

Guiding principles of Indigenous artistic methodologies

By: Quill Christie

Indigenous artistic methodologies are diverse in nature. Across Turtle Island, different nations, communities and individuals have specific and multifaceted relationships to art-making. The following is an exploration of what some major tenets of Indigenous artistic methodologies may look like in the context of decolonization. Just as attempting to define decolonization is inherently messy due to the ways in which Indigenous knowledges are embedded in diverse people and places, so too is attempting to define Indigenous artistic methodologies (Sium, Desai & Ritskes, 2012). By no means is this exploration complete and objective. It is shaped by my own identity as a cis, heterosexual, able-bodied Anishinaabekwe with Scottish, English and Irish ancestors who has experience working largely with urban Indigenous youth. These Indigenous artistic methodologies pertain to arts-based education, projects and gatherings across Turtle Island both in community and institutional contexts.



I. The ongoing practice of self-location:

Indigenous feminist praxis demands that we speak from our own experiential knowledge base through the practice of self-location. In the context of the academic industrial complex, an emphasis on experiential knowledge, demonstrated through the sharing of genealogies and transparency of identity, destabilizes the façade of objectivity (Hilden & Lee, 2010). While the practice of self-location is sometimes taken up within academia, it is glaringly absent from institutional spaces of arts-based education. Within these spaces, the knowledge that is brought forward is truncated and distanced from the facilitator such that what they provide is only related to the specific activity of skill-based art-making. Self-location in these contexts is, at best, a brief introduction of the artist and their work. In contrast, Indigenous artistic methodologies demand a deeper and continual process of self-location that carries forward the entirety of our knowledge base. We reject the compartmentalization of our knowledge and we weave our histories into our methodologies such that multiple and seemingly disparate stories become woven into the process of art-making. This practice of self-location within arts-based education restores value to the knowledges that are typically excluded from institutional spaces.

In many cases, meaningfully introducing and locating one's self is Indigenous protocol that honours where we come from and who we are (Debassige, 2010). As a facilitator working with Indigenous youth, I like to embody an Anishinaabe protocol of introduction as a starting point for any project. However, I am also selective about what I choose to share during that first introduction because I am cognizant of the ways in which introductions laden with cultural markers can be intimidating and disempowering for people who may not know as much about where they come from. My self-location

becomes continuous and depends on the building of trust within the group I am working with. In this sense, my self-location is the guiding methodological framework that shapes the trajectory of the art-making process. By the end of our time together, the youth do not simply know that I am Kakekayatahseekobiik, water woman with everlasting light, who grew up in Toronto and comes from Treaty 3 territory. Instead, they have learnt, piece by piece, the stories that deeply shape my identity including how I ended up in Toronto (flooding of our reserve, father in residential school, mother and father meeting at Queen's Park), how I relate to my homeland in the face of displacement (artistic practice, urban Indigenous community), and how I received my name (not in some romanticized way but through pain, struggle and the building of strength to visit my grandmother at the age of 24). I do not just bring forward the knowledge I have that directly relates to art-making, I bring forward all of my knowledge including the knowledge of my experience and the knowledge of my heart.

This type of ongoing self-location as a guiding methodological framework is empowering for all participants. It encourages reflection in others while taking the onus off of participants to contribute anything they are not comfortable with. Simultaneously, speaking from the heart places value on the experiences of others in the group and the transfer of knowledge becomes non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian. Many sources of knowledge become apparent that are equally valid and we start to recognize the self, Elder, family, and land as teacher (Chartrand, 2012). From this approach, Indigenous artistic methodologies are also attentive to these different sources of knowledge and may incorporate elders, knowledge keepers and land-based pedagogies formally into the project. A practice of radical self-location generates a safe environment for reciprocal

learning, utilizes a diversity of sources of knowledge and dismantles the compartmentalizing logic of colonialism that truncates our interconnected experiences.

II. Place-centered methodologies:

Engaging a place-centered methodology in arts education starts with acknowledging your relationship to the territory. You have to ask yourself, am I a visitor to this territory and how should this shape my methodology as an arts educator seeking to further efforts of decolonization? We must take seriously our obligations, as proponents of decolonization, to center the repatriation of Indigenous land or risk the metaphorization of our projects (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Quite simply, if we are not attentive to place then we are complicit in the erasures that facilitate ongoing colonial dispossession that are particularly rampant in institutional spaces. This process starts with a territory acknowledgement and if possible, prioritizing the participation and/or facilitation by elders, knowledge keepers and community members from the host nation(s). Most importantly, a place-centered methodology approaches art-making as an enactment of accountability that ensures the artistic process and product honours our obligations and responsibilities as potential visitors to the territory.

Centering place within our methodologies is Indigenous protocol. This centering does not mean appropriating the host nation(s)' teachings, but rather entails creating space for community participation and for dialogues on accountability to territory while honouring self-specific and nation-specific knowledge. This deep understanding of place, which includes an awareness of where you come from and where you operate from, is central to our knowledge systems and resists the multiple forms of colonial erasure (Blight, 2015). This place-conscious methodology also maintains the integrity of our

nation-specific knowledges (Chartrand, 2012). Place-centered methodologies may also entail physically engaging with the land itself. In Anishinaabe pedagogy, the land is both context and process, and knowledge flows through the diverse web of relationships we have (Simpson, 2014). Engaging with the land in both rural and urban contexts grounds our knowledge within our interconnected web of creation and speaks to a non-compartmentalized conception of art-making. Engaging with the land in urban contexts allows us to reclaim the city as a site for radical relationship building within our diverse urban communities (Recollet, 2016).

