

The Birch Bark Eaters¹ and the Crisis of Ethical Knowledge in Storytelling

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We're not trying to live in the past, we're trying to live with the past and use the good things that our ancestors have handed down to us. (Elder and Chief Paul Nadjiwan, 2005)

When we hold an image of what is objectively "the fact," it has the effect of reifying what we experience, making our experience resistant to reevaluation and change rather than open to imagination. (Green, 1995, pp. 126-127)

Overview

In this article I explore the pedagogical intersections between self-reflexive methods of arts-based learning and practice through a series of my new works titled *The Birch Bark Eaters*. Using visual and mixed-media art, these works trace dialogical links between one's ancestry and identity, heritage and land. In this article I ask how the practice of art and the exploration of traumatic historical events framed in pedagogical discourse and biographic narrative can be constructive in developing a method for interrogating ethics.

Introduction

This story begins with a song I received while reflecting on the struggles that my community and family have endured (Figure 1). As a child I learned that the Wabi River, which runs through the Timiskaming Shores and straight into Lake Timiskaming, was named after one of my great-grandfathers. "We're Native," my mother would say, as if deliberately instilling in me a strong sense of identity. I have come to appreciate that knowing oneself is vital to interrogating convoluted identity politics, which looms over many Aboriginal people like a pesky colonial by-product.

I was raised in a small town where French and English were the dominant languages. There was always, and still remains, an Aboriginal presence in this small town, but most lived on nearby reservations in Timiskaming and Matachewan.

This was my first exposure to the effects of segregation and enfranchisement on Indigenous peoples. As a young person I did not fully grasp what it meant to be enfranchised as a First Nations person in a society burdened by a bloody history and one that even today upholds fragmented and distorted perceptions of North American Indigenous people. These perceptions do not necessarily stop at any particular racial boundaries either, as they have permeated many communities, thereby

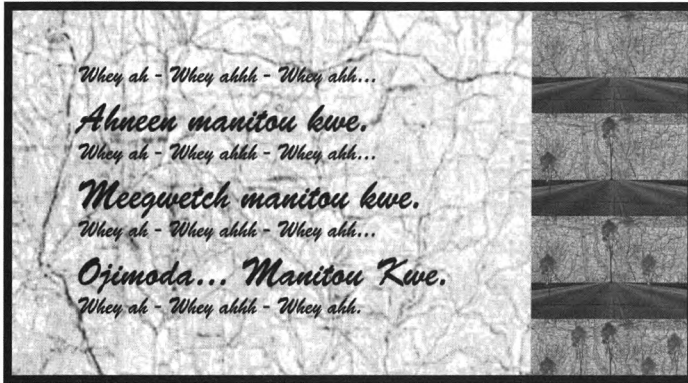


Figure 1. Title: "Song, Road and Maps." From *The Birch Bark Eaters* #3. Digital still from animation. 2007 Spy Dénommé-Welch. Original is in full color.

effectively splitting us both from each other and from the larger society. It is precisely these racist and sexist notions that have influenced how the government assigns Indian status. The result of this is that generations of Aboriginals, primarily women and their descendants, have been denied their status as a result of forced assimilation or for marrying non-Aboriginal men.

Aboriginal people are commonly objectified and mythologized through popular culture and as a result of a consumer-driven society. Portrayals include tobacco chiefs standing guard outside cigar shops, cowboys and Indians in old western flicks, and Andy Warhol silk-screens of Sitting Bull and Geronimo. This is hardly an exhaustive list, although I have to admit that Warhol was doing some pretty groovy work for his time. Still, the notion of Aboriginal mythologies continues to spring up like a repetitious "15 minutes of fame," continually raising questions about what constitutes ethical art. This begs the following questions: Does art/storytelling always need to be ethical, or can it be mediated in an ethical manner? What precisely would ethical art/storytelling look like in contrast to unethical forms of art/storytelling? As well, how do we judge what makes ethical or unethical art?

I have to give partial credit to my days in the French Catholic school system for guiding me toward these questions today. It has offered me a glimpse into the Eurocentric perspectives of a larger society that considers itself an authority in knowledge production, where any reference made to Native culture during history class was usually in relation to Columbus, James Cooke, or Samuel de Champlain.

Deconstruction, activist art-making, and education are often, but not permanently, the place where a large body of my work is situated and builds on the work of many Indigenous artists who have come before such as Maria Campbell, Norval Morrisseau, Alanis Obomsawin, and Chrystos.

