. We spent time talking to all students individually and in a group where everyone could freely participate.

To further investigate the impact of placing identity texts at the center of the curriculum, we used methods of thematic narrative analysis ([Riessman, 1993, 2003, 2008](#)) to listen more carefully to what Adam and Cassandra had to say about their Aboriginal identities. We were interested in the first-person accounts of the experiences related to identity exploration resulting from a school-based project devoted to Aboriginality and interested in the content of Cassandra and Adam's narratives and the sense they made of their individual and/or collective Aboriginal identities. Because we were interested in the content of their stories, we transformed the 'messiness' of spoken language to make the stories more easily read, a practice consistent with thematic narrative analysis ([Riessman, 2008](#)). To acknowledge and respect the co-creation of the narratives, and the experiences created beforehand, it was appropriate for both Cassandra and Adam to be co-authors on this paper. They were involved in creating the visual and literary art, debriefed their experiences with us, and participated in verifying the data and its representation. Next, we present Adam and Cassandra's identity stories and in keeping with narrative practice, we theorize from the cases rather than from component themes across cases ([Riessman, 2008](#)) in the *Impact* section of this article.

Adam's Identity Story: An Invocation of the Subconscious to Canvas.

Next is an image of Adam's painting, *Eagle Flying* (Figure 2). Next, Adam presents his reflection on the painting and how he understands his First Nations identity.



Figure 2: Adam Marsh, *Eagle Flying*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12.
Photo credit: M. Kristiina Montero

When I was making the painting, I thought a lot about myself. I have a lot of self-identity problems, as most people know. *I have a lot of self-identity problems.* I put a lot of that into this

painting. [Making the painting and reflecting on its significance] has changed my life pretty much. How I look at everything now and how I think of things—[I have] a different perspective.

I was originally going to put a bear on the painting. I was going to somehow work on making a bear, but it didn't work out that way. When making the painting, I started with a blank canvas. I put modeling paste on the canvas in random areas, let it dry, and painted the area with a burnt umber wash that highlighted the peaks and valleys of the modeling paste. When I came back the next day, there was an eagle sitting on the canvas. Nobody else saw it, but I saw an eagle. The eagle immediately jumped out just like it was taking off.

My painting has to do with my father not being there. I didn't know who he was. I don't know who he is. I am kind of lost without him, because I don't know who he is. There is a barren part of my picture that looks really warm and peaceful, but at the same time it is unsettled. There are veins in the tree to represent that there is always life in something, even if it doesn't appear to be alive—the tree looks dead, but it isn't.

This painting is spiritual and emotional for me. There is so much spirituality in my painting—the color purple represents my spirituality. The eagle—it is the highest-flying bird, and we use its feathers during our ceremonies. I was recently at a Powwow, and the first thing used in the dance is the eagle staffs. Those are the colors that were carried across lands. We didn't have light back then—we had eagle staffs, and the eagle staffs had eagle feathers. We use eagle feathers because they are the smartest of animals, and they carry our messages up to our Creator. It seems that everywhere I go there is always something to do with an eagle. I think the eagle might be my spiritual guide, totem animal, clan animal, and spiritual helper. I think the eagle might be mine because there is so much in my life that has to do with the eagle. It is always there to help me. So, there is a lot of spirituality with the eagle on the painting.

Cassandra's Identity Story: One's Light is Another's Darkness.

The second example highlights the poem titled "See What You Choose" that Cassandra wrote in response to the painting titled *Unity* (Figure 3), a collective painting created by Eric Flemming, the Native Arts and Culture teacher, and his students.



Figure 3: Eric Flemming and the Songide'ewin Community Artists, *Unity*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12. Photo credit: M. Kristiina Montero

Cassandra was initially attracted to this painting because of the representation of fingerprints on the turtle's back. Her initial reaction to the painting was as follows:

I felt very strongly about [this painting]. I didn't really know why, but I just had a feeling, and I said, "This is really important," and I began to dig deeper. I said, "I am going to choose this [painting]....because it gives off this feeling of being together, and no matter where you come from, you are welcomed from proud and powerful pasts." I felt [that emotion] in the painting even before I started writing... [The painting] was [created] around the Medicine Wheel, together, collectively working around issues that we're having between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. It was in a circle, and how all of our fingerprints were there, counted together equal. That was the most amazing thing.

In response to this painting, Cassandra wrote the poem "See What You Choose" (Figure 4). Her reflection follows the poem.

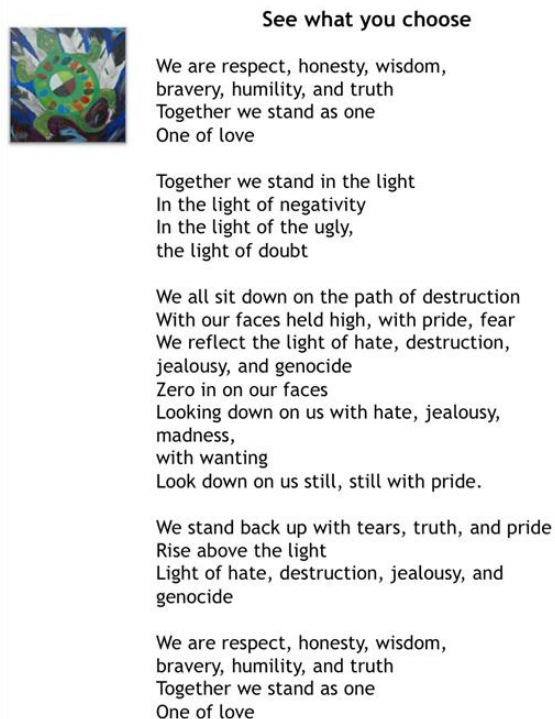


Figure 4: "See What You Choose," Cassandra Bice-Zaugg, 2012.

It was an amazing process to see and feel all of these powerful emotions through the painting. I had to dig deep and work through the emotions and feelings I was experiencing. I know that those around me had to do their own work around the effects of Residential Schools, drugs and alcohol, and identity issues. How do you put all those things together? It was really difficult. However, *the process helped me develop whom I thought I was born to be*. I was able to verbalize that if I am able to say "*I know who I am,*" then my kids will be able to do the same, as will their children, their children's children, and so on and so forth. I am comforted to think that if I know who I am and find strength in my First Nations identity, I will help my future generations stay away from drugs and alcohol, for example. If I hadn't created this poem and

written down my experiences, then I don't know that I would be able to ensure a solid future for my successive generations.

In the beginning of the poem, I talk about respect, honesty, wisdom, bravery, humility, and truth, standing together as one, one of love. This is how I see my ancestors—very strong. They built their families on a firm foundation, and they made sure their children knew who they were. This was before the settlers, before confederation.

Then I write about standing in the light, the lights of the negativity. A lot of people view the light as God, heavenly. I decided to take a different approach on the metaphor of light. When the Canadian government first introduced the Indian Act in 1876, its members thought that they were doing a good thing—that was their light. However, change the perspective and view the Indian Act from our perspective—their light was our negativity, our darkness. Their light was and is our pain. Since colonization, multiple generations have been destroyed and have identity problems that cause many to numb the pain with drugs and alcohol. That is where I saw the light as I was writing the poem. My perception of light changed. It turned into how I felt I was looked down upon as a First Nations person. Under the Indian Act, just because I have a number, because I have status, I am more likely to go to jail or be incarcerated than graduate from high school. As soon as I was labeled, a multitude of statistics began to bombard me. It was difficult for me to see that *their* light was taking *my* people, flipping us upside down, moving us around, and telling us how to define ourselves, how we should act, and what we should look like. As I continued to write the poem, I explained that we reflect the light of the hate, destruction, jealousy and genocide—the effects of Residential Schools. My grandmother is a Residential School survivor; she is a real trooper. She didn't let that experience break her, and this is something very important for me to remember.

When I write, “we stand back up with our tears, truth, and pride,” I want to say that we, as an Aboriginal people, didn't give up. We are still here, standing strong, and getting stronger. It's amazing to think that our people have survived through all of this negativity and still were able to stand back up with their pain and sadness and vow that such atrocities would never again be repeated. The poem's conclusion is a tribute to all future generations: the need to connect to our ancestors' spirits before the times of Residential Schools, get in touch with our inner selves and our true identities in order to know what it means to be a First Nations person and live that with pride. We will be less likely to drink and do drugs, because we know who we are and don't need substances to numb our pain. It is important to know where you come from, know your past, and know who you are today. Take away identity and what do you have?—the effects of residential schools.