III. Embodying a decolonizing relational approach to art-making:

Decolonization must seek to strengthen, reclaim and restore the relationships that settler colonialism has sought to destroy. As Indigenous people, we have always honoured our relationships that extend not only to our communities but outwards to our non-human and spirit-based kin. From my Anishinaabekwe understanding, we are a relational people. Anishinaabe knowledge is inherently relational (Simpson, 2014). Anishinaabe artistic practice is relational. Anishinaabe pedagogy is processed-based and subjective (Chartrand, 2012). When we make art we engage our whole bodies and nourish our relationships to the self, each other, to the medium we are using, to our ancestors and our homelands (Pedri-Spade, 2014). Relationships are the key to decolonization, both in returning to ourselves and in restoring the relationships that have been specifically targeted by settler colonialism. A radically relational praxis demands that we shape our artistic methodologies to strengthen *all our relations*.

This relational approach to art-making applies to both process and product. Our methodologies should prioritize the strengthening of relationships during art-making.

These relationships are expansive and overflow the boundaries of what art is typically thought to be. We can practice accountability to our ancestors and our homelands through a relational artistic practice. We can strengthen relationships within our working groups while also exploring the intimate relationships we have to the inner self. Some specific methodologies that embody this relational approach include using the talking circle (Debassige, 2010), using collaborative artistic projects that require negotiation and making room for discussions to explore how we relate to various components of creation. These methodologies are relational and thus center on process rather than product, which can be useful for youth or participants who are intimidated when there is pressure to make an aesthetically pleasing final product (Flicker *et al.*, 2014).

One Anishinaabe-specific conception of artistic practice is that it is an act of storytelling and of transmitting knowledge that sometimes cannot be communicated in other ways. Storytelling is radically decolonizing because of the reciprocity and relationship building it fosters between storyteller and audience (Simpson, 2011). In order to retain these decolonial qualities of storytelling, there must be relationship building within the process of art-making. We can also conceptualize our final artistic product as a relational entity. When we create a final product it transmits knowledge to our communities and nations as well, allowing the flow of knowledge to continue.

IV. Indigenous arts education in institutional settings

Institutional settings are complicated spaces for Indigenous peoples to exist within. Museums and galleries are often pillars of capitalism and colonialism, actively perpetuating nationalist narratives and colonial myths. How do Indigenous peoples fit into this space? Although previous strategies of erasure and exclusion through museums

have shifted to more inclusive and performative pedagogies that allow the visitor to critically participate in museum ideologies (Garoian, 2001), the Indigenous subject can only participate limitedly because they challenge the very foundation of the museum. Even radical approaches to museum pedagogies seem to fall short for the Indigenous visitor because the museum's foundation in capitalism and loyalty to colonial narratives will never be compromised. Often, this results in the museum being a hostile and unsafe space for Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous youth. The hostility of the art institution is not just in the perpetuation of colonial narratives, the erasure of peoples altogether, the commodification of Indigenous pain and suffering, or the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from programming, but also within the ways Indigenous bodies are policed and put under rigorous surveillance in art institutions. For many, the museum remains unsafe.

For all of these reasons, I suggest an autonomous space model for working within institutions. This means that rather than attempting to weave Indigenous art methodologies into a pre-existing institutional framework for programming, we demand an autonomous space for our work to exist within. In simpler terms, it means... give us the space you owe us from profiting off of stolen lands and genocide and leave us alone. This will entail rejecting the labour of translation that will likely be burdened on the Indigenous person in the institution, instead advocating for the institution to relinquish its desire to control, understand and validate Indigenous arts education. An additional consideration for the Indigenous individual working within cultural institutions is to build practices of self-care into your conception of your role and responsibility within the institution. Just as the museum can be an unsafe space for the Indigenous individual, it

can be very unsafe for the Indigenous employee seeking to embody a practice that cuts at the very foundation of the institution.

References

- Blight, S. (2015). Where you're from and where you're at: Place, space, and the assertion of nationhood in Shibastik's "Moose River." *Decolonization Wordpress*. Retrieved from: <http://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/03/18/where-youre-from-and-where-youre-at-place-space-and-the-assertion-of-nationhood-in-shibastiks-moose-river/>
- Chartrand, R. (2012). Anishinaabe pedagogy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 35(1), 144- 162.
- Debassige, B.A. (2010). Re-conceptualizing Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life) as research methodology: A spirit-centered way in Anishinaabe research. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 33(1), 11- 28.
- Flicker, S., Yee Danforth, J., Wilson, C., Oliver, V., Larkin, J., Restoule, J., Mitchell, C., Konsmo, E., Jackson, R., Prentice, T. (2014). "Because we have really unique art": Decolonizing research with Indigenous youth using the arts. *International journal of Indigenous Health*, 10 (1), 16-34.
- Garoian, C.R. (2001). Performing the Museum. *Studies in Art Education*, 42(3), 234-248.
- Hilden, P.P., & Lee, L.M. (2010). Indigenous feminism: The project. *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*. 56-80 !
- Pedri-Spade, C. (2014). Nametoo: Evidence that he/she is/was present. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(1), 73-100.
- Recollet, K. (2016). Gesturing Indigenous futurities through the remix. *Dance Research Journal*, 48(1), 91-105.
- Simpson, L. (2014). Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), 1-25.
- Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing on our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence and a new emergence*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.
- Sium, A., Desai, C., & Ritskes, E. (2012). Towards the 'tangible unknown': Decolonization and the Indigenous future. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), I-XIII.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K.W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1-40.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada