

**ᓂᓱᓂᓱᓂᓱ (Sakihitowin/Love and Kindness):  
Practicing an Indigenous Process of Decolonization**

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### **Abstract**

Western theories of knowledge and research exclude Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Such omissions are also prevalent in research regarding Indigenous peoples, as well as, in the study of racial prejudice and identification of effective ways to ameliorate its impacts. In response to the dearth of reliable, trustworthy, culturally appropriate, research concerning the negative impacts of racial prejudice, this article discusses a community-based program in Alberta that was grounded in and used Indigenous theories of knowledge and practices. The learning program was intended to mitigate impacts of racism on Nehiyaw students in grades 7, 8, and 9 through a renewal process termed Kisewatotatowin Kiskisohkemowin. This renewal process revitalized a specific aspect of the Nehiyaw students' identity, Sakihitowin. To conclude, the article draws on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) postcolonial theory. The article argues that the community-based, renewal process depicted a locally informed process of decolonization.

**Keywords:** Sakihitowin (love/kindness), Indigenous theories of knowledge, racial prejudice, mediation, authentic identity, postcolonial theory, decolonization

### **Introduction**

Before delving into this article, it is important to take a moment to acknowledge and honour Elder Donald Johnson Muddy Bull, Elder Lucy Kammer, Elder Eugene Buffalo, Sandi Hiemer and all of the research participants. Without all of your guidance and support the study shared below simply would not have been possible. It is also critical to locate myself within Canada's colonial context and legacy. I grew-up on a farm in northern British Columbia. During these informative years I was never taught that the land that my family lived off of was part of Turtle Island<sup>1</sup> or how we were benefiting from colonial and racist policy that gave the land to my ancestors while disenfranchising the First Nations that were the inherent stewards of the land. Over the past 16 years, I have had the honour of working with and learning from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers that have been teaching me about pre and postcolonial contact, how we are all Treaty people, and mentoring me on how I, an Indigenous ally, Caucasian, queer, and community-based scholar, can use my skills to constructively disrupt the status quo of Canada's colonial legacy of racist ideologies and practices. This journey brought me to the research study presented below in this article which was an honour to be part of.

*We made this book to see and be seen. As First Nations youth, we are affected by racism. We have been labelled. We have been discriminated against. The struggle is real. Residential schools hurt our families. We are thankful for the guidance from our Elders. We are here to say we will overcome discrimination and hardships. We know not everyone labels us and we sometimes label others, but we should stand together not against each other. All in all, we are all humans. We hope our book helps our community, our people, ourselves, and anyone who reads this book. Things can get better.* (Book, 2016, p. 2)

A quote from the book<sup>2</sup> published by the students in the community-based learning program begins this article, because it centres the students lived experiences and introduces the authentic Indigenous practice of ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness for oneself, family, and community) which is significant in the ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Nehiyaw/Cree)<sup>3</sup> ways of knowing, being and doing. Unfortunately, for many ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Nehiyaw/Cree) people, the experiences and legacies of colonial residential schools, systematically disrupted a particular aspect of the ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity, the practice of ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). This article discusses key components of a four phase, community-based, Cree renewal process termed ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding). The renewal process in this ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Nehiyaw/Cree) community school is designed to mediate effects of systemic racism and ameliorate its negative impacts particularly on, ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Nehiyaw/Cree) youth. Further, the article demonstrates that a process of decolonization underpins the renewal processes of ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding). The article argues that the program revitalized a specific aspect of the students' ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity that was demonstrated through a sequential renewal of their practice of ᕐᕕᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐᕈᕐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). Finally, the article draws on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) postcolonial theory in order to examine whether the community-based, renewal process depicted a locally informed process of decolonization.

## Mapping the context

Historically and in contemporary Canada, Indigenous peoples have been impacted negatively, by systemic and institutional discrimination and racism. In important sectors such as, health, education and income, its effects are evident in terms of measurable disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and resultant differences in life opportunities (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb & Hampton, 2004; King & Gracey, 2009; King, Tuhiwai Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Recognition of systemic racist activities that targeted Indigenous peoples led to the creation of Chief Justice Sinclair's Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) to which hundreds of residential school survivors shared their negative schooling experiences. The Commission concentrated on Canada's enduring, colonial legacy and focused on the impacts of the Indian Residential School System (I.R.S.S.). Between the 1870s and 1996, the Government of Canada, in partnership with representatives of the mainstream, established churches (Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, and United), implemented discriminatory and racist, schooling policies and practices in the I.R.S.S. (Miller, 1996; Stanton, 2011). In effect, the churches developed an educational system for First Nations students of rigid surveillance and attempted total control of their minds, spirits, hearts and bodies.

It is estimated that 50% of the children who entered the I.R.S.S. died while attending the schools (Scott as cited in Miller, 1996). For students who survived, compulsory attendance at I.R.R.S. meant that the schools facilitated processes of severing them from their families and communities for months and in some cases, for years at a time (Lawrence, 2004; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). While attending the schools, children were forbidden from experiencing, learning and living their respective ways of life. Forced assimilation which included severe punishments for speaking their respective parental languages which negated their Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. As importantly, many children were routinely subjected to severe physical, psychological, and sexual abuses at the hands of the schools' administrators (Grant, 1996; Lawrence, 2004; Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Although closure of residential schools across Canada, began during the 1960s, the last school in the province of Alberta, did not close until 1996 (Lawrence, 2004).

During the 1980's, many residential school survivors launched several criminal investigations into the abuses that occurred in the schools, resulting in the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history (Stanton, 2011). In 1991, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was established to investigate Indigenous experiences with the Government of Canada and the larger, society. It was charged to provide recommendations for moving forward. The Commission held 196 public hearings in 96 communities. During the hearings, survivors recounted the abuses that they had endured while attending residential schools (Stanton, 2011, p. 2). In 1996, the testimonies culminated in a comprehensive report. It called for a public inquiry into the I.R.S.S which went unanswered. Irrespective of the federal Government's silence, pressures from First Nations communities continued to escalate. An increasing number of lawsuits apportioned liability to the federal government and the established churches involved. The Government of Canada and the religious organizations which administered the residential schools, on the federal government's behalf, were found culpable (Stanton, 2011). Such pressures ultimately resulted in the Indian Residential Schools System Settlement Agreement (I.R.S.S.S.A.) which outlined the following five mechanisms of reparation: A Common Experience Payment, an Independent Assessment Process, a Commemorative Projects Fund, a Healing Projects Fund, and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

In 2008, following Prime Minister Stephen Harper's public apology to residential school survivors, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established with Chief Justice Sinclair as the Commissioner. The main objectives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were to create opportunities for survivors, their families and communities to come forward and tell their stories in safe and culturally appropriate environments, to document and witness the stories, and as importantly, to reconcile and heal Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. The Commission's work culminated in the release of a comprehensive, six-volume Report entitled: *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). A common thread running through the Sinclair Report to the federal government is the need to address systemic racism at all societal levels (micro, meso and macro). Moving such a comprehensive initiative forward means avoiding the mistakes associated with Canada's colonial past and continued legacy; especially, recognizing and taking into account past and present failures to create environments in which mainstream individuals and organizations (government and non-government) would recognize and value Indigenous theories of knowledge, worldviews, customs, values, contributions, and actions.

## Situating the Case Study

The 2015-2016 *Photography Class*<sup>4</sup> was offered at a ᐅᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ (Nehiyaw/Cree) First Nation<sup>5</sup> community school, in western Canada. The community is geographically located in Treaty 6 territory. From a western worldview, Treaty 6 is located in the province of Alberta. The community is approximately 90 kilometers south of Edmonton, Alberta's capital city. According to the Government of Alberta's statistics, in 2017, this First Nation community had a population of 1,021 with 689 members (68%) living on reserve and 332 members (32%) residing off reserve. The *Photography Class* was offered through the community's local school which was operated and overseen by Chief and Council. Each year the community school provides education to approximately 150 students enrolled in kindergarten to Grade 9.

In responding to the continuing, negative media coverage of the community, the school developed a locally driven, community learning program, as a response to the mainstream media. The media has portrayed the community and its residents as violent gang members who are engaged in continuous turf wars. The dominant media has repeatedly depicted the students' community as being "plagued by violence and trigger-happy gang members..." (Toronto Sun, September 6, 2011, p. 1, paragraph 1). Interestingly, during the 1970s and 1980s, gangs emerged in the community with the oil boom, when oil and gas revenues started to flow. However, as is common in most communities with gang activity, the majority of the community members were and are not involved with gangs or gang-related activities. Yet, negative media portrayals continued. Additionally, while the media offered narrow and negative images of the community, little, if any, information was presented concerning, how colonial policies and practices negatively, affected the community. In short, mainstream media conveyed nothing about who the community members were as ᐅᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ (Nehiyaw/Cree people).

In 2010, 21 students decided to take action to challenge the negative, inaccurate, and simplistic portrayals of their community. With the guidance of the school counselor, S. H., who established and continues to lead the program, students began to take photos of themselves, their families, and their community. The goal was to capture images that reflected their own perceptions of who they are. Photos ranged from images of different people in the students' lives (e.g., school personnel, Kokom/Grandmothers and Mosom/Grandfathers, siblings, friends, etc.), to pictures of their surroundings that reflected land and place (e.g., eagles, horizons, mountains, their school, etc.). Published in a book, the photos illustrated graphic, visual narratives which were accompanied with relevant texts. The book's narratives illustrated the students' connections and links with their community, their sense of place and feelings of belonging. In effect, the students created a significantly different narrative, by vividly portraying the students, their families and their community from their own perspectives. In subsequent years, new cohorts of students have continued this learning process in the *Photography Class*. Since 2010, with the exception of the 2014-2015 school year<sup>6</sup>, the *Photography Class* has published a new book with their narratives, photographs and perspectives. Each book deliberately challenges the mainstream media's dominant, negative narratives about the community.

In order to publish the book annually, the students initiated, implemented, and completed the following steps. Firstly, to identify an inaccurate narrative in the mainstream media about the community. Secondly, working independently, to take the photos and compose a more accurate community narrative. Thirdly, to meet as a group to select and decide which of the photos would

be used to compile a more accurate narrative. Fourthly, to collate the photos with accompanying written statements in order to present a published book with insiders' narratives. Fifthly, to launch the book, to a far wider audience, in a nearby urban centre<sup>7</sup>.

In keeping with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's goal of addressing systemic racism, the 2015-2016 students' book (the focus of the larger doctoral study) wove together a visual narrative about racism and how it might be mediated from a ᑕᐃᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) perspective. Negative effects of racism and discrimination are of particular importance in this ᑕᐃᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) community because, it is not widely known that the community and its neighbouring First Nation communities represent one of the largest populations of residential school survivors in Canada. Despite the colonizers' attempts to systematically, assimilate the Indigenous community to the western culture, many of the Elders, adults, and youths in this community have continued to be the Knowledge Keepers of ᑕᐃᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) ways of knowing, being and doing. In the following section, in order to provide a larger context, I summarize some of the North American research concerning racial prejudice.

### Summarizing the Literature

The American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology defines racial prejudice as:

A form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior to others. Racism generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of the group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases it leads to violence. (VandenBos, 2015, p. 585)

Since the early 1950s when the study of prejudice emerged as an academic specialization, it has focused on racial prejudice. Two questions are central in such a study: (1) what is racial prejudice and (2) how can it be mediated? Gordon Allport (an American social psychologist), published his seminal work entitled, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Katz, 1991) and is regarded as the founding father of this specialization. Allport's work examined relevant studies from various fields (psychology, anthropology, and sociology). Using this information, Allport developed a framework to reduce dominant groups' racial prejudice towards marginalized groups and proposed the well-known, Intergroup Contact Theory. Allport's theory hypothesized that racial prejudice held by members of a dominant group could be reduced when dominant and marginalized group members came together, and interacted under the following four conditions: (1) equal group status, (2) a common goal, (3) intergroup cooperation, and (4) having active support from authority, law, or custom. Allport argued that the four conditions foster the optimal social environments for reducing racial prejudice held by dominant, in-group members towards marginalized, out-group members (Allport, 1954).

Since the late 1980s, building on the conceptual and theoretical framework provided by Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory, several studies have focused on examining processes which underpin reductions in dominant group prejudice. For example, Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006, 2008) work found that three actions, specifically, enhancing knowledge, reducing anxiety, and increasing empathy (meaning, perspective taking and giving), have the strongest

possibilities, to be able to: mediate racial prejudice by reducing negative attitudes, feelings, and/or behaviours of dominant group members towards members of non-dominant groups. Recently, the study of prejudice has shifted and expanded from targeted examinations of dominant groups' experiences with the processes of mediation, to focus on analyzing marginalized groups' experiences with the dominant mediator of increasing empathy. A particular emphasis is on the technique of perspective taking (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008; Saguy & Kteily, 2014; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). It entails actively, engaging in-group and out-group members in a process of reconciliation, in order to develop the ability to explore and assume different perspectives. Shnabel and Nadler's (2008) work, however, critiques the approach of perspective taking. They suggest that by actively engaging in-group and out-group members in a process of reconciliation has unanticipated consequences. Unintentionally and inadvertently, out-group members are marginalized. Further, out-group members report feelings of being voiceless, disempowered, and objectified. Another important limitation is that most studies of racial prejudice, are framed and conducted within a Eurocentric lens. Accordingly, Indigenous theories of knowledge are yet to be given validity in such research.

Although there is no one definition of Indigenous knowledge, the tenet of relationality is widely accepted as a core characteristic. Battiste and Henderson's definition (2009, p. 42) explains that:

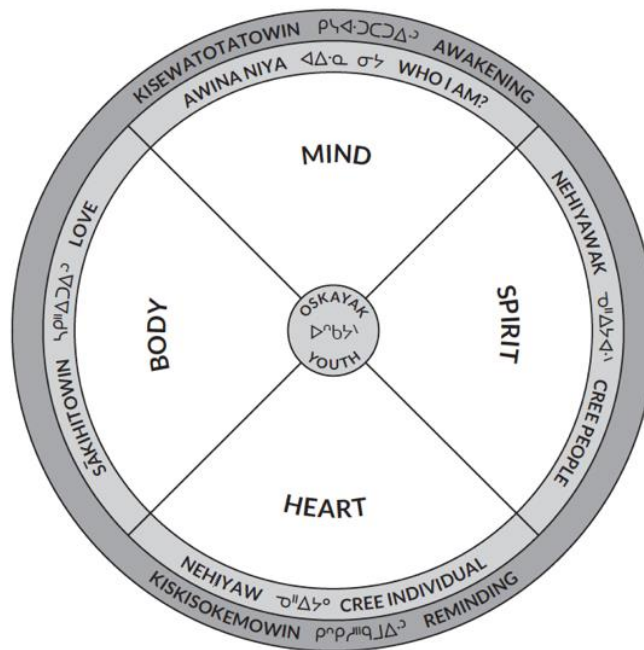
Perhaps the closest one can get to describing unity in Indigenous knowledge is that knowledge is the expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their ecosystems, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands.... All aspects of knowledge are interrelated and cannot be separated from the traditional territories of the people concerned....

The tenet of relationality, as described above, is not a foundational element of western-theories of knowledge. However, it is one of the important distinguishing characteristics of Indigenous theories of knowledge. Further, Henderson explains that an Indigenous worldview is "not an act of imagination, but a series of teachings about a particular place and about the proper way to relate to a whole and irrevocable ecosystem" (2002, p. 45). For many Indigenous communities these teachings are commonly referred to as the natural laws, customary laws, or sacred laws. The teachings are fundamental to understanding an Indigenous worldview. In my study, the First Nation community used the term **sacred teachings** to refer to such teachings/laws (Rousell, 2018 and Sharing Circle, 2017). Importantly, each Indigenous community has its own stories that are shared to pass sacred teachings from one generation to the next<sup>8</sup>.

Research by Brundige's (2004), Little Bear's (2000), and Weber-Pillwax (2001) explains that the renewal ceremony of storytelling, was and continues to be, a key pedagogical tool. Storytelling passes on knowledge about specific customs and values that play critical roles in guiding the development of one's individual and collective identity in an Indigenous community. Further, the development of an identity is viewed as a lifelong process of learning. It is grounded in and guided by ceremonies such as storytelling, as well as, an individual's active and iterative engagement in reflectivity (Brundige, 2004). Hence, the development of an Indigenous person's identity is not about arriving at a specific understanding about one's self or a particular way of



Figure 1: ᐱᓴᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening)  
ᐱᓴᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding)



### Understanding the Process

The renewal process depicted in Figure 1, uses the framework of the Medicine Wheel because it is epistemologically aligned with and conceptually appropriate for visually representing the larger study’s main findings. As well, Figure 1 summarizes the renewal process of ᐱᓴᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐱᓴᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄᓄ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) in which the 2016 cohort of the *Photography Class* was actively engaged.

Over the years, I have been taught by different Elders about the basic tenets of a Medicine Wheel. It is comprised of four interconnected steps that are part of a cyclical, continual, and lifelong learning process that has no particular beginning or end. In the context of my research, the Medicine Wheel reflects the ᓄᓴᓴᓴ (Nehiyaw/Cree) understanding of identity as a continual, iterative and life-long journey (Brundige, 2004; Weber-Pillwax, 2001). To quote Mary Lee, a ᓄᓴᓴᓴ (Nehiyaw/Cree) Elder, from Pelican Lake, in northern Saskatchewan:

As Cree people, we were given the gift of being named for the four parts of human beings. *Nehiyawak*, we were called. It means being balanced in the four parts that are found in the four directions of the Medicine Wheel. These four parts for human beings are the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental aspects of the self. We need to try and balance these four parts that were given to us, to function as people. The fire is in the centre of the Medicine Wheel. That is where the meaning of the teachings comes from. For me this fire is also the self. When you look at the Medicine Wheel, you start from self. And as you look out, you make your circle. This is how the Medicine Wheel represents the life journey of people. The old people will tell you it is life itself. Look at the four seasons and follow the sun. Spring in the east, summer in the south, fall in the



west and winter in the north. It tells the whole story of how all life came into being abundantly bright, rising in the east and then fading away as it moves west and north. All life rises and sets like the sun. What we do in between is our journey. (Four Directions Teachings, 2006)

Further, in 2005, a Collaborative Inquiry Committee that was composed of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and Elders was struck to develop guidelines and a framework for Indigenous science, teaching and learning for Southern Saskatchewan, Canada. The committee's work was guided by the Medicine Wheel. Each quadrant of the Wheel has specific meanings. The north quadrant represents the **mind** and the development of understanding. The east quadrant represents the **spirit** and the importance of connecting with the world around you. The south quadrant represents the **heart** and developing abilities to reflect on feelings. The west quadrant represents the **body** and taking action (Ali, 2005). I explain in the next section of the article, how the model presented in Figure 1 depicts the ᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃ (Nehiyaw/Cree) renewal process of ᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding).

### First Ring: The Self

The process begins with the center of the model, the self<sup>9</sup>. It is important to note that the center of a Medicine Wheel is commonly understood as representing the Creator. For example, as Elder Mary Lee explained in the above quote, “The fire is in the centre of the Medicine Wheel. That is where the meaning of the teachings comes from. For me this fire is also the self” (Four Directions Teachings, 2006). Accordingly, the students are placed in the center of the diagram to reflect how the process of learning starts with the self. S. H. (the program coordinator), supports this positioning when discussing the *Photography Class*, in the following manner:

[Developing their identity,] is what we are trying to get at. You know what is an adolescent's number one job? To develop their identify; who they are in the world. And I cannot tell them who they are. I can encourage them to look in different places and search for different answers to their questions or develop questions for themselves.  
(S. H., Interview, June 8, 2016)

While reviewing Figure 1, school Elders (D. M., E. B., and L. K.), explained that for them the Creator is placed in the middle of the Medicine Wheel (Field note, December 13, 2016). In documenting the learning process in this study, I placed the youth in the center. My decision to do so, should not be seen as negating what the Elders shared with me, nor as ignoring the Creator's significance. As described by Elder Mary Lee, the self and the Creator are not, necessarily, separate entities. C. C., a member of the school personnel and a parent, for example, stated that: “Everything is part of the creator. Creator is ᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃᐅᐃ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). The Creator transcends all. All things are alive and related to each other.” (C. C., personal communication, January 24, 2016).

### Second Ring: Four Components of Self

The second ring represents the four different components of the self (the mind, spirit, heart, and body). By using the framework of the Medicine Wheel, and including central aspects of the students' lives addressed in the course, I then placed the components of the self in the second ring of the model:

*Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, Fall 2018, 10(2), pp. 139-160  
ISSN 1916-3460 © 2018 University of Alberta  
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cpi/index>

- (1) The mind in the north quadrant represents the students gathering information about the past to understand the present (developing an awareness of their community's practice of ᓴᐱᓃᓃᓃᓃ Sakihitowin/love and kindness). From the past, the students learned of the introduction of a colonial praxis of hate for themselves and communities, as well as, for the people who ran the residential schools, on behalf of the federal government. A praxis of hate was introduced and enforced through the residential schools' policies and practices.
- (2) The spirit in the east quadrant represents the students connecting with the world around them (their community, two of the Seven Sacred Teachings<sup>10</sup> (love and courage) and with each other).
- (3) The heart in the south quadrant represents the students reflecting on their feelings (for example, being aware of who they are, knowing about what has happened to them and their community), as well as, being positive about who they are as a ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Nehiyaw/Cree individual) and as part of the ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Nehiyawak/Cree people). And
- (4) The body in the west quadrant represents the students taking action (e.g., taking photos, creating and launching the book; writing speeches and putting the ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Nehiyaw/Cree) sacred teaching of ᓴᐱᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) into practice).

My next step was to understand how the different aspects of the self become engaged in the processes of: ᐱᓴᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐱᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding).

### Third Ring: Developing Identity

This **first step** of the process of ᐱᓴᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐱᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴᓴ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) is termed ᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ ᐱᓴᓴ (Awina Niya/who I am). I placed this step in the northern quadrant because it reflected the students engaging their **minds**. By explaining the long-term impacts of residential schools, Elder D. M. raised the students' awareness of how colonialism had and continues to impact their community. The Elder further discussed how the residential schools disrupted an important aspect of the ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity; specifically, impeding the passage of the teaching and practice of ᓴᐱᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness for oneself, family, and community<sup>9</sup>) from one generation to the next.

Elder D. M. also explained that racism was introduced to their community, as a praxis of hate experienced and learned in the residential schools. Further, Elder L. S. explained how racism was not and is not part of the ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (Nehiyaw/Cree) worldview or way of life. By discussing the long-term impacts of residential schools, the students' awareness and understandings of these unique challenges was heightened. The effects of the Elders teachings are evident in the photos and texts selected for inclusion in their book. For example, a photo of the gate to the Lebret Residential School that operated in the province of Saskatchewan from 1884 to 1973 (Figure 2, below) is included. Further, a photo of a section of the brick wall of the

Residential school (Figure 3) captured places where students had etched their names into the brick, as a way to document that they had existed. (I have highlighted one of the etchings by inserting a box around the name Richard in the bottom right corner of Figure 3). Both of the images (Figures 2 and 3) were part of the *Lebret Residential Petroglyphs* exhibit that the students attended as part of the first phase of learning in the *Photography Class*.

**Figure 2: Gate to the Lebret Residential School**



**Figure 3: Lebret Residential Petroglyphs**



It is interesting to note that students placed Figures 2 and 3 near the front of their book. The photographs are accompanied with the following summary regarding, Canada's colonial legacy and identifies the importance of naming, understanding and challenging racist practices:

[Our book] seeks to name the Truth. A Truth that has remained a blind spot in the consciousness of mainstream Canadians. Naming the Truth requires we look at and understand the enduring effects of an attempted cultural genocide. With the guidance of Elders, the... Youth set out to better understand the impact of racism and aim to challenge individual and systemic discrimination. Like the Lebret Residential School children, the... Youth [taking part in the *Photography Class*] mark their life, **THEY ARE HERE**. They mark the change beginning to take place. They name themselves as a way to step

out from under the enduring effects of the Residential School System. (Book, 2016, p. 6, emphasis in original)

The above photos and text illustrate that the students have acquired a heightened awareness and understanding of their specific locations in terms of the impacts that colonialism has had on their community. Further, the students emphasized that Canada's colonial legacy has visible impacts that are well illustrated on the contemporary community landscape. Even further, they highlighted a praxis of systemic and institutional racism evident in the residential schools. By fostering spaces for the students to explicitly learn about their community's past (e.g., through inclusion of local knowledge, experiences and field trips), step one laid the foundations for step two.

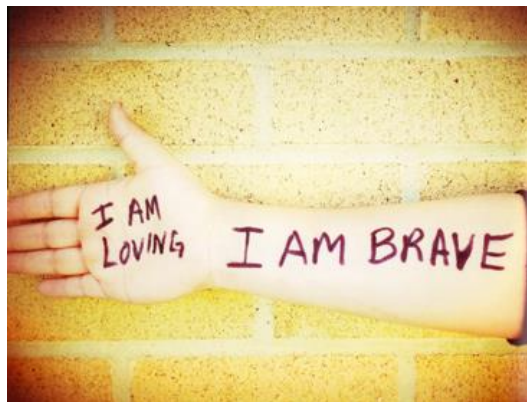
The **second step** of the process of ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) focuses on what it means to be part of the ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people). This step provides the students with more accurate, complete and positive narratives, in order for them *to see* and understand who they are as part of the larger community of ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people). Moving in a clockwise direction, I placed this step in the eastern quadrant of the Medicine Wheel. It reflected the students' engaging their **hearts**, by connecting with and facing the world around them with love and kindness, and as importantly, with courage. This type of engagement was core to Elder D. M.'s sacred teaching of ᕕᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness), as well as, Elder L. S.'s sacred teaching of courage. As the Elders shared these sacred teachings with the students, they were connecting them in positive ways with their ancestors and with the world around them. At the same time, the students learned about the values and norms of the ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people). For example, while reflecting on what it meant to her to be part of the ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people), C. R., one of the students involved, stated that:

I am kind to all people. If you are kind to people and animals, it will come back to you. Being kind makes me feel proud and happy. I am loving to all my family, my school and my community. I follow the Cree teachings of love that I have been taught. (Book, 2016, p. 31)

Further, C. L., another student, shared what it meant to him to be part of the ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people) when he stated that: "I love my family. I love my Kokom. We need Courage to live and love" (Book, 2016, p. 55). C. R. and C. L.'s quotes are two examples which showed the extent to which the students dialogued with the Elders' teachings of ᕕᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) and courage. The students continued the dialogues in different degrees, ways and furthermore, identified different aspects which resonated with their own lived experiences. Importantly, during this phase the students learned about their ways of knowing, being and doing through storytelling. They learned the seven sacred teachings, vital to developing an understanding of who they are as part of the ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people). Having fostered an environment where students could *see* what it meant to be part of the ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyawak/Cree people), through the use of local knowledge and lived experience, the third phase of the learning process sought to create a space for the students to develop an authentic awareness of who they are as a ᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿᕿ (Nehiyaw/Cree individual).



Figure 4: Photo of K. L.'s Arm



The above photo (Figure 4) and text represent a snapshot of a specific time, place, and space. It reflected where K. L. was on his journey, during this particular phase of the *Photography Class'* community-driven learning process. Notably, K. L.'s narrative, as with each of the students' individual narratives, highlighted different aspects of the Elders' teachings that resonated with the student's lived experiences. Each photo and text revealed an internal dialogue of individual identity formation. The student's responses demonstrated, how and to what extent the Elders' teachings about the past (residential schools) and shared community values and norms (the Seven Sacred Teachings) resonated with, and informed, the students' narratives mediated by lived experiences. This type of engagement was reflected throughout the book. It wove together text and photos to provide readers with a more accurate, complete and positive narrative about the students' identities as ᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Nehiyaw/Cree individuals) and as importantly, emphasized being part of the ᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Nehiyawak/Cree people).

Having fostered a learning environment where students developed an awareness of who they are as a ᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Nehiyaw/Cree individual), (through the use of local knowledge and lived experiences), in the next phase the students, with the guidance of the school personnel (S. H.), sought to create a space for themselves. In this space, students were encouraged to demonstrate aspects of their ᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity in practice, to show ᓄᕿᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) and to *be seen*.

The **fourth step** of the process of ᕿᓄᕐᕇᕇᕇ (Kisewatowin/awakening) and ᕿᕿᕿᕇᕇ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) is termed ᓄᕿᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). I placed this phase in the western quadrant of the Medicine Wheel. This fourth step represented the students engaging their **bodies**. They were taking action by standing-up and naming themselves. They intended to share their new knowledge with their family, community and the broader public in a more accurate, complete and positive narrative about their ᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity. Specifically, the students put into practice Elder D. M.'s teaching on ᓄᕿᕐᕄᕐᕇ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) and Elder L. S.'s teaching on courage. This form of sharing their knowledge included the following activities: (i) taking action by writing their speeches for the book launch in which they dealt with issues and feelings that were very close to them; (ii) attending the book launch; and (iii) discussing their personal stories in their public presentations. Hence, the students presented more accurate, complete and positive

narratives about who they are. For example, during her speech at the book launch, S. W. (a student) stated that:

To know myself is to understand my bloodline, to know who and where I come from, and to know my history and my hopes and dreams. It is important to me to let myself be known and that I make use of my life. There are people who spend their lives hating, fighting, judging, labeling and this hurts themselves and others. We need to look into our hearts. We must seek and find love for ourselves and each other to understand ourselves and others. What does it really mean to love yourself? I think it means to love that you were born into this world and to let our hearts be open and to let our spirits live (personal communication, June 02, 2016).

The book launch and to a greater extent, the nine of the 21 students who bravely, stood-up and delivered their speeches, represented the **fourth step** in which the students demonstrated practices of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) and courage. By showing courage (meaning, to stand-up and name themselves in a public arena), the students made their practice of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) visible, tangible and measurable. As the students' positive, accurate and complete narratives entered into circulation in a larger public arena, their voices displaced the dominant media's racist negativism. As importantly, by being visible and audible, hopefully, the students' *Photography Class*' book will have a more lasting impact in the public domain.

#### **Fourth Ring: Widening the Circle of Practice**

Elder L. K. explained that the four phases represented a process of learning that was ultimately ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) the students of an inherent aspect of their ᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity that was evidenced in their practice of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). Further, Elder L. K. shared that phases one, two and three represented awakening and reminding them of their practice of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness), love and kindness towards themselves, their family and community. This level of practice was evident in phase three ᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Nehiyawak/Cree people) when the students were developing their book's narrative that braided together their individual and collective narratives about themselves, their family and community. During the fourth phase, their practice of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) became much broader; moving beyond themselves, their family and community to include all beings (Field note, December 13, 2016).

Although this broadening of the students' practice of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) was initiated during the fourth phase, similar to dropping a pebble into the water, the practice rippled out into other areas of the students' lives and daily interactions. For this reason, I perceived it as a distinct element and represented it visually on the diagram as a part of the fourth ring. In addition, Elder L. K. shared that the fourth ring represents a space where non-Indigenous peoples can be included in the process of ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᓕᓕᓐᓂᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding). For example, when the students held their book launch, they fostered a space where non-Indigenous people had an opportunity to be included in/begin to learn about and understand (if they have not already done so), about the ᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐᓂᓐ



(Nehiyaw/Cree) processes of ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding), while simultaneously affirming their own practice of ᓕᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) for themselves, family and community to include all beings, including First Nations youth (Field note, December 13, 2016).

The insights that Elder L. K. shared with me highlighted, for me, the four important characteristics of the process of (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) for [ᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Nehiyawak/Cree people)] and the identity of the ᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Nehiyaw/Cree individual). First, as outlined in Figure 1, this process starts with the self and is interpersonally/relationally and locally driven in phases one, two, and three. Second, once a youth can name themselves and is strong in who they are, the next step of the process broadens into the public realm. Third, once the practice enters the public sphere, there is an opportunity to widen the circle of practice as neighboring communities and non-Indigenous peoples observe and experience the students' practice of ᓕᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). Fourth, this experience can foster an opportunity for ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) non-Indigenous peoples of their practice of ᓕᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). In this way, the process and the four steps outlined in Figure 1 foster conditions for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to broaden their narrative resources beyond the dominant narrative of colonialism and racism to develop a more accurate, complete and positive understanding of what it means to be ᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Nehiyaw/Cree) and the lived experience of First Nations youth (Field note, December 13, 2016).

### Decolonization and concluding thoughts

It is critical to situate and discuss the practice of ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kisewatotatowin/awakening) and ᐃᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Kiskisohkemowin/reminding) within the context of the *Photography Class* and the larger context of Canada's colonial legacy. To do so, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999, 2012) theoretical lens of decolonization proved to be most helpful. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that decolonization of knowledge is accomplished through the application of two intersecting lines of inquiry that ask: Firstly, what do the findings illustrate about Indigenous authenticity prior to colonial contact? Secondly, how has colonialism impacted Indigenous authenticity and how does this knowledge inform the research participants' immediate past, present and future?

**Indigenous authenticity.** As stated above, Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) first line of inquiry directs the researcher to explore Indigenous authenticity prior to colonial contact. In assessing the community's decolonizing educational program, I inquired into whether the program addresses the challenge of Indigenous authenticity. As noted earlier, the first phase, of the students' *Photography Class* which focused on learning ᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Awina Niya/who I am), clearly redressing this issue. For example, by the Elders sharing histories of the communities, prior to colonial contact, this phase of the program redresses the challenge of Indigenous authenticity. Furthermore, content in the program is locally informed and grounded. It includes an emphasis on the ᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Nehiyaw/Cree) practice of ᓕᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). The Elders teach that, since time immemorial, such a practice is passed from one generation to the next, through the renewal ceremony of storytelling. As importantly, they teach



that prior to the residential schools, the students' community experienced conflicts; however, pre-contact conflicts were not grounded in racist ideology. As previously discussed, Elder L. S. explained that racism was not and is not a part of the ᑭᓄᓂᓂ (Nehiyaw/Cree) language, sacred teachings or practices that informed their community's epistemology, values and norms (Field notes, February 11, 2016; May 25, 2017).

