

## **"We Went in as Strangers, and Left as Friends": Building Community in the Wahkohtowin Classroom**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper analyzes interviews with students of an interdisciplinary community-based class in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The class—"Wahkohtowin" ("kinship" in Cree)—brought together university students with youth from Oskayak, an Indigenous High School, and members of STR8 UP, a community-based organization for former gang members. The course centred on the theme of "justice," and students discussed legal and literary texts related to policing, criminal trials, and prison, and shared their own experiences and stories about justice and injustice. The students described the class as a profound experience of "community," which caused them to reflect critically upon structures that create and reinforce inequality and estrangement and impact quality of life. This paper describes the class within the larger context of community-engaged pedagogy and Indigenous approaches to community engagement. We explore major interview themes centred on the complexities of creating community in the classroom. Participants discussed encountering "strangers"; telling and witnessing traumatic stories; unsettling privilege; and enacting resistance and solidarity. Ultimately, the Wahkohtowin class intervenes in dominant models of engaged pedagogy and community-service learning, disrupting notions of a university-community binary, and creating a space where students began to practice solidarity and imagine a quality of life based on equality and justice for all.

**KEYWORDS** community-based education; community-engaged pedagogy; Indigenous community engagement; justice education; anti-foundational pedagogy

"We went in as strangers, and left as friends." This comment was made by a former street gang member about his experience in a 2014 community-based class held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The class, called "Wahkohtowin" ("kinship" in Cree), was developed and implemented by the co-authors in collaboration with community partner Stan Tu'Inukuafe, a social worker at Oskayak High School and founder of STR8 UP. The Wahkohtowin class brought together university students from our disciplines (Law, Indigenous Studies, and English) with youth from Oskayak, an

Indigenous High School, and members of STR8 UP, a community-based organization that provides peer support for former gang members. For twelve weeks, we met weekly in a classroom at Station 20 West, a local community enterprise centre, to learn with and from each other about “justice.” Students read and discussed legal and literary texts pertaining to policing, criminal trials, and prison, and, most importantly, they shared their own experiences and stories about justice and injustice. In the process, they built a sense of community and solidarity, and began to envision a quality of life based on equality and justice for all.

With funding assistance from the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (Prairie Region), we conducted a qualitative study following the program to investigate the impact on participants. Overall, they described the class as a profound and transformative experience that invited them to enact “community,” and to reflect critically upon the wider structures that create and reinforce inequality and estrangement within society. In particular, the class brought to the foreground stories of trauma, violence, and pain—much of it wrought by and through the criminal justice and carceral systems. Thinking through this subject matter as a group helped to illuminate structural violence and institutional racism, and inspire a shared commitment to resistance and solidarity.

This paper first describes the Wahkohtowin class and our community partners Oskayak High School and STR8 UP before positioning the class within the context of community-engaged pedagogy, contrasting it with dominant models of community service-learning, and situating it within “antifoundational” and Indigenous approaches to community-engaged education. Following a section on our research methodology, we discuss major themes emerging from our interviews, focusing on community and relationships, which students identified as the most important aspect of the class. Within this overarching theme, we trace a number of sub-themes, including encountering difference; telling and witnessing traumatic stories; unsettling privilege; and enacting resistance and solidarity. We explore the ways that students’ encounters in the classroom, and in particular the traumatic stories about the justice system shared by the STR8 UP members, illuminated the pre-existing colonial and class structures that reify the privilege of some members of society and subjugate others. Ultimately, we contend that the experience of community in the Wahkohtowin classroom caused students both to critique dominant structures and imagine a more just world together.

### **Partnerships and Place: Situating the Wahkohtowin Class**

In January 2014, we commenced the twelve-week class, having secured funding to expand and improve the course delivered the previous year and offer it again. Our focus was “justice,” discussed in five themes: policing, the criminal trial process, prisons, restorative justice, and missing and murdered Indigenous women. The four of us took turns facilitating the class. Six university students participated (two each from Law, Native Studies, and English), along with four Oskayak High School students and five members of STR8 UP. Two STR8 UP members were inmates at the federal

Willow Cree Healing Lodge (located outside Saskatoon); we obtained permission for them to join us each week along with an escort from Corrections.

Each class proceeded similarly: we sat in a circle around a central table, commenced with a meal, and then asked each participant to share something about their week. We then asked each to share their knowledge and experiences in relation to the topic of the day—whether that be prisons, policing, or missing and murdered Indigenous women. Next, we discussed a legal or literary text that pertained to the topic, referring to aspects of experiences shared earlier. As one of the university students noted, the method was to “[p]roblematize our narratives together.” To close the class, we had a final round of sharing/discussion and a ritual (introduced by our collaborator Stan) of a “group handshake,” whereby each would shake hands with every other participant and wish them a good week. We have previously reflected in more detail on the methods and pedagogy of the class (Buhler, Settee, & Van Styvendale, 2014).

Throughout the class, we emphasized the value of personal experience as well as theoretical or academic knowledge about the phenomena under discussion. As one university student observed, the class proceeded from the perspective that “[e]xperience is a reasonable place to glean knowledge and discern knowledge and produce it.” We embraced the notion that rich critique and production of knowledge can occur when a diverse group thinks through issues together. As another student summarized, “if we’re all coming from the same place, how are you really learning that much?” We promoted the idea that everyone was there to teach and to learn. One of the STR8 UP members emphasized this idea, saying that he joined the class to “teach and learn,” and that he very much wanted to “bring things to the table from behind the [prison] wall.”

Taking its name from the Cree word for relationship and the concept that we are all related (Settee, 2011), the Wahkohtowin class sought to acknowledge this interrelatedness and to ground ourselves in Indigenous knowledge of Treaty 6 territory/Métis homeland, where Saskatoon is located. While the class included participants from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds, the majority identified as First Nations or Métis citizens: three Indigenous university students, four Indigenous high school students, five Indigenous STR8 UP members, and two Indigenous facilitators.

The structure and content of the class were thus shaped by Indigenous ways of knowing and learning in and through community (Weaver, 1997), as well as by the founding commitments of Oskayak High School and STR8 UP to community-based education and support of Indigenous young people. Both Oskayak and STR8 UP fill a social and educational void left by a system that isolates and alienates Indigenous youth, and they embrace an education process that reflects community engagement. Oskayak, Saskatoon’s only public Indigenous High School, was established by community activists and Indigenous educators over thirty years ago to address the dropout rate of Indigenous students. Oskayak follows the principles of the Indigenous survival school movement initiated close to forty years ago in Canada to work with Indigenous educational concerns and make educational institutes more accessible to

marginalized Indigenous communities (Haig-Brown et al., 1997). The Wahkohtowin project builds on these gains, when Indigenous educators fought to have their voices heard in the formal education process.

Like Oskayak, STR8 UP was established from within the community—in this case, by a gang member who approached one of the chaplains at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre to ask how to leave the gang life. Working with individuals in the community and in federal and provincial correctional centres who wish to leave gangs, STR8 UP supports members in their healing journeys through a peer support model based on Indigenous philosophies. The organization also provides public education about gangs, and the members mentor youth “at risk” of joining or involved with gangs. The Wahkohtowin project extends these principles of community-based education, mentorship, and relational healing by creating a learning environment where participants of various ages and social locations learn from and with each other.

Finally, Wahkohtowin was shaped by the space in which the class took place: Station 20 West, a community enterprise centre in Saskatoon’s low-income Pleasant Hill neighbourhood and built from the “ground up.” Station 20 had its roots within two community service organizations, Quint Development Corporation and CHEP (Child Hunger Education Program) focused on social housing, employment training, and food sovereignty/security. We selected Station 20 because of its location and its historical symbolism as a site of struggle, collective action, and awareness raising: it was a community success story when it finally opened its doors in 2012. Later, the University of Saskatchewan established a satellite office there that serves as an outreach hub for community-university partnerships. Students commented on the fact that the learning space was accessible to them and provided a “relaxed atmosphere,” something that is not always the case for first-time students within a large university setting. Station 20 and the Wahkohtowin classroom are thus examples of what Teelucksingh (2006) calls “claiming space” (p. 3) in the urban context. Cities have often been sites of oppression and assimilation for Indigenous people (Anderson, 2013); as one Wahkohtowin participant observed: “it’s harder being in the city, being urban, because where’s one going to find what they’re looking for? How do they even know what they’re looking for? And then that’s where things can go dark and they can turn to drugs, alcohol, and stuff.” And while this is true, cities are importantly located on Indigenous land and, as we saw in the Wahkohtowin project, are sites of Indigenous culture, identity, reclamation, and activism.

### **The Wahkohtowin Class in the Context of Community-Engaged Teaching and Indigenous Pedagogies**

We situate our class within the field of community-engaged teaching and learning, drawing from what Butin (2010) termed an “antifoundational” approach to pedagogy and community engagement. This approach is “profoundly disruptive of how students normally acquire knowledge and from whom” (Butin, 2010, p. vii) and can “undermine our deeply held habits of mind and repertoires of action through

deliberate and distinctive learning experiences” (Butin, 2013, p. x). Summarizing this perspective, Hollander observes:

Antifoundational service-learning requires students...to ask fundamental questions about justice, to hear voices rarely heard and reveal the ‘deep divisions’ within which and through which we think about content knowledge, cultural openness, and oppression. (as cited in Butin, 2010, p. vii)

Wahkohtowin is antifoundational in that it asks students to hear each other’s voices, to appreciate one another as sources of knowledge, and to disrupt normative ways of thinking about “justice.” Antifoundational pedagogy “defamiliarizes the seemingly natural state of knowledge and social life, forcing students to ‘question their certainties and as such expand their sense of the possible’” (Butin as cited in Dorow et al., 2013, p. 70). Through the class, we asked students to question the idea that justice and its enactment are in any way neutral, and to overturn their assumptions about who is or should be “inside” university and/or prison walls.

In this regard, we have been inspired by the Inside-Out model of community-engaged pedagogy, which Butin (2013) identifies as “the embodiment, the most powerful model I had ever encountered of transformative education” (p. x). Founded by American scholar and activist Lori Pompa, Inside-Out is a model where college students take academic courses with individuals in prison. As Davis and Roswell (2013) explain,

[Inside-Out] begins with the assumption that all human beings—whether they reside behind bars or on the outside—have innate worth, a story to tell, experiences to learn from, perspectives that provide insight, and leadership to contribute to the community.... Offering an alternative model of community-engaged learning unfettered by paternalistic notions of “charity” or “service,” the Inside-Out model is rooted in reciprocity, dialogue, and collaboration. (p. 3)

Like Butin’s antifoundational approach, and similar to the transformative pedagogy of Inside-Out, Wahkohtowin is distinct from some models of community-engaged teaching, and particularly from traditional community service-learning, which, as Himley (2004) notes, has roots in middle-class aspirations to go into poor communities to help “improve the material and moral lot of the less fortunate they found living there” (p. 419). A community service-learning approach runs the risk of reproducing the social hierarchies and inequities that it attempts to address. Weah et al. (2000) ask us to “seriously consider who is doing what, to whom, and for what reason” (p. 673). They note that service-learning often relies on a charity model of “community service” that positions white middle-class people as “helpers” and people of colour as those in need of help (see also Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

The Wahkohtowin model is thus a critical, antifoundational response to the server-served dichotomy common in much community-engaged scholarship and teaching.

We problematize this top-down, binary model by involving three clusters of students plus ourselves as facilitators—each cluster internally complicated by intersections of race, class, and gender. This four-part structure reflects our core philosophy that ethical and egalitarian relationships between all participants—not only students and instructors, but students from various social locations—should be at the heart of education that desires to critique hierarchies of power and privilege and work toward a more just society.

We also situate the project within the tradition of critical Indigenous approaches to scholarship and knowledge, and therefore acknowledge that it takes place in the context of (and is inspired by) the efforts of Indigenous community activists and leaders locally, nationally, and internationally. Indigenous communities have been pushing for and requesting accountability from dominant places of power for decades and have achieved some gains. An international effort to enforce “free prior and informed” consent as a democratic right of impacted Indigenous communities before “development” takes place is one example. The endorsement of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by major world powers is another. Because research, development, and education have historically been done *to* Indigenous communities, new models have been developed. Although universities have, sadly, often been the sites of theoretical development and intellectual domination (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008), with the leadership of Indigenous scholars they have become contested spaces, where gains have been made (Kovach, 2009; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Settee, 2011).

Indigenous scholars have urged the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing in university spaces, theorized the impacts of colonialism, and placed the healing and wellbeing of Indigenous communities at the centre of their work. For example, Kovach (2009) has emphasized research practices based in traditional knowledge, rooted in community connection, and focused on empowerment. Battiste and Henderson (2000) have asserted the importance of community relations in research and education: “the educational experience must be designed to enhance Indigenous knowledge and the transmission of that knowledge must be effected holistically” (p. 92). The Wahkohtowin project is inspired by their work. As we explore below, the stories shared during the class helped us to illuminate the history of colonialism and injustice that continues to structure relationships in Saskatoon today. Most important for the students, though, was how the sharing of stories and experiences in the classroom created a sense of community. This community, we argue, was a space from which critical examinations of dominant approaches to knowledge production and justice unfolded, as well as a place to imagine and practice resistance and solidarity, and thus to enact collective wellbeing.

### **Research Methodology**

We obtained ethics approval for our study from the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. The study involved semi-structured oral interviews with

eleven of the 15 Wahkohtowin class participants: five university students, two Oskayak students, and four members of STR8 UP. We developed interview questions in relation to students' experiences and reflections about the class, although it was uncommon for all questions to be asked of each participant, and each interview followed a slightly different trajectory based on the participant's responses. We three researchers, along with our collaborator Stan, held interviews in person with individual students (each conducted about three); on average, each interview took about half an hour. We used digital voice recorders to record the interviews, and our research assistant transcribed each interview verbatim. We used a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2011, p. 359) to code the interview data into emergent themes. To protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used and quotations have been edited to remove any identifying information.

We are aware that as the creators and instructors of the Wahkohtowin program, in many ways we undertook the study as "insiders": we had previous teacher-student relationships with the interviewees. While "insider status" can prevent researchers from recognizing insights that might be apparent to those more removed from a particular social context, insider status can also open up valuable insights into nuances of data (Pelias, 2011, p. 662-663). Certainly, Indigenous researchers have criticized western research methodologies that "assume that the researcher is an outsider able to observe without being implicated in the scene" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p.137). As facilitators of the class, we were surely "implicated in the scene." Our own lived experiences and personal histories impact how we read and interpret the interviews. One of us (Priscilla) is Cree, two (Sarah and Nancy) are descendants of white settlers. Our co-facilitator Stan Tu'Inukuafe is an Indigenous man. All three authors have histories of community activism and connections to the three organizations whose students participated in our class (Oskayak High School, STR8 UP, and the University of Saskatchewan). Ultimately, we would agree with Johnson (2011) that "[a]ll theories, concepts, and findings are grounded in values and perspectives; all knowledge is contextual and partial; and other conceptual schemas and perspectives are always possible" (p.581). We therefore offer here our own critical "reading" and interpretation of the student interviews, acknowledging other possible perspectives and readings.

### ***Building Community in the Wahkohtowin Classroom: Analysis of the Interviews***

One of the university students commented that the meal we shared each week was a means of opening up a "common," familiar space to set the stage for the "uncommon" nature and activity of the class: "It's helpful to do sort of common things together before you do uncommon things like talking about injustice. [Eating together] is really helpful to foster those relationships." The idea of the "common" and the "uncommon" infuses participant comments about the encounters across difference that they experienced during the class, and the sense of connection and community that developed. In this section, we explore the major themes that

emerged from the interviews, all of which focus on the complexities of building community. We turn first to an analysis of students' initial apprehensions about the class, drawing on the work of Ahmed (2000) to show how these anxieties are shaped by hegemonic discourses about "strangers." We then consider how the stories—many of them traumatic—shared during the class literally brought to the table the impacts and ongoing manifestations of colonialism in our criminal justice system. We discuss how these stories worked in our classroom community, focusing on the themes of healing and solidarity. We examine also how the relationships formed during the class caused university students to think differently about their privilege. Finally, we move to an exploration of how our class became, in a small way, a site for Ahmed's "ethical encounters" and a shared commitment to social justice and quality of life for all community members.

### ***Anticipating "Strange Encounters"***

Participants described the apprehension and also the curiosity and anticipation that they felt before meeting for the first time. One STR8 UP member noted that she was initially uneasy because "we're the ex-gang members." Another member stated that at first he felt "scared," while a third commented that he was really looking forward to being part of the class because he would never "sit down and eat with these people any other time" in his day-to-day life. "We don't share the same friends or circles," he said, highlighting the significance of the classroom configuration, where people who "normally wouldn't...talk to" each other sat side-by-side—literally in the same circle. In addition, STR8 UP members noted the potential of being "judged," and also that they might intimidate other students because of their status as former gang members. Similarly, some of the university students spoke about being worried that their privilege might get in the way of relationships with non-university students. The Indigenous high school students described their curiosity about the other people in the room—both university students and former gang members. Everyone seemed to be aware that they were "going in as strangers."

These reflections call to mind Ahmed's (2000) theoretical work about "strange encounters" and what she terms an "ontology of strangers," showing how the "figure of the stranger" circulates in hegemonic discourse and influences the ways that people apprehend and approach one another. She argues that the "figure of the 'stranger' in dominant discourses is not someone that 'we *fail to recognize*'; rather, the 'stranger' is someone who '*we have already recognized* as a 'stranger'" (p. 3). Thus, Ahmed explains, embodied encounters between people are always framed by pre-existing power relations (p. 8). Discourses about strangers help to make it clear who belongs and who does not belong to a given community, and permit "the demarcation and enforcement of... boundaries" (p. 21-22).

By describing their initial classroom encounter as unusual or uncommon, our students acknowledged the forces—including settler colonialism, racism, and poverty—that installed barriers between them in the world outside. In their daily lives,



the participants would not have been fellow students, but rather positioned, through economies of race and class, and indeed through the barriers of the prison wall and the ivory tower, as strangers to one another. Dominant racist discourses in Saskatoon construct Indigenous people, and certainly individuals who have been involved with gangs, as “strangers.” One university student noted, for example, that “gang members are so vilified that it’s like they’re seen as monsters” by the larger society, while others indirectly acknowledged this construction by saying that the class “humanized” gang members for them. “I feel like it would be really cheesy to say,” one concluded, but “gangs are people too.”

However, we note that everyone—STR8 UP members, university students, and high school students—referenced feeling somewhat “strange” going into the Wahkohtowin class. It was not clear to any of the students exactly who might “belong.” In this way, the Wahkohtowin classroom disrupted from the outset easy notions of belonging and otherness, even as it brought into sharp focus the systems and discourses that dehumanize and hurt people and create pain within communities. We turn in the next section to an analysis of the stories of trauma and pain and how these stories became a central focus of solidarity and community building.

### ***“Hearing Others Speak Helps Me to Speak About My Traumas”: Trauma and Resistance in the Classroom***

In Saskatoon, as in Canada more generally, discourses of “otherness” are bound up with ongoing practices and policies of settler colonialism. Scholars have long analyzed how these dehumanizing discourses function to “justify” land theft and economic exploitation (Berkhofer, 1978; Francis, 1992; Goldie, 1989). As Comack et al. (2013) argue, “[a] key characteristic of colonialism is the effort to govern indigenous inhabitants of the occupied lands. At its heart, therefore, is the construction of unequal relations of power between the colonizers and the colonized” (p.35). The regulation of Indigenous lands and bodies is enacted in colonial law and enforced through policing, the criminal justice system, and incarceration as an ongoing structure of power (Monture, 2007). In Canadian prairie cities, inadequate housing, poor health outcomes, economic marginalization, and high rates of criminalization and incarceration are legacies of colonialism. As Comack et al. (2013) write, “[c]olonialism and its effects have contributed to the grinding, racialized poverty of inner-city communities” (p.17).

Throughout the Wahkohtowin class, members of STR8 UP told intimate stories about their experiences with police, in courts, and inside correctional centres. When we watched *Two Worlds Colliding* (Hubbard, 2005), a documentary about the police practice of taking Indigenous men outside the Saskatoon city limits in the winter and leaving them to freeze, members shared their own experiences of being racially profiled by police. When we talked about the criminal trial process and read sections of *R. v. Gladue*, and its sentencing provision for Indigenous people, some of the members indicated that they had never heard of it or knew little about it. One who

was incarcerated at the time said, “Never once did [it] come up in my court. It’s good to know; it would’ve been good to know a long time ago. Now I won’t get the chance to use it.” When we read the portions of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* pertaining to administrative segregation, two STR8 UP members vividly shared their stories of the pain and experience of what Guenther (2013) calls the “social death” of solitary confinement. When we discussed the subject of missing and murdered Indigenous women, the majority of the STR8 UP members, as well as one Oskayak student, had first-hand stories of women and girls that they knew, or were related to, who were among the missing. The stories of trauma, violence, and pain—shared (primarily) by members of STR8 UP—focused the group on the ways in which personal trauma is often linked to larger structural violence. These stories in the end became the central “texts” that knit the Wahohtowin community together, creating a sense of being heard and a desire to educate in those who told them; a recognition of privilege and a commitment to change in those who heard them; and a common critique of systems of oppression.

While many interviewees did not speak directly about their childhood and upbringing, the weeks of meeting and talking together made apparent that the gang-involved participants, and to some extent the high school students, had been impacted by layers of trauma affecting their ability to learn and to succeed. In her work with immigrant and Indigenous women, Horsman (2000) talks of the impact of trauma on students’ ability to learn and succeed in her classes. Similarly, a STR8 UP participant, a residential school survivor and long-term inmate, spoke about his alienation from the education system: “I really wasn’t interested in anything in school,” he said. “To me it was.... what’s really there for me? When you’re in residential school, [you] lose a lot of self-confidence and everything.”

Certainly, as stories of residential school trauma are exposed, we are beginning to understand the depth of pain of the survivors. Metatawabin (2014) describes his grief:

In the residential schools, the secrecy began at dawn: we were beaten from the time we first awoke. Speaking out against the injustice in letters home was also cause for punishment. We coped in whatever way we could, often by imitating our oppressors. At St. Anne’s, the stronger boys beat the weaker boys either with their fists or with tamarack branches. Sexual abuse was rampant too, with the staff forcing themselves on the girls and boys, and the students forcing themselves on each other. (p. 288)

Here we see in graphic detail the effects of the schools, including lateral violence within Indigenous communities. While the Canadian government has issued a formal apology and implemented the residential school settlements, the “aftermath of this violence has resulted in longstanding effects that have been passed from one generation to the next, thus the term ‘intergenerational trauma’” (Cote-Meek, 2014, p. 18). As one STR8 UP member observed, “Things that happened to Natives a long

time ago are still in effect today.” Further, the institutional violence of the schools continues today in the child welfare system, which currently has more children “in care” than at the height of the residential schools (Fournier & Crey, 1997), as well as the prison system, where Indigenous people are overrepresented (Rymhs, 2008).

STR8 UP members are deeply affected by this legacy of intergenerational trauma: many were separated from their birth families and/or experienced violence in the home. Many join street gangs at a young age in attempts to find belonging and a sense of community; in fact, many have family who are themselves involved in gangs, and so they are born into “gang families” (*STR8 UP and Gangs*, 2011). Although Aboriginal street gangs can be seen as a form of resistance to colonial oppression (Comack et al., 2013), they also reiterate the lateral violence and identification with the oppressor that Metatawabin (2014) describes above, as members of opposing gangs fight each other (rather than the colonial oppressor) for territory and power. As one STR8 UP member commented, “Many of us lost our language, identity, and now today we run around with our heads cut off. Gang life does not help us either, because we fight amongst ourselves.”

Metatawabin (2014) also highlights the secrecy and silence engendered by the residential schools, explaining how survivors were trained not to write or speak out for fear of retribution. Similarly, incarcerated STR8 UP members discussed being “passive,” “quiet,” and emotionally “closed off” at the start of the Wahkohtowin class. In this context, speaking out and telling one’s story becomes a particularly potent act, and “pedagogy that supports and encourages students to find their voices, that resists further objectification and that helps students regain a sense of liberty in themselves” is vital (Cote-Meek, 2013, p. 163). For STR8 UP members being able to share and examine the trauma at the hands of institutions (residential schools, child welfare systems, police, and prisons) was a positive, empowering experience that contributed to a “sense of healing.” “It’s better to let things out rather [than] to hold them in because if you bottle things up, you’re going to explode one day,” one member said.

“But none of this would have happened,” a student suggested, “if the community had not been created, if we didn’t...come together to talk about these issues.” Like many of the participants, this student stressed how, in general, “we do not have communities in...classrooms.” Cote-Meek (2014) writes that it is vital for students to find spaces to debrief and find “community support” to deal with vestiges of trauma and the “emotions that are evoked” (p. 152). As one STR8UP member confirmed, the Wahkohtowin class was indeed a “roller coaster of emotions,” from happiness and laughter to sadness. STR8 UP members also stressed the trust and support that they felt in the classroom, which they characterized as a space in which they were listened to and respected. One said, “[I]t seemed like I knew everybody at the class. Like... we were all supporting each other. A feeling of comfort too. I didn’t feel nervous or thinking, ‘Should I say that or should I say [this]?’ I felt free to say what I wanted and share what I felt, and my real opinion.” Another shared, “I was allowed to speak about what I felt without looking over my shoulder,” adding that “[h]earing others speak

helps me to speak about my traumas.” Outside of the censorship and surveillance of the prison system, where some of the students lived out their daily lives, the Wahkohtowin class became a “community of memory,” which Cote-Meek (2014) suggests is important in classroom discussions of colonialism and trauma. As we recognized the knowledge of those with lived experience of the justice system, and as we acknowledged the missing and murdered, we created a community in which we were “call[ed]...to listen” to each other, as one university student remarked.

But sharing stories of pain is not sufficient to resist colonialism, as Monture-Angus (1995) argues: “To end exclusion, we must do more than offer our pain, but we must also offer our visions on what must come” (p. 29). STR8 UP members discussed how learning about the history of colonialism, discussing racism, and examining law critically helped them to reinterpret their own experiences, and thus to resist colonialism and institutional violence. One member explained how she came to understand that “some people are not exposed to violence, and others have no choice”; another commented that the class had helped him learn about the effects of the residential schools, which he had never considered before. A third spoke about how he had been taught not to question the system, but he now realized that it worked to keep colonial power intact: “It’s like they want to keep us behind bars just to make money off of us and we let that happen.” All members talked about wanting to translate their increased political consciousness into action—to “offer their visions of what must come,” to recall Monture-Angus. One explained his commitment to “help out the younger generation, the teens that are in trouble, that are drinking, working the streets, doing drugs, getting involved with gangs.... That’s what I want to help—these young teens break that cycle before it’s too late.... I want to open up people’s eyes to the world.” Another indicated that the class would help her “fight against punishments that are wrong and things that the law is doing wrong to the person that’s charged.... Like it will help us learn what to do about it and how to go about it the right way.”

### ***Privilege and Solidarity***

While STR8 UP members discussed how traumatic stories inspired commitments to healing and resistance, university students (and to a lesser extent Oskayak students) discussed how hearing these stories made them aware of their own privilege—a process both “uncomfortable” and “useful.” One student said that the class helped him understand “privilege” as the “absence of state power” and violence in his own life. Likewise, another realized that she had been “really sheltered from ever experiencing any of these things.... whereas so many people, they are dropped right into those scenarios right from the start.” An Indigenous university student described feeling “in the middle”: she felt privileged because of her education and the absence of violence in her immediate experience, but she also had family connections to some of the things that were discussed, and she felt that her identity as an Indigenous woman often positioned her as “the other” within dominant discourses

and university contexts.

Interestingly, university students said that the Wahkohtowin class taught them how not to feel “paralyzed” by their own privilege, but rather to consider what they had to contribute to a discussion about justice, and what actions they might take to resist injustice. As one student reflected, it was impossible to feel paralyzed “because you’re...talking with people, you’re learning from each other.” By hearing stories of injustice in a relational context—that is, in the context of wahkohtowin or “kinship” with those affected—students felt the need to activate what they had learnt. One said, “[I need to] understand what kind of role and responsibility I hold in not letting these stories just sit inside me but to actually make them active in what I do.” Another recognized his privilege not as individual luck or good fortune, but as a function of larger systems and structures that create and distribute injustice unevenly such that some bodies experience more violence and pain than others (Farmer, 2005). He asked, “What does it mean to be solidaritous with these communities and these folks? I don’t know the answers to such questions, but [I know] that it’s important to speak to those people who have lived experience of these things.” Another similarly focused on hearing from those with lived experience: “we know intellectually that a lot of inequality exists,” he said. “But hearing some of the stories from people really changes that and challenges that and it emphasizes the difference between intellectually knowing something is the case and emotionally knowing something is that case.”

In discussing testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission events (held for residential school survivors and the Canadian public), Simon (2013) highlights the danger of turning traumatic stories into “spectacle” (p. 132). He warns against pathos as a primary response to traumatic stories, explaining how when witnesses feel “sorrow and sympathy” for those they see as victims, they “confirm their ‘own humanitarian character’ and consequently feel good about feeling bad” (p. 133). He further argues that hearing traumatic stories “as narratives of victimhood...increases the likelihood of a dissociative splitting off in which listening accords no need to take on a sense of responsibility for a social future that would include those whose stories one is listening to” (p. 132). Tellingly, not one interviewee spoke of feeling sad or sorry for the STR8 UP members, or of seeing them as victims. Instead, both the university and Oskayak students talked about valuing the knowledge of the STR8 UP members: “They have really acute knowledge of something that a lot of us don’t even have to think about,” one university student explained, while another said, “I was most struck with what I learned from [the STR8 UP members] I think.” The stories shared by STR8 UP members certainly had an impact on the youth, who connected what they heard in the classroom to their own lives. As an Oskayak student observed, “I learned a lot from everybody, especially the STR8 UP members because they had experience.” “They provided a lot of information through their stories and from what they’ve been through and how they got through it,” she continued. “I thought that was really educational because now I understand that’s what my brother is going

through. And I'm like 'Oh I could do this to help him.'" These comments illustrate how the STR8 UP members became teachers and mentors, rather than victims—they had “important things to teach,” as one participant noted. This was both “humbling” for the university students and “empowering” for the STR8 UP members. As one STR8 UP member said, “I realized that I did know quite a bit about the system, just from being in it. And that what I know is valuable to some people.” Ultimately, participants recognized that “knowledge could disseminate and flow from any corner and everybody had something to offer,” and they came together in a common learning project.

### ***Ethical Encounters and “Creating the World We Want to See”***

Interview participants affirmed again and again the importance of the relationships and friendships formed in the Wahkohtowin classroom. They identified the stories, the circle formation, and the shared meal as helping them to get to know each other and become comfortable together—to move from being “strangers” to being “friends.” At the same time, participants recognized that the community in the classroom would not be sustained into the future; it was “episodic but profound,” as one student put it. This recognition was uncomfortable and even sad for some students. In this section, we draw on Ahmed's (2000) “ethical encounters” to reflect on the significance of the community formed in the Wahkohtowin classroom, despite its fleeting nature.

Interview participants spoke at some length about how the class helped to create a sense of community. One participant noted that “barriers” that held them apart outside of the classroom were “broken down” as the class progressed. A STR8 UP member explained that he shared his personal stories because trust was established in the group: “So I trusted them, right? To be able to do that otherwise I wouldn't have said anything. If I don't feel comfortable somewhere, usually I won't talk.” Others commented on the “comfortable atmosphere” of the room, and how sitting in a circle and eating together “made us more comfortable.” One university student observed that sharing food together contributed to a “family building atmosphere,” while another added that the class created “a sense of community and connectedness.” Several participants commented on how the class showed them simply that everyone was “human”: a STR8 UP member said she learned that “we're still humans. We're all the same,” and a university student noted that “we are all human—we are all capable of listening and caring about one another.”

These comments emphasize the importance of safety, comfort, and trust, as well as a strong focus on commonality rather than difference. However, participants did not end their comments on this idealized note. Many went on to speak about the limitations of the Wahkohtowin community, expressing a longing for even stronger and more genuine connections within and beyond the classroom. One of the university students said he wished there had been even more time and space for “informal, personal interaction” during the class, which he thought would lead to a more genuine “sense of community and caring for each other.” He explained that the sharing and

interactions in the class “opened up” the desire for this. Another participant wanted the group to engage in social activities beyond the classroom, suggesting bowling or similar activities: “I think that would build more lasting relationships after that class is over,” she said. “We’re more likely to see each other as friends and...have ways to communicate.”

Students explained that although some would try to stay in touch with each other via social media, overall the community of the class ended after the twelve weeks. This recognition caused students to reflect on the structures—both material (such as prison walls) and societal (class, race, and settler colonialism)—that make ongoing relationships difficult beyond the classroom. However, despite this recognition, most would nevertheless carry with them the memory of these relationships into the future. One participant stated that he would remember the stories “for decades,” and another noted that the class would “continue to be with [her].” Another concluded simply that the Wahkohtowin classroom was “a really special space...and we need more of that.”

Ahmed (2000) provides a helpful framework for the interpretation of participants’ comments about community. In response to the forces of stranger ontology that reify dominant hierarchies and cement ideas about “strangers” and “those who belong,” Ahmed calls for a politics of “ethical encounters”: “Thinking about how we might work with, and speak to, others, or how we may inhabit the world *with* others, involves imagining a different form of political community, one that moves beyond the opposition between common and uncommon, between friends and strangers, or between sameness and difference” (p. 180). Ahmed urges us to move beyond “what ‘we’ have in common – and what ‘we’ do not have in common” (p. 180) to a commitment to imagine and create community and collectivities through a mutual commitment to justice. For Ahmed, this requires a politics where we establish “an alliance through the very process of being unsettled by that which is not yet” (p. 180).

In their interviews, participants engaged quite extensively in discussing commonalities and differences. But we would suggest that the community in the Wahkohtowin classroom did not simply hinge on feelings of “commonality” and “transcending difference,” developed through the class. Rather, students’ experiences of community in the classroom also caused them to feel unsettled and bothered by the very limits of this community, which had helped to illuminate so starkly the injustices of the world around them. This inspired a common commitment to resisting ongoing structures of settler colonialism, racism, and classism. As one participant noted, the class “politicized” him. In this way, participants entered into an alliance—albeit a fleeting one—based on a mutual experience of being “unsettled by that which is not yet” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 180). We argue that the space of our classroom was thus one that called participants towards a critical and politicized engagement with the world, challenging them to “imagine a different form of political community” (p. 180).

## **Conclusion**

Our interviews reveal that the Wahkohtowin class was in many ways a transformative and antifoundational learning experience for most participants. It helped to unsettle participants' ideas about privilege, power, and justice, and invited them to forge a community within the classroom. There, they began to practice solidarity and critique the conditions that keep communities estranged and cause some people to experience disproportionately more violence and trauma than others. Our research invites further theorizing and inquiry into the ways in which "community" and relationships between students operate within antifoundational classrooms, and also into the affective dimensions of antifoundational pedagogies. By problematizing traditional notions of the "community-university" binary and sources of knowledge, our project also invites reflection on the complex and politicized processes of knowledge production in community-engaged education settings and impacts on quality of life of all.

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