Impact

Cummins and Early (2011) noted that “when students share their identity texts with multiple audiences...they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences” (p. 3). In our project, students had many opportunities to share their work with multiple audiences and, therefore, had many opportunities to receive positive feedback about their work. When the students received positive feedback, we believe it enabled them to continue reflecting on and talking about the personal significance of their work. In addition, opportunities to answer questions and engage in dialogues about their identity texts helped the students to solidify their thinking and learning. Purposeful dialogue about the identity texts also created a

space for students to tell stories—actual, fictional, or hypothetical—about their lived experiences and reflect on them as a way to plan their futures.

Such insights have implications for teaching. While teachers are creative in their practices and will present students with innovative and creative assignments, many will, however, often stop at the output of the assignment—the final products—and fail to debrief the value of the work with the students due to curricular and time constraints. Because the students invested so much of their identities in these assignments, it is imperative that members of the community listen to their perceptions of the process, product, and impact of an identity assignment. In fact, it was dialogue that encouraged both Adam and Cassandra to discover nuances of their identity stories.

As we continued to reflect on the artistic experiences that resulted in rich Aboriginal identity texts, three salient themes emerged. These themes helped us understand the significance of placing Aboriginal identities at the center of the curriculum: (a) reflection and articulation of historical consciousness; (b) agency in a complex lifeworld; and (c) acknowledging Aboriginal Ancestors. We offer these insights in the hope that they will help shape and define future pedagogical practice, particularly when creating identity texts with Aboriginal youth.

Reflection and Articulation of Historical Consciousness

Identity texts provide students with opportunities to explore the way individual histories are connected to their *historical consciousness* (Seixas, 2006, 2004)—the way one looks at the past as one defines present and future lives. In this case, the Aboriginal identity texts provided a space for Adam and Cassandra to understand that history does not have to dictate the future. Both Adam and Cassandra identified how their understanding of the past impacts how they view their current and future lives, insights that help them take charge of their futures.

Adam for example, talked about his personal life history, explaining how his Aboriginal identity development was stalled because his First Nations birth father was not part of his childhood or adolescence. This absence contributed to the self-acknowledged identity problems he experienced and has had to deal with throughout his life. Adam searches for guides, which he finds within the spirit of the Eagle and its feathers—a clarity communicated to him through his painting and subsequent reflections.

Cassandra, on the other hand, reflects deeply about how she views herself within the larger details of Aboriginal history, particularly in relation to settlers' dominance and oppression of Aboriginal People in Canada. In her poetic narrative, she alters the metaphor of light, which is often used in literature to connote a positive image, to highlight sophisticated concepts of Aboriginal othering, oppression, and the impact of colonization—"change the perspective and view the Indian Act from our perspective—their light was our negativity, our darkness. Their light was and is our pain."

Agency in a Complex Lifeworld

As both Adam and Cassandra reflected on their identity texts, each articulated how insights into their lifeworlds would help shape their futures. Specifically, Adam realized that the Eagle, the highest flying bird that carries prayers and messages directly to the Creator, is his spiritual guide. He places faith in the spiritual guide to help him come to accept that his father is not in his day-to-day life, but that he has the right and deep desire to embrace his Aboriginal heritage and

understand the meaning of being a First Nations young person. Cassandra focused on being able to understand “who I am” in order to create a solid foundation for herself and her future generations. She explicitly expressed that she does not want her future generations to have the same feelings of isolation with respect to identity as she has felt. In order for her to accomplish this goal, she has committed to learning more about Aboriginal history, law, and traditions so that when her future children ask her about their ancestors, she will be able demonstrate how to live proudly as a First Nations person. She expressed her desire to understand the impact of colonization, the legacy of Residential Schools, and to rise above the thick fog of colonization. She is beginning to more clearly define her oppression and, in doing so, understand its potential impact on her life and carve a path to change the trajectory of her people from a legacy of oppression to future not defined by doomsday-type statistics.

Acknowledging Aboriginal Ancestors

Essential to Aboriginal worldview and teachings is the deep connection to all those who come before and after a lifetime and includes all things (living or not) in Mother Earth and Father Sky. Adam, for example, talked about how his identity is rooted in the traditions of his First Nations People; he expressed his desire to connect to the life worlds of his People before the time of colonization, recognizing that the demise of his People began during contact. He understands that his present and future will involve forming a deep understanding of the Aboriginal heritage inherited from his birth father. Moreover, being connected to his ancestors gives Adam the strength to negotiate his future goals. Cassandra’s understanding of her identity is deeply connected to her Grandmother, who is a Residential School survivor, as well as to her future children.

Epilogue

The experience of creating visual and literary Aboriginal identity texts and dialoguing about them has had lasting impacts on each of us. Next, we present brief statements how this project has created, recreated, and validated our identities as Aboriginal people and allies.

Cassandra

This experience gave me a gift of poetry. I started to develop a passion for poetry during this project. I didn’t know I had this passion. Since this project I have written and shared many pieces of poetry. My identity story is a representation of how I feel, what I think, what I believe to be true. My story has meaning for me, but may mean something different to another reader. What the poem means to me now isn’t necessarily what it meant when I wrote it and probably won’t have the same meaning in the future. Our life experiences dictate how we interpret texts. It is a wonderful feeling to share a talent that others appreciate, understand, and encourage. It’s so important for adults to help young people recognize their gift. Participating in this project was like hearing a collective voice telling me: “We are proud of you. We care about you. You have a future.” Being able to express my thoughts about who I am as an *Anishinaabekwe* (an Ojibwe woman) made me feel like I belonged and was connected to a larger community. It showed me that a Native student could sit and chat with a university professor without shame. Others might have the feeling of being looked down upon because they don’t have the same education and feel negativity. This showed me that there are people who are invested in us and want to help us succeed. I understand now that we all have gifts to share with each other and from those gifts we can learn with and from one another.

Adam

I want to be connected to my traditional First Nations roots. I sing my songs, I drum my drums, and I dance my dances in order to stay connected to my traditions. I am becoming more and more rooted in my identity as a strong Ojibwe man and part of that journey is coming to terms with who my father was (or was not) in my life. I know that the spirit of the Eagle guides my journey.

Kristiina

Working with Aboriginal youth and learning about the importance of their identities has allowed me to name the immense regret I feel about Canada's role in the desecration of the beautiful histories, languages, and cultures of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people. At the start of the project, I remember driving to Four Directions Secondary School to meet with the art teacher and community Elders to discuss the design of the project and experiencing an overwhelming need to apologize—to apologize for my ignorance, lack about knowledge Canada's First People. I realized that the dark cloud of colonialism negatively impacts Aboriginal people—physically, spiritually, and emotionally—but, it also clouds the lives of those whose home is Canada because of recent or distant immigration. We were robbed of the beauty of Aboriginal People's worldviews and teachings. Within my identity story, I feel like I have a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary issues connecting Aboriginal People of Canada as well as those that cause dissonance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Because I am able to name some of the sources of oppression and understand how they play out in institutions of formal schooling, I can play a role in creating a more inclusive learning environment for Aboriginal students. As I learn and grow, my identity is now shaped by the richness of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples.

Jim

As I listened to Rene, Adam, Cassandra, and their classmates in the Native Studies program talk with insight and passion about their paintings and poems, and later read through the transcripts, I was profoundly moved. Their creative work certainly connected with and rooted itself in the oppression their communities have endured over centuries at the hands of the Canadian government, with the collusion of Canadians more generally, but the themes that they articulated were not ones of oppression and racism but of emergence, regeneration, and empowerment, understood as the collaborative creation of power. Power was being created in an additive way as students interacted with Elders; it grew within students as their high school studies enabled and encouraged them to view their histories, experiences and the wider society through an Aboriginal lens; their identity texts, understood as both process and product, not only expressed their identities, these texts enabled their identities to be projected into new social spheres (art galleries, university classrooms), and in the process they acted as a catalyst for the re-creation of students' identities. Their private voices, in the past frequently expressed only as whispers, have gone public. Just as the *Idle No More* movement of Aboriginal resistance to Canadian government policies has occupied public spaces during the past year, the identity texts created in the context of the Native Studies program illustrate how Aboriginal voices can make themselves heard once again in Canadian classrooms. During the past 30 years, I have frequently reacted with disgust as Canadian politicians wrap themselves in the cloak of "multiculturalism" and, in the process, erase the ugly history of racism against Aboriginal peoples and other groups that is intrinsic to the Canadian narrative. Schools have a major role to play in uncovering and exposing the

hypocrisies of official discourses and injecting issues of power and identity back into the core of education. Educators and policy-makers might do well to listen to Cassandra as she says: *Take away identity and what do you have? If you have a student that doesn't know who they are, do you think they care about what goes on in the classroom?*

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