Although much work can be done to examine ethical questions of knowledge production, there are broader issues about notions of Aboriginal art, activism, and pedagogy that ask how such work is produced and by whom. Peter Trifonas (2000) provides a relevant analysis of writing and ethics in an exploration of deconstruction, philosophy, and pedagogy. He writes,

The ethical problem of who can, should be, or is capable of determining the propriety of the formal location of inquiry—the space and place of the culture-institutional indexicality marking the public paths of its entrances and exits—is a flash point of conflict. It implicates deconstruction in the perennial question of democracy and discipline, and brings us face-to-face, yet again, with the violent opening of the institution of pedagogy and the difference of Other. (p. 142)

My early experience with representations of Aboriginality, as seen in a historical and pedagogical context, motivated me to begin asking philosophical and pedagogical questions about issues of social construction and notions of the *Other*. Can there be a democratic approach toward deconstructing intersections of social construction and Otherness without creating points of conflict like those suggested by Trifonas? “The Undercurrents of Warfare” (see Figure 2) examines historical conflict and warfare on which our contemporary society is founded.

My identity as an Aboriginal existed in a paradox with how colonial history was taught, where Aboriginals were made invisible or irrelevant to pedagogy, or if made relevant were often in the context of being positioned as the *Other*. It should be no surprise that I struggled with learning, but still learned from all the teachers I encountered. My awareness of these colonial tropes is much deeper now than when I was stuck in a classroom

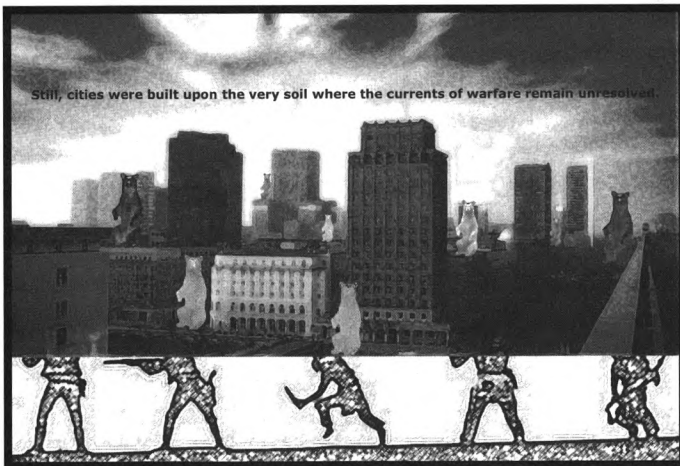


Figure 2. Title: “The Undercurrents of Warfare.” From *The Birch Bark Eaters* #2. Digital print, with text, on paper. 2007 Spy Dénomonné-Welch. Original is in full color.

with teachers teaching us only what they were taught to instruct, which was the farthest thing from the type of *Autochtone* (an Aboriginal person or people) that I perceived myself to be. I could never have imagined engaging in a dialogue of this type as a youngster, perhaps because it never occurred to anyone to ask me what I thought.

If I were to believe the dominant viewpoints I encountered as a child, then I certainly would have concluded long ago that my culture was a lost cause, becoming endangered like the caribou, buffalo, and various species of wolf. Many Native people have had to endure great obstacles in a society that has long perceived us as nothing more than boozers, welfare bums, and dropouts who can barely manage the slightest government handouts; meanwhile, few give us props for at least surviving through all these obstacles.

More troubling is the fact that many Aboriginals face barriers to accessing assistance because they are unable to “prove” their ancestry as a direct result of a system that is built on the notion that “Indians” are only legal/real as long as they possess status cards.

This struggle is multifaceted, buried in historical travesty, and is often camouflaged from a larger society that barely recognizes our battle with a system established to see Aboriginals fail. We live in a society that offers little to no stable infrastructure that reflects our cultural and community needs and does not support our collective vision of what happiness and success mean. Rather, blame ricochets against Aboriginal people, who are accused of stagnation, failure, and being a waste of taxpayers’ dollars. Some forget that we pay taxes too.

Seen from this perspective, it seems oddly poetic how recurrent this vicious cycle has become. However, this has prepared me for a career in social awareness, pedagogical and transformational resistance that has inspired me to want nothing more than to defy these destructive stereotypes founded on color-blind delusions and clichés. Here begins a process of questioning ethics in art, pedagogy, and storytelling.

Storytelling Ethics in Academe

In exploring pedagogy through narrative and storytelling, I realize that I must be conscious of my role as storyteller and must strive to ensure that I do not perpetuate romantic mythologies of my culture. This does not imply that I cannot or will not use these mythologies in my own artistic and academic work as a strategy toward deconstructing them. By deconstructing subversive, iconic mythologies, an artist is capable of occupying space as an in-betweenener, living among world views, cultures, and spaces. This is a space where I feel I must incessantly revisit notions of ethics and truth-seeking. If seeking truth is a possible ideology, then it could be argued that it should come with the responsibility to act respectfully, or at least be prepared to accept the consequences of one’s artistic actions.

The works of many Aboriginal and Indigenous artists are imbued with questions that concern ethics, culture, art, and education. Many artists have applied their art and cultural background as a means to resist or to broaden the more dominant mainstream worlds of academe and art. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's (1986) work as a professor and poet has been particularly important in breaking down institutional barriers in academe. Cook-Lynn's work frequently and deliberately bridges her own traditional and cultural Sioux background with Western practices. This practice has been vital to her work, which she has described as being "an act of defiance born of the need to survive. It is the quintessential act of optimism born of frustration. It is an act of courage, I think. And, in the end, it is an act that defies oppression."

Artists who choose to follow or to create ethical guidelines in their artistic practice and work may find this a unique, subjective, and often difficult process, but this is possibly because there is a need to resist, survive, and/or question. Many artists whose work addresses or confronts questions and issues of an ethical and pedagogical nature will often be measured against two set of standards: (a) standards set by mainstream social, artistic, and academic communities with expectations that Indigenous-themed art should be accessible and pleasant to the tastes of a broader society and consumer; and (b) standards established by their own guidelines, and if not theirs, then by their community who may not want them to use or exploit various cultural signifiers (e.g., clan symbols, teachings).

On a positive note, although there is the added benefit of seeing that the work is thoroughly thought out, sometimes unreasonable pressures and expectations are placed on Aboriginal artists to please multiple cultures. Does this impede or promote the creative process and imagination of artists and their free will to produce work that transcends or disrupts these social and political aspects of art and pedagogy?

The extensive work of veteran performance artist, writer, and educator Guillermo Gómez-Peña and several of his collaborators such as Coco Fusco and Roberto Sifuentes is heavily based in interdisciplinary practice and is an example of how the worlds of art and academia can be bridged together. Gómez-Peña frequently explores border crossings of all forms: political, social, gender, race, economics, pedagogy, and the cyborg/post-human. Much of his work has been documented in his books *Dangerous Border Crossers* (2000) and *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy* (2005), both of which outline his artistic and pedagogical praxis, which is usually at odds with authoritative structures. He writes,

Yes. I am at odds with authority, whether it is political, religious, sexual, or esthetic, and I am constantly questioning imposed structures and dogmatic behaviour wherever I find them. As soon as I am told what to do and how to do it, my hair goes up, my blood begins to boil, and I begin to figure out ways to dismantle that particular form of authority. I share

this personality trait with most of my colleagues. In fact, we crave the challenge of dismantling abusive authority. (p.27)

Whereas Gómez-Peña is compelled to question and dismantle authority, I find myself asking my own questions such as why am I doing this work, and can truth be found in art and stories? I have also discovered that although I might make one viewer or reader or listener happy with what I reveal in my work, it may upset others. Do I need to assume responsibility for other people's reactions? I would just as well say No, as this merely represents one social form of the action-reaction theory, further complicated by what Pitt and Britzman (2003) describe as encounters with difficult knowledge: a "concept meant to signify both representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy" (p. 775).

Introducing notions of difficult knowledge into works of art can prompt us to question whether it is the artist or the viewer who experiences the greater effect resulting from collective, social, or individual reactions. Perhaps the feelings are mutually shared? Do the reactions have greater effect than the work itself, and are we equally to blame for creating these traumas?

At what point can we simply appreciate the experience of scholarship and art as a pathway to learning? Can art become a "safer" entry point for dialogue to happen and a method to explore difficult and contentious topics? Is it safe to think that notions of safety will always be present when exploring these topics? If we were always to seek notions of safety, then we might remain perpetually fixed in a space of constant renegotiation, preventing us from any accomplishment. This is not to imply that one should hesitate to steer straight ahead, but rather be mindful of the multiple perspectives present and the contradictions in them.

Difficult knowledge can cause tremors of anger and pain in Aboriginal communities and the larger society. There is comfort in not knowing, as it averts our responsibility to act on our conscience, like the trickster playing on our fears of the unknown. Knowledge should arouse in us a desire to act responsibly, but sometimes this is lost in how we relate to a Foucault's (1980) theory of knowledge and power. For example, some may act on their knowledge by abusing it for self-gain, whereas others might respond by not acting at all.

Although I may never fully harmonize how viewers experience or internalize my work, I believe that this demonstrates that truth is merely relative to the viewer or reader no matter what the context may be. Therefore, if truth is relative, is it an illusion? This is a compelling space in which to work, but it also creates vulnerability for an artist and scholar. This is a derivative form of the personal-is-political slogan, and although it may be a clichéd adage, it still is a powerful mechanism to apply when exploring or questioning ethics.

Building a foundation for allowing ethics and the illusion of truth to meet head to head may be one way to form resistance against oppression, but this is not a simple process into which to enter. Tools may not always be there to draw on in terms of operating through the apparatus of art and pedagogy, and they may not always be as quickly validated in academe.

Although there is growing awareness that Aboriginal languages are diminishing, conventional institutional support for preserving and practicing these languages is virtually nonexistent. My exposure to the Anishnaabemowin (part of the Algonquin family of languages) language was limited in my formative years because it and other Indigenous languages were discouraged and deemed unnecessary in the larger Canadian society. The little I did pick up was taught through an after-school program led by an Anishnaabe-speaking woman. The program was shut down soon after I started due to an apparent lack of funding. The pendulum might finally have swung in the opposite direction as it is now more common for the larger society to recognize Indigenous languages as being an essential component of our history and cultural survival.

Many other variables contribute to the endangerment of Indigenous languages such as the residential school system where generations of Native children were prohibited from speaking their languages for fear of severe punishment. As a consequence, many have not retained the language or passed it on. Part of my process of relearning my language includes documenting it through *The Birch Bark Eaters* (see Figure 3).

Searching for Compassionate Ethics

Sharing difficult stories in an art form is an effective tool for discovering empowerment through education, self-reflection, compassionate resis-

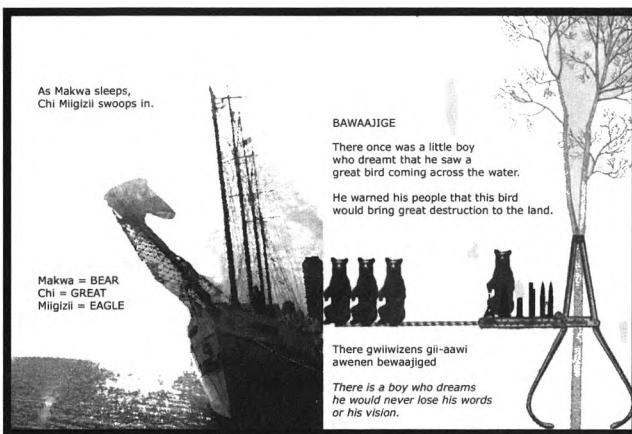


Figure 3. Title: "Anishnaabe boy's Medicine Vision. From *The Birch Bark Eaters* #2. Digital print, with text, on paper. 2007 Spy Dénommé-Welch. Original is in full color.

tance, and ethics in a space where resistance has historically been silenced. *The Birch Bark Eaters* explores issues of heritage, land, history, and colonization through family photographs. I used these images by transposing them into new media and works to deal with relevant current issues, while still upholding the deepest respect and compassion for the spirit and people depicted. The work has expanded into a four-part series that now includes digital media, experimental animation, and traditional media such as acrylics on watercolor paper and canvas.

Nathalie Piquemal (2006), who conducts research in education, argues for compassionate ethics, Aboriginal inclusive research, and ways of building empowerment among Aboriginal students through education in her article "Hear the Silenced Voices and Make that Relationship: Issues of Relational Ethics in Aboriginal Contexts." She writes: "The ethical basis of the stance I adopt is based upon the following principles: A commitment to difference, a commitment to reciprocity, a commitment to beneficence and respect for persons, and an ethic of caring" (p. 115). Piquemal further stresses, "many Aboriginal people who have been research participants have complained about researchers' unwillingness to respect local ethics, local conceptions of authority, protocols, and ownership, as well as intellectual property rights, in the name of the improvement of scientific knowledge" (pp. 115-116). Finally, she offers this poignant statement:

It is not surprising, then, that many Aboriginal people shy away from research projects. For years, through various policies of assimilation, they were told that their culture was inappropriate, that their language and their traditions were not welcome. We now tell them that we are interested in their culture, that their language and traditions are valuable, but do we fully question our motives? In other words, do we seek to value Aboriginal cultures or to value ourselves through the use of Aboriginal culture? (p. 120)

It might be fair for us all, Aboriginal, artist, or scholar, to contemplate these questions. Also, should or do Aboriginal artists need to question their own motives behind the work they produce, particularly when using their art and culture to push social and political statements? I recognize that many other contemporary Aboriginal artists such as K.C. Adams, Terrence Houle, and Cheryl L'Hirondelle are also attempting to speak to these questions in their own visual art or performance practice. In my case, I begin with assessing my position as an artist and a doctoral candidate in a Western university located in one of Canada's largest cities. Can these variables affect my storytelling and origins?

They affect everything. From this position I can fully appreciate the scope, purpose, and meaning of self-reflexive art forms, activism, and pedagogies and what it means to act as a responsible agent of cultural knowledge. It is not only about what we produce in academic and art worlds, but also how the practice of collecting knowledge is applied in ethical protocols. Winona LaDuke (2005) addresses similar issues about the practices of excavating the cultures and objects of Others. She writes, "In the process of leaving behind their histories in the old lands, the

colonists became a people in search of a history—a desire that led many to collecting the history of other peoples” (pp. 75-76).

Thinking about ethics is not simple, but we must be careful with it in our work. My art and academic work are continually applied to concepts of self-reflexive ethics; they compel me to honor a set of protocols and values that always shift and develop, yet do not necessarily compromise my imagination and knowledge. These points may converge and contradict one another, but values are always at risk of being affronted when one tries to imagine new, alternate ways to present a story or aspects of history. An artist’s work may still offend or raise contentious issues about the use of the images, histories, and stories despite vigilant use of ethics and respect for the medium, the object, or the story being told.

When I began using images collectively owned by my family, I was attentive to the fact that without my personal context, others might have a radically different view of the work. I am always negotiating the terms with which I use these images. To what extent could the looming subject of appropriation be limiting my creative expression? How do others perceive a work that is rooted in personal and family historical objects?

This process of learning and creativity has allowed me to enter a new transitional space and raise the following question. Can creativity and knowledge be appreciated and validated when applying an Indigenous way of knowing within academe? *The Birch Bark Eaters* interacts with this problem and assumes ownership as I hope viewers will take responsibility for how they gaze on the work.

This is a point from which I begin a dialogue about ethical issues. Who or what determines the line of appropriation? What accurately defines appropriation? Does my work appropriate, and if it does, then am I appropriating myself? What does it mean to appropriate appropriation? At what point as an Aboriginal artist and scholar can I withdraw from the close proximity of my own work and speculate on why a few individuals might see a fundamental problem with my approach and use of my heritage and history? Why would this be a problem? Is it because I am a living, breathing descendant of the people I portray in my work? Is it provocative for me to stand next to them while revealing the political story? Is it confrontational? Is it too humane? Or is it that some do not want the responsibility of knowledge and the responsibility to act consciously on it? These questions are not for me to answer in this article, but it is exciting to speculate.

The works containing images of my family are not currently for exhibit or sale. However, I did show some of these pieces at academic conferences in order to offer a context for how this work has evolved. This has enabled me to draw from public responses and gauge the political and pedagogical climate in which these issues exist. I have received questions ranging from the ethics of art to the broader issue of how we communicate through images. I have met with resistance from experts in the disciplines of

education and fine art who accuse me of colonizing my own heritage despite the fact that members of my community and family support my work.

This leads me to question: Is this about my pedagogical resistance, or is it about my having to overcome the resistance of others when they feel confronted? This brings us back to questions about how we respond to representations of social traumas in art and whether the trauma is in fact created the moment it conjures up uncomfortable social responses. I welcome constructive analysis, but topics of colonialism and racism, when illustrated through art and storytelling, are bound to reflect a deeper, hidden image in some viewers that they may not be willing to address. Many are not prepared to accept accountability or embark on a constructive dialogue. Perhaps this has to do with being uncomfortable hearing a First Nations descendant speak to the issue of colonization, ethics, and the notion of accountability. But I borrow from the words of Thomas King (2003): "So what? I've heard worse stories. So have you" (p. 8).

Is this really how pedagogy should work in academe among colleagues? I can only greet the challenge with open arms, as often their resistance has little to do with me and more to do with their own issues about their perceived power over the oppressed. Paulo Freire (1958) writes, "It is the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors" (p. 42). There may be no clearer way to illustrate what is at stake for the oppressor, whose aim is to silence and reinforce complacency and maintain co-dependency and control on the oppressed.

I may never live to know all the reasons for resistance to strong Aboriginal voices, but this offers me the opportunity to reflect on a statement written by photographer Nan Goldin (1996) about the importance of preserving people in her work. She writes,

My desire is to preserve the sense of peoples' lives, to endow them with the strength and beauty I see in them. I want the people in my pictures to stare back. I want them to show exactly what my world looks like, without glamorization, without glorification. This is not a bleak world but one in which there is an awareness of pain, a quality of introspection. We all tell stories which are versions of history—memorized, encapsulated, repeatable, and safe.... Memory allows an endless flow of connections. Stories can be rewritten, memory can't. If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory, a story without end.... People who are obsessed with remembering their experiences usually impose strict self-disciplines. I want to be uncontrolled and controlled at the same time. The diary is my form of control over my life. It allows me to obsessively record every detail. It enables me to remember. (p. 6)

I must preserve these images as they help me understand my place in this world. I need to examine the political context in which my family and community have struggled so that I can see the bigger picture and understand what the resistance, fear, anger, and silence are about. Whether or not these emotional responses are rational, they address Goldin's statements about pictures being like stories that can represent our history.

The stories I choose to tell offer me an opportunity to present a new, hopeful story without erasing the political context. I tell these stories not to force an end or closure, but to present a strategy for surviving as an Aboriginal person and storyteller. Some pieces of this story I do not know and may never find answers for. For example, the photographer(s) responsible for capturing our family photographs remain(s) unidentified. These missing pieces of information are not necessarily negative as they raise new questions such as those in the work of Alberto Manguel (2000):

But can every picture be read? Or at least, can we create a reading for every picture? And if so, does every picture imply a cipher merely because it appears to us, its viewers, as a self-contained system of signs and rules? Do all pictures allow for translation into a comprehensible language, revealing to the viewer what we might call their Story, with a capital S? (p. 7)

Pictures are not always as they appear, but they allow us to imagine and absorb the esthetic qualities contained in them. The esthetic becomes one of the strongest vectors for me to channel and supported with further research, informs my storytelling. But Thomas King (2003) reminds us: "So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories you are told" (p. 10). Heeding King's advice, I have considered the many versions of northern Ontario history, and specifically that of my own family.

I have done significant research into my own background to confirm and support aspects of my family's oral history and discovered published texts by historians about pre-pioneer and pioneer years in the Timiskaming region. Although little is written about First Nations people from the area, I did happen on two authors who included stories about my distant relations of the Wabigijik² clan. In Louis S. Kurowski's (1991) book *The New Liskeard Story* is a passing mention of one of my great-great-grandfathers who lived on Lake Timiskaming at the mouth of the river. Kurowski writes,

Not much is known about the Indian family who lived at the mouth of the river when William Murray first arrived. The name of the Chief was Angus Wabi. The river and the bay were named after him. The Chief adopted the white man's ways and continued to live in the community for many years. (p. 21)

I was especially struck by Kurowski's remarks in the conclusion of this passage where he states, "the coming of the white man to this land did not cause any unusual concern among the Indians. Chief Wabi and his band never did object to the clearing of land by the settlers. 'I never heard them complain,' said Frank Herron, 'They seemed to fit right in'" (pp. 21-22).

Bruce W. Taylor (2003) authored a book contradicting Kurowski's publication. Titled *New Liskeard: The Pioneer Years*, Taylor's research includes samples of letters and postcards written by Nancy Wabi,³ who at the turn of the century wrote to the government about the pilfering of her family's land and the encroachment of the European colonizer/settlers. In all fair-

ness, Kurowski might not have had access to this knowledge, but it is also quite possible that he simply overlooked or ignored Aboriginal versions of the story.

Nancy Wabi's letters to the Secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs reveal some of her grievances (Taylor, 2003). In her first letter dated July 6, 1917, she wrote:

Dear Sir, I would like to know if I am going to get anything for our land that was sold in New Ontario in the property of New Liskeard which is a town now. And about my great-grandfather's hunting ground from Cobalt and Elk Lake and Swastika up to Timmins. All this was my father's hunting ground and now those white people are making all kinds of money in timber and mines. When they first come up, we use them as best we could. We are working for them the best we can and they don't pay us enough that why we never got anything ahead. We are getting poorer all the time. I cannot forget that you sold my land and I want you to understand me. Who was the first here in New Ontario—Indian or White man, and I am going to tell you the same thing I told you last summer.... I tried nearly all the lawyers up in this northern country to try and get something for that property in New Liskeard. It cost me about three hundred dollars now. I tryid Mr. George Cohban, the Indian Agent about ten years ago. I asked fifteen thousand dollars for the property in New Liskeard and they told me the government took everything in New Ontario and if I should try to get it that I would get in jail ... I enclose there with 3 cent stamp to answer my letter.

Yours Obedient Servant

Miss Nancy Wabi

Timmins

I forgot to tell you that our father's name was Joachim Wabikijik and since the white people came they made it to Wabi instead. (p. 26)

Nancy Wabi tried to resolve her land claim over many years, and by the mid-1930s the Secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs determined in a brief correspondence that "The Department has gone very fully into this matter, and finds that she has no valid claim either to the land or arrears of annuity" (Taylor, 2003, p. 30).

Learning to understand better this historical resistance and its inter-generational effect has greatly informed and helped *The Birch Bark Eaters* evolve its narrative pathway. It is an expression of what I and others must walk and live with when entering the discursive world of art and storytelling. It has motivated me to look closely at what ethics can look like, how and by whom they are created, and whose purpose they truly serve. Storytelling does not always rectify these conflicts, but it can be useful in creating a platform where such questions can be raised and where new teachings can emerge. This topic is taken up in the piece "Anishnaabe Boy's Medicine Vision #2" (see Figure 4), which looks at the cost of sparing one's culture, ending conflict, and peacekeeping.

Finale (?)

Whey ah... Whey ahhh... Whey ahh... Ahneen manitou kwe.

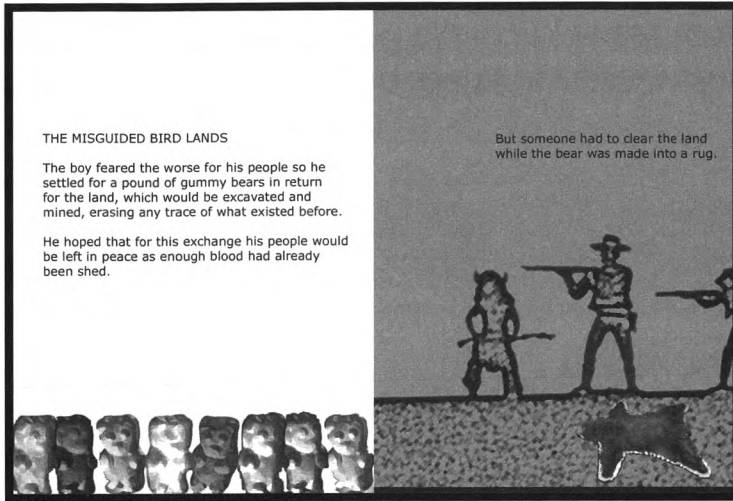


Figure 4. Title: "Anishnaabe boy's Medicine Vision #2." From *The Birch Bark Eaters #2*. Digital print, with text, on paper. 2007 Spy Dénommé-Welch. Original is in full color.

Some people in academia place importance on objectivity in knowledge production, excluding research that incorporates autobiography and the sharing of other notions of truths. But can multiple forms of research be applied and interrogate one another as two relative and creative forces?

In his article "Indigenizing the Academy? An Argument Against," Taiaiake Alfred (2007) writes:

Our experiences in universities reflect the tensions and dynamics of our relationships as Indigenous peoples interacting with people and institutions in society as a whole: an existence of constant and pervasive struggle to resist assimilation to the values and culture of the larger society. In this, contrary to what is sometimes naively assumed by us and propagated by universities themselves, universities are not safe ground. (p. 22)

Where and how can the academic and/or artist decolonize how we do research? If we are truly acting in the best interests of ethics, can we fully live up to this responsibility in the academic space? I have trouble believing that the solution can be based solely in a theory of decolonizing, because the term *decolonizing*, like *postcolonial*, suggests there may be an opposite to colonization or a way of undoing colonization. But is there really? If there is a way, then how can we imagine such a space, and who exactly will be imagining it? Is there a way to decolonize while nurturing an "ethic of caring?" (Piquemal, 2006). So far, most of those doing the imagining have been the inheritors of the benefits of colonization.

Alfred (2007) further argues that in "pacifying our existence as Indigenous academics while the actual state of our relations between our people remains aggressively colonial would cut us off from the reality of

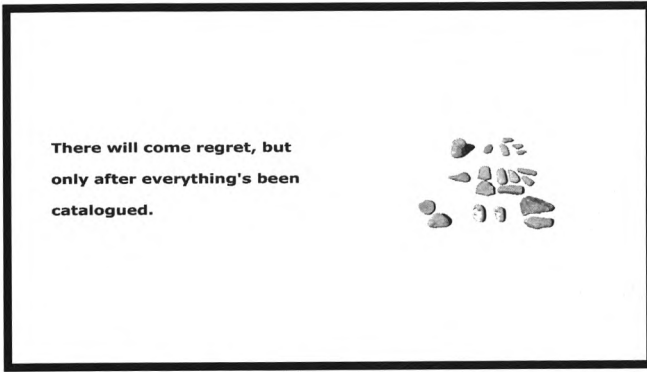


Figure 5. Title: "Museum Artifact #1." From *The Birch Bark Eaters* #2. Digital print, with text, on paper. 2007 Spy Dénommé-Welch. Original is in full color.

our people, rendering us useless, or worse, fashioning us into the tools of white power" (p. 22). I would go further and say that power is the product of privilege not limited by color, race, or gender, and if we are to produce work of relevance by and for our communities, then we must find ways to resist being pacified or silenced.

The struggle to maintain an Indigenous identity among a colonial presence in the Western academe has led me to a deeper understanding of the intertwining politics and histories and how they must be deciphered. I recognize that often there exists a dichotomy between linear and nonlinear storytelling that can be expressed through the syntax of visual language and text. Both of these spaces can offer ways to grasp the gravity of injustices in relation to land, language, culture, gender, and racism and reflect on the struggles the Natives experience against a contemporary and historical backdrop.

*Whey ah... Whey ahhh... Whey ahh...
Whey ah... Whey ahhh... Whey ahh... Meegwetch manitou kwe.
Whey ah... Whey ahhh... Whey ahh... Nimino-yaa!
Nimino-yaa! Manitou Kwe!*

Enter peacefully, spirit woman.

The red line that pulses through the quiet tones of my ancestors' voices provides the strength to reconfigure what is fragmented and caught between places. Although I may find comfort in the river, I also find joy in the stories that my ancestors left behind for me to discover such as their soft footprints and the details of their lives that now linger in my blood. The effects of generational trauma provide powerful ways to resist colonial residue. I am in a position to use images and texts to imagine and dwell in a new space—my transitional space—and walk a path toward

healing while protecting what is the most sacred to me: my Anishnaabe spirit and history.

Notes

¹The title *The Birch Bark Eaters* is based on the term *Adirondack*, a derogatory word for Algonquin people meaning “they eat trees.” Documentation indicates that bark, like leather and lichen, was sometimes eaten when food was scarce and starvation imminent, and descriptions of this can be found in Chief Thomas Fiddler and James R. Stevens’ (1985) historical work *Killing the Shamen*. This became a striking and powerful way for me to respond to the idea that poverty and starvation are not just painful experiences, but are also endured by many Aboriginal people in various capacities. The title is also evocative of Vincent van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters*, which is now a celebrated and revered series of works. In this I ask: What does it mean when poverty and starvation become cultural commodities?

²At some point in time the name Wabigijik was shortened to Wabi(e) with or without the *e*.

³Nancy Wabi (born circa 1870) was another descendent of the Wabigijik family tree.

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