**Impacts: immediate past, present and future.** Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) second line of inquiry states that a decolonizing methodology should ask how colonialism has impacted Indigenous authenticity in terms of, the immediate past, present and future. Does the *Photography Class* offer the students such an opportunity? In exploring ᐱᓂᓂᓂ (Awina Niya/who I am), the Elders address how colonialism interrupted the community's Indigenous authenticity. The Elders link past colonial practices to students' everyday life experiences of racism. The ᑭᓄᓂᓂ (Nehiyaw/Cree) teachings of the Elders were severed when children were placed in compulsory, residential schools and separated from their Elders and their Knowledge Keepers. The residential schools' curriculums deliberately replaced the community's practice of ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) with a practice of hate, derived from colonial and racist ideology.

For the purpose of this study, this interruption meant that colonialism had significantly limited the students' access to ᑭᓄᓂᓂᓂ (Nehiyaw/Cree) teachings and practices and in particular the practice of ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness). Further, if not redressed before the community's current Elders pass away, the current situation would become worse because the Elders would take their knowledge with them when they leave this world. If this occurs, it would significantly limit the students' and future generations abilities to access and learn about their community's ᑭᓄᓂᓂᓂ (Nehiyaw/Cree) teachings and practices such as the teachings of ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness), their ability to develop this aspect of their ᑭᓄᓂᓂᓂ (Nehiyaw/Cree) identity and engage in a locally informed process of decolonization.

**A local process of decolonization.** By developing and implementing, a local, culturally informed, educational process in the *Photography Class*, the community has responded to the negative, intergenerational impacts of the I. R. S. S. The first phase of renewal, exploring ᐱᓂᓂᓂ (Awina Niya/who I am) as an individual; and the second phase of cultural renewal, examining ᑭᓄᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Nehiyawak/who I am as part of the Cree people) lay solid foundations about the past and present. The Elders braided together (in phases one and two) their knowledges through stories to create a living cultural tapestry. As importantly, phases three, reflecting upon and sharing who they are as a ᑭᓄᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Nehiyaw/Cree individual) and four, learning about ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) and fostering opportunities for the students to put the Elders' teachings of ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ (Sakihitowin/love and kindness) and courage into practice. Further, the students collectively, authored a book that provided a more accurate, complete and positive narrative about Indigenous authenticity and identity. In the book, the students literally demonstrated: "writ[ing] back . . . from the margins" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 63) to



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**Endnotes:**

1. The term Turtle Island was and continues to be used by Indigenous peoples who are the inherent stewards of North America. The northern portion of North America was later named Canada by Euro-Canadians.
2. In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants, I use the generic title “book” to refer to the student’s 2016 publication.
3. To assist with disrupting Western theories of knowledge and to center Indigenous theories of knowledge, I use Nehiyaw/Cree syllabics prior to the English Roman orthography when discussing key concepts/processes and practices in order to acknowledge, respect, and bridge Nehiyaw/Cree ways of communicating. For example, “ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ” is Syllabics for Nehiyaw, “Nehiyaw” is Roman orthography for Cree, and “Cree” is the English text used to identify a specific First Nations community in Alberta.  
  
Syllabics have been placed first to respect and practice a teaching that I received, namely that First Nations peoples were given the gift of spirituality. Syllabics contain the spiritual component of the ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) language. Therefore, I was taught that Syllabics should be placed first to honour the spiritual aspect of the ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) language (Field note, December 13, 2015). This approach was possible because I followed the protocol and asked the school Elder L. B. who was also the ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) language teacher, to help me with learning the correct Roman orthography and Cree Syllabics. I acknowledge that this practice of textual presentation may create some discomfort for readers who hold a Western worldview; but this disruptive tactic supports my objective of centering Indigenous theories of knowledge. Its usage is also necessary because it reminds all readers that understanding the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, especially the perspectives described in this study, requires an active and ongoing disruption of Western theories of knowledge.
4. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants, I use the pseudonym *Photography Class* to refer to the school’s program.
5. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants, I do not identify the specific ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) First Nation, or where the research study was conducted. Instead, I refer to the community as a ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) First Nation.
6. There was a loss in the community that impeded the *Photography Class* from taking place during the 2014-2015 school year.
7. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of research participants, I do not identify the city where students continue to hold their annual book launch. Instead, I refer to the city as an urban centre.
8. It is generally agreed that although the stories that are used to pass the sacred teachings to the next generation may differ from nation to nation, the norms and values communicated through the sacred teachings are consistent.
9. It is important to note that different First Nation communities have different ways of depicting the Medicine Wheel and explaining its representation. My study depicts merely, one of the numerous possibilities.
10. It is important to note that the ᑎᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Nehiyaw/Cree) teachings, including the Seven Sacred Teachings (Love, Courage, Honesty, Respect, Truth, Wisdom, and Humility) in and of themselves, were not the focus of this study. Further, I am not a Knowledge Keeper of these teachings and therefore, they are not mine to document or share. My role and responsibilities as a non-Indigenous ally researcher was to elucidate how the teachings informed the students’ lived experiences with the *Photography Class*. As the research and writing developed, I shared my information with research participants and in particular, with three school Elders (D. J., E. B., L. K.). Furthermore, I have their permission to submit this article for publication.

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