Decolonizing Reflexive Practice Through Photo Essay *Aisinai'pi Storying Place*

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Blackfoot terminologies in the title and photo descriptions are provided by Elder Anita Eagle Bear.

Abstract

In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, universities across Canada are currently exploring ways to decolonize and indigenize their institutions and curriculum. The profession of social work has had an historical and ongoing role in the oppression of Indigenous Peoples, and now has the responsibility to advance and integrate Indigenous worldviews for reconciliation and healing. Storytelling has been described as an embodiment of Indigenous knowledges and validates the experiences of Indigenous Peoples. Although traditional stories have been most often shared orally, visual methods of storytelling have gained popularity among oppressed communities as a way to share their realities. This photo essay project was developed as a tool to guide social work educators and students to decolonize their reflexive practice by reflecting on their personal and professional identities in relationship to *place*. The photo essay presents a series of images evoking stories of original peoples and settlers on this land and fuels important questions about identity and belongingness.

Keywords: Decolonization, reflexive practice, photography, storytelling

Decolonizing Reflexive Practice Through Photography

Arising from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC, 2015) Calls to Action to create a culturally relevant learning environment (Grey, Coates, & Yellowbird, 2008), post-secondary institutions in Canada are tasked with the process to decolonize and indigenize the delivery of their curriculum (Kerr, 2016; MacDonald, 2016). Decolonization and indigenization seek to counter the domination of Euro-settler narratives and ideas (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999) by transforming the academy to include "Indigenous knowledges, voices, critiques, scholars, students and materials" (Pete, 2016, p. 81). A fundamental first step in this journey is developing and/or deepening the understanding of Indigenous worldviews among educators and students.

While many academic disciplines are charged with the responsibility of teaching Indigenous worldviews, social work, as a consequence of its historical and ongoing role in the

oppression of Indigenous Peoples (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015) and its stated aim of the pursuit of social justice (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), is further implicated, and consequently must head the call to advance and integrate Indigenous worldviews for reconciliation and healing.

Numerous approaches have been proposed to educate social work students about Indigenous worldviews (Chartrand, 2012; Nabigon & Wenger-Nabigon, 2012; Peters, 2013; Sinclair, 2004; Walsh, Van Patten, St-Denis, & Jerome, in press). Yip (2006) outlines that reflective practice is a critical approach in social work education that engages students to reflect on “the influence of societal and ideological assumptions, especially ethical and moral beliefs behind professional practice” (p. 777), which provides a stepping stone to transform “practice by challenging existing social, political and cultural conditions” (p. 778). Indeed, reflexivity has been identified as a necessary pre-condition for effective clinical practice with Indigenous Peoples (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011; Rix, Barclay, & Wilson, 2014), and central to reflexive practice is understanding one’s identity and belongingness. Anthias (2016) explains:

Belonging is always in relation to something outside the self (a place – in the social as well as geographical sense – and is therefore always ‘located’), while identity has been used more as a possessive characteristic of the individual, as that which defines ‘who they are’ or ‘who they think they are’ as well as entailing the construction of bonds with ‘similar’ others. (p. 177)

Social work educators have a responsibility to teach future social work practitioners to understand their biases as deeply rooted in their histories, beliefs, values and traditions. The aim of the educational strategy we present in this article is to facilitate students to both suspend judgment and to open their minds and hearts to other ways of knowing, specifically Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. As well, this practice encourages students to develop a greater understanding of the devastating and ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous Peoples. Future social workers must become aware of how belonging and identity “raise the question about boundaries of ‘difference’ and ‘identity’ and also relate to how people are placed hierarchically, i.e. within societal systems of resource allocation and inequality” (Anthias, 2016, p. 181).

In most social work programs, students are asked to engage in reflexive practice by journaling (Heron, 2005). In this paper, we offer another approach – a visual method through photo story – to evoke self-reflection in an experiential group setting. As a method, storytelling aligns with our ultimate aim towards decolonization and reconciliation in that it is congruent with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Storytelling has been described as an embodiment of Indigenous knowledges, as a way to transmit knowledge from one generation to another, and validates the experiences of Indigenous Peoples (Archibald, 2008; Bird, Wiles, Okalik, Kilabuk, & Egleand, 2009; Iseke, 2013; Kovach, 2009). Visual methods of storytelling have gained popularity among oppressed communities as way to share their own stories (Iseke & Moore, 2011). Photography humanizes social conditions by engaging viewers into a relational experience with the images (Russell & Diaz, 2011), and has been used intentionally to bring attention to the process of meaning-making in educating social work students and practitioners by exposing “one’s own thinking, theorizing, and emotions” (Phillips & Bellinger, 2011, p. 92).

Storytelling connects both the teller and the listener/viewer into a circle of engagement, reflection, and meaning-making. While most often oral, storytelling is an experiential way of knowing and of experiencing the world (Heron, 1981) that can be mediated through other art forms (Walsh, Shier, Sitter, & Sieppert, 2010). Art is a significant conduit for knowing as it provides an avenue for “hard to-put-into words aspects of knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or ignored” (Weber, 2008, p. 44). Indeed, a series of interrelated photographs that tell a story “gradually reveal possible interpretations and meanings with sufficient clarity to outline the idea or line of reasoning” (Marin & Roldan, 2010, p. 13). In that process of meaning-making, students can explore their identity and belongingness in relation to the images (Walsh, Casselman, Hickey, Lee, & Pliszka, 2015), and begin to understand “how storytelling is a way to co-construct histories, empowering peoples and shaping the world” (Peralta, 2010, p. 25).

In this visual essay we share one such example. Our journey takes us to *Mohkinstsis*, the Blackfoot word for elbow, the land where the Bow and Elbow Rivers meet, Treaty 7 territory, home to the Blackfoot Confederacy. We (the first two authors) took over 400 photographs over a number of outings in January 2017 while exploring the City of Calgary in Alberta, Canada as *place*. We then compiled this work into a video document which was shared with Anita Eagle Bear, a Blackfoot Elder, who provided an additional layer of interpretation. In this photo essay, we used photographs to evoke reflections on identity and belonging as it relates to *place*, and to consider historical and ongoing ideas about (re)presentation and (dis)settlement on this land, a place we now call Canada. Examining stories of original peoples and settlers fuels important questions about identity and belongingness, and its implication within the social work profession.

Locating Ourselves

I Christine Walsh am a white, feminist, settler who collaborates with Indigenous Peoples on community-based action-oriented research. I undertake this work from my personal moral stance and my professional discipline’s imperative of social justice, and as an apology in an effort to redress “white expert” colonial dynamics. My profession is not benign in the oppression of Indigenous Peoples; it has historically and continues to contribute to the oppression of Indigenous Peoples. As an ally and activist, I hope my work can counter these forces.

I Natalie St-Denis, also Mistahaya Maskwa Iskewew (*Grizzly Bear Woman* in Cree), am of Acadian and Québécois heritage with Mi’kmaq and Mohawk ancestry. Although I live in Blackfoot Territory, my tribal knowledge is rooted in Sioux-Cree teachings and ceremony; I am also an *oskâpêwis* (*helper* in Cree) to my Elders and community. In my journey as a social worker and PhD student, I am continually exploring ways to decolonize social work practice, education and research (St-Denis & Walsh, 2016; St-Denis & Walsh, 2017). I strive to support – in a good way – all my relations in their journey of healing, resistance and resurgence.

I Anita Eagle Bear, also known as Kakatoo’saki (*Star Woman* in Blackfoot) am a member of the Kainai Nation and a lifetime member of the sacred Blackfoot Societies. I enjoy serving the community by providing language classes as well as sharing cultural knowledge. I am an alumni of the University of Lethbridge, where I received a Bachelor of Management. I am former Vice President of Red Crow Community College, Executive Director of St. Paul Treatment Centre, and the Siksika Medicine Lodge. I am a mother of three children, grandmother of seven, and a great-grandmother of one child.

Decolonizing Reflexive Practice

In our photo essay we have compiled more than 60 images, which we use to engage participants in reflection, sharing and meaning-making. While the images are presented serially, the meanings and interpretations are complex and typically overlap, interconnect, and build into layered stories. We employ an Indigenous knowledge framework to orient students to Indigenous histories and current realities centered on *place*. In contrasting Western and Indigenous worldviews, we encourage students to understand *place* as highly nuanced, complex, and contextualized. It is through the course of reflection, knowledge sharing and the use of guiding questions that we urge the viewer to reimagine. This experiential activity is intended to enhance social work students' knowledge and insights as a means of beginning the process of decolonizing their own practice.

For the purpose of this paper, we have selected eight images to demonstrate the process of storytelling through a series of photographs. While gathered together in a talking circle, we pose key questions with each image to further extend the internal dialogue and opportunities for self-reflection. Our aim in engaging students in a talking circle is to facilitate a deeper understanding of students' individual and collective identities, and shared stories. A talking circle, from an Indigenous perspective, is very sacred and represents the interconnectedness of all entities, as Running Wolf and Rickard (2003) explain:

Traditionally, many Native American communities have used the talking circle as a way of bringing people of all ages together for the purpose of teaching, listening and learning. [...] This method of education instilled respect for another's viewpoint and encouraged members to be open to other viewpoints by listening with their heart while another individual speaks. (p. 39)

Participants in the talking circle can choose to discuss any insights, feelings, or raise questions that may have emerged for them, or remain silent. The talking circle is also used to bring forward elements of reconciliation within and between individuals, which we see as both necessary and foundational for reconciliation. Reconciliation is about developing trust and respect through open and honest conversations to restore balance in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples living on this land (TRC, 2015).

We use the photo essay, investigating the City of Calgary as *place*, as a means of invoking feelings and thoughts about self and identity. Lynch's (1960) groundbreaking investigation of city as *place*, sets the stage for our inquiry, as he explains: "At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings" (p. 1).

Figure 1. Na'aa (*Mother Earth*).

Figure 1 invites students to consider *place* through an historical lens. Using this image, we aim to disrupt pre-conceived notions of Calgary as a fixed entity. Instead, we focus on different realities. Adopting an Indigenous worldview, we see Mother Earth and the sky as dominating the image with the Rocky Mountains in the background. The opening statements of the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth, enacted in 2010 Cochabamba, Bolivia, acknowledges that Mother Earth “is the source of life, nourishment and learning and provides everything we need to live well” (para. 2). This image also captures time as immemorial, transcending *place* which remains fixed in time.

Students are asked to imagine this land as an historical *place*. Key questions to consider: How do you understand Calgary as place? Who originally occupied this land? How do you understand Indigenous Peoples’ relationship to land? What does ownership and belonging mean in capitalist societies in contrast to Indigenous societies? How do Euro-centric societies and Indigenous societies understand Mother Earth?

Figure 2. Oah’kii (*Water*).

In Figure 2, we invite the viewer to consider the connection between water and life. From an Indigenous worldview, water is a living entity imbued with spirit, a life-giving force to be protected and nurtured as it is central to sustaining life through its natural and medicinal properties. Through conversations with Elders, LaBoucane-Benson et al. (2012) were gifted with teachings about the sacredness of water, and the need to respect water:

...water is regarded with reverence because it is connected to the people’s relationship with the Creator, and it is perceived as a sacred being – a Grandmother in the spirit world, with whom we are to be in relationship. As the Elders described, “water is a very, very powerful element, [a] grandmother and I think if we look at her that way, learn to respect her that way, then we will have life for our children.” (p. 7)

In considering how the natural world connects with human life, students are asked to ponder key questions, such as: What are your beliefs about life-giving forces? According to Indigenous worldviews how are humans and other sentient beings interconnected? How are concepts of sustenance, sustainability and stewardship manifested in Western societies and in Indigenous societies?

Figure 3. Pa'tapiysin (*Life Cycles*).

This photograph depicts how the land is connected to the cycles of life, death and rebirth. It also identifies the role of land as medicine to heal and support mino-pimatisiwin, the good life. Koithan and Farrell (2010) explain the role of medicine within Indigenous societies:

For thousands of years, traditional indigenous medicines have been used to promote health and wellbeing for millions of Native people who once inhabited this continent. Native diets, ceremonies that greet the seasons and the harvests, and the use of native plants for healing purposes have been used to live to promote health by living in harmony with the earth. (n.p.)

Students are asked to reflect on this image and life cycles and consider key questions: What does health and wellness mean to you? What are Western concepts of medicine? What promotes health and wellness? How do Western philosophies portray the cycle of life? How do you understand Indigenous Peoples' worldview of land and wellbeing (spiritual, physical, mental and physical) as interconnected? What does it mean to live in harmony with the land?

Figure 4. Ihkanai'tapstiwa (*Interconnectedness*).

Figure 4 invites students to reflect on the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities. From an Indigenous perspective all entities are sacred and imbued with spirit, including the four legged, the trees, grass, and snow. As Absolon (2010) articulates: “Indigenous worldviews teach people to see themselves humbly within a larger web or circle of life” (p. 81). Indigenous knowledges come from the physical and spiritual realms, from the ancestors and the land, through storytelling, teachings, songs, dreams and ceremonies. Absolon (2010) further explicates:

Indigenous knowledge is earth centered with ecology-based philosophies derived out of respect for the harmony and balance within all living beings of creation. Indigenous knowledge occupies itself with the past, present and future. The past guides our present and in our present we must consider the generations to come. (p. 81)

Students are asked to consider the meaning of interconnectedness and consider the following questions: What is the connection between spirituality and the environment within your worldview? How do you understand the notion of all entities to be interconnected and interdependent? How can you acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in your social work practice when supporting Indigenous Peoples?

Figure 5. Napi Kowaaks Ootsi'tootohp (*When the white man came*).

Figure 5 depicts the railroad bisecting the land, symbolizing the invasion of White settlers and the colonization and genocide of Indigenous Peoples. Little Bear (2000) reveals the aim of colonization as a force which “tries to maintain a singular social order by means of force and law, suppressing the diversity of human worldviews. [...] Typically, this proposition creates oppression and discrimination” (p. 77). As an example of the repercussions of colonialism, Daschuk (2013) explains that in order to build the railway from coast to coast, the government used starvation politics to displace Indigenous communities onto reserves. He further explicates that:

For many on reserves, the railway proved to be a fatal disease vector. In short order, mortality of the synergy of chronic tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, especially measles and influenza, brought the indigenous populations of the Canadian plains to its demographic nadir. (p. 164)

In reflecting upon this image, students are asked to imagine how the railroad brought significant changes for Indigenous Peoples who inhabited this land prior to the occupation by settler-colonials. Key questions to frame this discussion include: What have been some of the disrupting forces in your life (that of your family/community)? How have these impacted you (your family/community)? How have Indigenous Peoples been impacted by colonization, both historically and currently? What are the oppressive, discriminating forces that have been enacted on Indigenous Peoples?

Figure 6. Nitsitapi'paataa piysin (*Ways of knowing*).

Figure 6 depicts Calgary's modern cityscape in juxtaposition with a traditional Medicine Wheel located on Nose Hill Park, built in 2015 near remnants of a half-buried circle estimated to be over thousands of years old. According to Wenger-Nabigon (2010) the Cree Medicine Wheel "is a pathway for healing among many Aboriginal peoples across the continent, used in reclaiming identity and purpose for individuals and communities" (p. 142). She asserts that the Medicine Wheel can be used to depict "contemporary human developmental theory from the perspective of traditional Aboriginal knowledge" (p. 139). In responding to conflicting notions of worldviews, Abram and Four Arrows (2016) offer:

But when we invite ourselves and others to walk out of the over-civilized way of seeing, to step through the threshold into an indigenous way of feeling and seeing and sensing, we invite them into a world of uncanny and inexhaustible multiplicity, a world wherein spiders and humpback whales and hummingbirds have each their own experience and perspective on the real, wherein a clump of sagebrush or an aspen grove and even a thunderstorm has its own sentience, and hence into a world of worlds within worlds within worlds... (para. 8)

Using this image, we provide students with a platform upon which to reflect on different ways of knowing, being, and doing in this world. Key questions to explore, include: What are your beliefs about the beginning of life on Mother Earth, your creation stories? What Western theories have been promulgated to explicate human development? How have Indigenous knowledge frameworks been marginalized? How can Western and Indigenous epistemologies contribute to your emerging social work practice?

Figure 7. Iitoo'tsimoh'soop (*Belongingness*).

In bearing witness to those among us who appear to occupy a marginalized place, Figure 7 encourages students to think about concepts of belongingness and social inclusion/exclusion. Urban Indigenous Peoples experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate, comprising a significant percentage of the homeless populations in major cities in Canada (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). The sense of belonging and of home for Indigenous Peoples has been gravely disrupted and displaced by colonization. Sefa Dei (2000) describes belongingness from an Indigenous worldview:

Indigenous knowledges view communalism as a mode of thought, emphasizing the sense of belongingness with a people and the land they share. It is not individualized and disconnected into a universal abstract. It is grounded in a people, a place and a history. (p. 115)

Key questions informing this exploration include: What is belongingness? What contributes to feelings of belonging? From a neoliberal perspective, what populations are considered to be legitimate in cities? How are populations marginalized or excluded? What policies contribute to belonging and social inclusion?

Figure 8. Iinii (Bison).

The image of the bison in bronze represents closing the circle and imagining the future. In the words of Elder Anita Eagle Bear, Calgary, home of the traditional Blackfoot Territory, has changed.

Your children of the past are gone as are their brother Iinii. They have turned to stone. Na'aa (the land, Mother Earth) you gave us Iinii and everything we need to survive. Some of your children are lost. Iinii, all that is left is the Iinii rubbing stone to show you were here. Na'aa we still see your children, the land, animals, and the winged ones – your beauty is still visible. Your children will become strong again; education is our new Iinii.

Using this image, students are asked to reflect upon their learning journey and discuss how they will move forward in decolonizing their social work practice to support reconciliation and healing. Key questions to support this dialogue include: What knowledge do you privilege? What novel insights have occurred for you? How have you changed through this process? What steps towards decolonization and reconciliation can you take as a human being and as a social worker?

Conclusion

This approach to reflexive practice seeks to respond to the TRC's Calls to Action (2015) by guiding students to gain a deeper understanding of the stories about the original peoples and settlers of this land and to use these new learnings to decolonize their social work practice. In particular, we aim to address the Calls to Action 64(iii), which call for the need to build "student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (p. 7), as well as the Call to Action 48(ii) which calls to respect "Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practice, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*" (p. 5).

This photo-project in its entirety has been shown at two conferences, as well as in several workshops provided to front-line social workers and leadership staff in social service agencies seeking to gain a better understanding of the TRC's Calls to Action and Reconciliation. The conversations that have resulted from the photo-story project have varied in breadth and depth. We noticed that individuals respond quite differently to the stories embedded within the images, and individuals are drawn to different images for different reasons, depending on their self-location and knowledge of colonization and Indigenous worldviews. We have also witnessed some people being deeply moved by the photo-story, while a few seemed to have little connection to the images. We have observed that the act of sharing reflections and personal stories during the talking circle is key to deepening one's reflexivity, and indeed our own understanding of these issues. As individuals shared their reflections with others in the circle, we noticed a deepening of awareness about the impact of colonization, further to one's self-location, identity and sense of belonging and how these notions influence their social work practice. We believe that it is through the guided conversations (using the questions we identified as starting points) and the sharing of reflections about the images and their embedded stories that participants are able to begin to decolonize their reflexive practice.

In conclusion, this approach to reflexive practice engages students to reflect about their identity and belongingness – as it relates to place, history, and the implications to their practice. In this instance, we proposed one way to decolonize reflexive practice, by replacing the written aspect of this process with storytelling through photographs to evoke thoughts and feelings about identity and belongingness, which are then shared and solidified by oral expressions of students' experiences in a talking circle.

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