
“Just” Stories or “Just Stories”? Mixed Media Storytelling as a Prism for Environmental Justice and Decolonial Futures

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ABSTRACT Our lives and the lives of those we study are full of stories. Stories are never mere stories. Qualitative researchers who document, hear, and listen to participant lived-experiences encounter and witness the intimate spaces of people’s everyday lives. Researchers thus find themselves in the position of translator between diverse communities: those affected by policies, the academy and public officials. For academic-activists committed to listening to situated stories in order to improve public policy, several critical questions emerge: How do we do justice to these stories? What are the ethics of engagement involved in telling stories about those who share their knowledges and lived-experiences with us? Can storytelling bridge positivist and post-positivist research methods? Do policymakers listen to stories? How? What can researchers learn from Indigenous storytelling methods to envision decolonial, sustainable futures? To respond to these critical questions, this paper draws from literature in community-engaged research, critical policy studies, interpretive research methods, Indigenous research methods, political ethnography, visual methods and social justice research to argue that stories are never simply or *just* stories, but in fact have the potential to be radical tools of change for social and environmental justice. As will be discussed with reference to three mixed media storytelling projects that involved the co-creation of digital stories with Indigenous communities in Canada, stories can intervene on dominant narratives, create space for counternarratives and in doing so challenge the settler-colonial status quo in pursuit of decolonial futures.

KEYWORDS Mixed media storytelling, environmental justice, Indigenous youth, relational research, arts of engagement

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released the final report in 2015, Canadians across the country bore witness to injustices perpetuated by colonial law and policies at the hands of the state. This truth-telling, fact-finding initiative engaged Canadians in a dialogical process of reconciliation while seeking to redress the legacy of residential schools and envision alternative, brighter futures (Calls to Action, 2015). As is widely known, the residential school system in Canada removed Indigenous children from their families and cultures without consent while dislocating them from their communities, identities,

languages, and lands (Coulthard, 2013; Million, 2013). To move forward, while uncovering these uncomfortable truths about the emotional and physical injuries caused by the colonial residential school policy, the final report produced by the Commission outlined 94 Calls to Action. These ranged from adopting and implementing the *United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as well as developing a national action plan, strategies, and other concrete measures into laws and policies and to create mandatory education about reconciliation from Kindergarten to Grade Twelve as well as within higher education (Calls to Action 43, 44, 62). In addition to developing more socially just laws, policies and education curriculum, the Calls to Action also referred to the role of the media to reframe Canadian-Indigenous relations (Calls to Action 84). Researchers who are invested in social and environmental justice have a role to play in responding to each of these calls. As I discuss in this paper, through mixed media storytelling as a relational art of engagement, researchers can connect with communities in an ongoing effort to witness injustice, learn about the ongoing effects and *affects* of colonial laws and policies while imagining brighter, decolonial futures in collaboration with community partners. This ethic involves an investment into relationships, reciprocity, and respect. To counter an extractivist mode of research production that enters a field site and removes data, this approach entails listening to communities—including their more-than-human environments—and a commitment to long-term relationship-building and structural change (Wall Kimmerer, 2013). One way to do so is through the practice of storytelling.

As this essay discusses from my vantage point as a non-Indigenous academic seeking to work in solidarity with Indigenous communities for environmental justice, engaging in relational arts-based research must go beyond just producing stories for the sake of storytelling, and orient itself to the interrogation and interruption of status quo inequities. This mode of community-engaged scholarship directs its attention to systemic injustices while aiming to create space for the voices of those directly affected by colonial policies that affect their everyday lives. Mixed media storytelling, which is a research approach that draws from Indigenous, intersectional and interpretive research methods, is an avenue with the potential to do so. Building upon the rich foundation laid by scholars of Indigenous research methods, this essay will assess the potential of mixed media storytelling for the enhancement of social justice research by discussing three collaborative visual media projects with academic-activist and Indigenous partners from across Canada.

Storytelling as Relational Research: Learning from Indigenous Research Methods

Indigenous research is action-oriented at its core. There exists a rich body of scholarship in the field of Indigenous methods, from which academics can draw from as they develop their research proposals and strategies (Kovach, 2009; Strega & Brown 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Specifically, Margaret Kovach discusses her training in qualitative research as she sought out a lens that would not just give voice to marginalized peoples, but generate dialogue, stress social justice possibilities for Indigenous peoples and contribute to decolonization (Kovach, 2009, 2015). Her discussion of Indigenous research methods intersects with the aims and orientations of interpretive, qualitative, and emancipatory research

approaches, including the foundations laid by intellectual traditions of feminism, critical hermeneutics, postmodernism, and critical theory, which articulate a commitment for social and political transformation. These approaches aim to engage in a relational research practice that emphasizes “research as resistance” (Strega & Brown, 2015; Swartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Wiebe, 2016). An emphasis on meaning-making, storytelling, and challenging generalizable, monolithic truth claims brings these approaches into conversation with Indigenous research methods. As Kovach articulates, these methods are now emerging from the margins and have a place on the menu of options for scholars who intend to commit to long-term decolonial research (Kovach, 2015). Indigenous methods align with interpretive methods to (re)introduce the importance of stories into research (Kovach, 2009; Pachirat, 2017; Swartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Wiebe 2016). At the same time, when considering the ethics of engagement and who has the authority to tell stories, researchers must learn when to step back and rather than translate stories from Indigenous communities, create spaces for them to tell their own stories in their own voices on their own terms. This is one potential way to support the self-determination of Indigenous communities through a relational research process along an ongoing, continuous, iterative path to reconciliation.

There are four key components of Indigenous research methods that this paper will consider in relation to the practice of conducting mixed media storytelling with Indigenous communities on creative collaborative research in Canada. Following from Kovach, these four components include: *holistic foundations*, *relational research*, *collective action*, and *creative methods* (Kovach, 2015, p. 55). First, the concept of *holistic foundations* draws into focus how Indigenous epistemologies are multifaceted, diverse, fluid, nonlinear, and relational. They connect lived-experience to the creation of knowledge production, which is transmitted through “stories that shape-shift in relation to the wisdom of the storyteller at the time of the telling” (Kovach, 2015, p. 53). A holistic research orientation requires an acknowledgement and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate ways of knowing that connect mind, body, experience, and community with the natural or more-than-human environment.

As such, this research is *relational*, which means that the relationship between researchers and participants are a natural component of the research design. This involves an emphasis on “reciprocity and humour” (Kovach, 2015, p. 54; Wall Kimmerer, 2013). Doing so implies respect for the natural or more-than-human environment. For instance, it means taking only what you need from communities to counteract the history of extractivist research (Wall Kimmerer, 2013). A relationship-focused model of research requires a lengthy investment into community, which means taking time to get to know the people and the place. It may involve travel to remote locations more than once, and moving slowly in the field to get to know community-members. This could mean leaving the consent form, audio recorder, or video camera behind for an initial visit and taking time to listen, to get to know Elders and community leaders, connecting with youth, listening to stories, and participating in ceremonies or community protocols. Rather than approaching community as the fly-in expert, this relational approach necessarily requires humour and humility and listening to community members to hear what their concerns are in order to involve them in a meaningful way in

the project design. At the same time, researchers must be clear about what they can offer to community and be in service to community. Academics bring a range of skills and experiences that can be useful, whether that is scientific knowledge about health and ecosystems or how to conduct archival research or operate research technologies ranging from GIS to video camera. In the process of sharing skills and experiences, researchers interested in Indigenous methods will also learn from communities. It is imperative to think about respect, gifting, and protocols. Before entering the community that a researcher wishes to partner with, they must think about the gifts they bring and be willing to engage in a reciprocal gift-reciprocity exchange.

Flowing from this, researchers engage with communities through an ethic of *collective action* with the shared aims of challenging colonial injustice and pursuing social change. It is important that researchers clearly articulate their positionality and where they are coming from as they approach community. For instance, elaborate why they are interested in the topic of study and how they envision a collaboration taking shape. Communities will want to know about what motivates the researcher. Researchers must also be mindful of the fact that communities are diverse and do not speak with one singular voice. Moreover, despite good intentions to pursue collective action, this does not mean that these relations are always cohesive or smooth. In fact, it is most likely that frictions, tensions, and challenges will emerge. Researchers who find themselves engaged in Indigenous research projects will thus need to reflect on this discomfort and be accountable to community leaders, partners, and protocols while working through these tensions. Seeking the support from cultural advisors such as advisors and community-based mentors can assist with doing so.

Furthermore, a central aspect of Indigenous methods centres the significance of *creative methods*, where stories, dreams, songs, dances, feasts, and ceremonies become legitimate ways of sharing emotive, felt, poetic knowledges (Kovach, 2015; Million, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson, 2008). These modes of knowledge exchange contend with objective, positivist social science research. In contrast, they are emotive, personal, caring, and heartfelt. They connect researchers to communities and cultivate an “atmosphere of engagement” (Wiebe, Aguirre, Becker, Brown, Claxton, & Angell, 2016). When collaborating on creative mixed media storytelling projects such as digital stories, PhotoVoice or community-mapping, researchers and communities together become part of a research journey. They spend time together and learn from each other, often with food, laughter, and music. In sum, while non-Indigenous scholars can apply Indigenous research methods to their scholarship, doing so requires reflexivity of one’s positionality. This includes respect for Indigenous knowledge systems as experiential, personal, relational, storied and connected to lands, waters and community life. The next section of this paper draws upon these four features of Indigenous research methods and discusses the practical experiences of collaborating with Indigenous communities in Canada on mixed media storytelling initiatives. The final section speaks to the importance of connecting these creative, relational experiences back to policy-making processes across multiple layers or levels of government (community, municipal, Indigenous, provincial, federal, international, etc.) in order to collaboratively seek environmental justice and transformative change. As will be discussed, this involves not speaking on behalf of

communities, but creating connections, committing to long-term relationships, sharing resources and being available for ongoing policy dialogue.

Mixed Media Storytelling and the Art of Engagement

To situate myself in relation to the focus of this paper on incorporating Indigenous methods in social and environmental justice research, I'll share how I began to develop an interest in mixed media storytelling, a creative method of collaborative engagement with partnering research communities that combines multiple modalities, i.e. photography, film, painting, and involves the following key elements: a) interrogation of monolithic narratives; b) co-creation of community stories; c) interruption of asymmetrical policy processes with the aim to democratize knowledge production.

During my doctoral studies, I was struck by a film called *The Disappearing Male* which drew my attention to the environmental health harms experienced by members of the Aamjiwnaang Nation living within an area known as Canada's Chemical Valley. Elsewhere, I document their experiences fighting for environmental justice (Wiebe, 2016). This story resonated with me and I wanted to learn more about how the *slow violence* of these injustices could be ongoing in Canada, out of sight and out of mind for most Canadians (Nixon, 2011). I relocated to Sarnia, Ontario/Anishinabek territory and engaged in participatory action research with community members. Nearing the final stages of my research, I was approached by youth leaders to work on a public education project about Anishinabek culture, something that was notably absent from their local high school curriculum. We decided to turn this project into a film, began to fundraise, and eventually co-produced *Indian Givers* and then screened it at the local high school the following Spring.

As my doctoral research study period came to a close in 2012, I relocated back to the West Coast of Canada, to Coast Salish territory where I grew up, and began a post-doctoral position. I was deeply moved by the experience of co-producing a collaborative film project with Indigenous youth leaders from Aamjiwnaang who taught me so much. Subsequently, I purchased a camera with my first paycheck. Soon, while based at the University of Victoria, I was called upon to document different community events on and off campus. One included the resurgence of Tsawout Nation's reef net fishing practices, which a team of academic-activists co-produced as a film called *To Fish as Formerly*. Although the film did not radically transform the state-led deliberative process over the expansion of this pipeline project, the film became a product of significant value to the community. Tsawout leaders presented it as part of their Aboriginal oral evidence before the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion project during the November 2014 hearings held in Coast Salish territory, Victoria B.C. This demonstrates one way in which collaboratively produced visual media can create relationships and speak back to and inform policy initiatives and processes, especially on difficult multilayered topics like Canada's resource extraction industry. As a post-doctoral fellow, I continued to collaborate with Coast Salish communities on several projects that incorporated creative and relational components (Wiebe et al., 2016). Furthermore, while based at the University of Victoria, I applied for federal funding to pursue post-doctoral research that examined official responses

to former Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike, with the underlying motivation of trying to better understand what it means to be in a treaty relationship today, a concern central to Theresa Spence's high profile effort. After an initial visit to Attawapiskat to attend the annual pow wow in the summer of 2015, I was invited to return to the community the following winter to work with the high school art students on a critical media studies and digital storytelling project. As Ashlee Cunsolo Willox and her research team discuss, digital storytelling is a research method that can deepen qualitative and narrative inquiry while focusing on "community participation, capacity development, social justice, and the decolonizing of research, knowledge and method" (Cunsolo Willox, Harper, Edge, 'My Word': Storytelling and Digital Media Lab, & Rigolet Inuit Community Government, 2013, p. 129). This creative and collaborative method of visual mixed media storytelling can be understood as a "critical visual methodology" to borrow Gillian Rose's term, and includes an emphasis on taking images seriously within their context, considering the social conditions and effects of images as well as their modes of circulation and the perspective of the researcher as they look at images (Rose, 2016, p. 22). With respect to my emerging relationships in Attawapiskat, what began as a project to examine official responses to former Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike evolved into an additional dimension which centered on locating youth voices in the process of envisioning healthy and sustainable community wellness that moved beyond the negative portrayals of the community in the media.

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), this narrative research, which began as a critical discourse analysis of mainstream media, evolved into the Reimagining Attawapiskat project, which centers youth voices in the storytelling process as they sought to counter the predominant portrayal of their community as crisis-laden. This additional funding allowed us to assemble a diverse research team including community-members, youth leaders, academics and artists. Together, through a series of workshops held in community, we co-produced photo essays and digital stories that highlight Attawapiskat youth perspectives about the connections between their culture, health, wellness and the environment. This project, what we called the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* project aims to combine visual and written elements of political research for social and environmental change to shift the dialogue about how Attawapiskat is seen and spoken about. I'll next explain how these projects incorporated the principles of *holistic foundations*, *relational research*, *collective action* and *creative methods* and identify some challenges and lessons learned along the way.

Holistic Foundations

What sparked my interest in Chemical Valley initially was the way in which women at the forefront of the struggle articulated a connection between the health of their communities, bodies, and environments. I was first moved to engage with this community through a story and the experiences of Ada Lockridge fighting for improved health outcomes in her community as she explained in the CBC film *A Disappearing Male*. As a researcher focused on environmental justice, I am particularly interested in this intersection of community health and environments. Other scholars have highlighted how oral narratives and storytelling can enhance research about

environmental-health relations and can complement other forms of data gathering methods (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013, p. 131). Place-based narratives from those living at the front lines of environmentally compromised environments can serve as a fluid, non-linear form of research that engage communities as well as academic and policy audiences. While my own doctoral research implemented interpretive research methods, it did not incorporate digital or mixed media storytelling methods (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Wiebe, 2016). During the final days of my field research in Chemical Valley, I was approached by youth leaders to work on a collaborative project, which emerged into a film. This undertaking sparked my interest in the power of digital storytelling in particular (i.e., image-based narratives such as photography and film) and mixed media storytelling in general (including multiple platforms and media) to holistically engage in a research process. In my experience, this involved sharing stories and lived-experiences with members of the collaborative team in mind, body and spirit. Our film shoots and interview settings took us from homes in Aamjiwnaang to the Mayor's office in Sarnia to a protest in Ottawa. As a team, we also went into the bush to learn about traditional land-based practices. The process was deeply moving and *affective*. It created a *sense of community* and an atmosphere of engagement that goes beyond what one can ever learn in the classroom or from a museum or text book (Wiebe, 2015). Our product, a documentary film called *Indian Givers* included voices from the community, ranging from youth to Elders, as well as public officials. While this co-production was not initially conceived of as a digital storytelling or participatory action research project, we learned many lessons from this experience that informed future creative, relational storytelling forms of community-engaged research. What became clear from this process is that this art of engagement is certainly a form of relational research.

As a holistic research lens, mixed media storytelling connects Elders' stories with youth voices. It can be a form of intergenerational learning and sharing as these stories can be documented, archived, and passed on as appropriate to future generations. Through this holistic approach, participants connect with lands and waters as well as ancestral lineages. This is a platform for people to "remember their roots" (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013, p. 135). During the production process for *Indian Givers*, participating youth leaders interviewed and spent time with Elders. These Elders shared with us their knowledge about treaties, environmental health and Anishniabek perspectives about community wellness to connect past, present and future. As we saw with the digital stories produced by youth from Attawapiskat, the storytelling process is an avenue that gives voice to culture through deepening connections with their territories and environments. Similarly, the shortfilm *To Fish as Formerly*—narrated by Nick Claxton who shares his story and research with the viewer—is a video that he is able to share widely with his community, policymakers and future generations. In the video, he speaks about treaties, fishing rights, and how water is also part of his community's territory, thus drawing attention to the holistic dimensions of Indigenous research while strengthening connections between human and more-than-human environments.

Relational Research

Once relocated back in Coast Salish territory as a post-doctoral researcher, I became excited about trying to more formally structure storytelling into the development of research projects given their potential to connect wider audiences to matters of social justice. This enthusiasm emerged from my experiences co-producing *Indian Givers* as I witnessed the ways in which community-driven collaborative film initiatives can raise awareness about social, political, and environmental injustices while creating pathways for co-learning throughout the process outside of formal state-driven deliberative processes. Elsewhere I have discussed the opportunities and challenges of participating in this kind of affective approach to political research (Wiebe, 2015). Despite the difficulties of engaging across cultural differences, these processes are deeply moving and have the potential to be transformative for the researchers and participants. In the summer of 2014, when invited to paddle with the Tsawout Nation as they engaged in reef net fishing, as one of the filmmakers in the canoe, not only did I have a responsibility to document the event but also to participate. On more than one occasion, the skipper of our canoe prompted me to put down my camera and paddle. Paddling together is a way to honour “the abundant life in an environment” and recall that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have a shared responsibility to care for and be in relationship with land and marine environments (Million, 2013, p. 169). This experience of pulling together was at times strenuous as one of the canoes sprouted a leak, and it was the first time for many of the paddlers to engage in the reef net practice, but we pulled together with the leadership of Nick Claxton. While this invitation was not expressed as an explicit research project, the experience certainly informed my thinking about relational research, paddling together and the roles and responsibilities of a team committed to Indigenous storytelling.

Relationship-building is central to working in a good way with Indigenous communities, and this takes considerable commitment and time. It also requires humility and participating in community events without a specific agenda while being open to community direction. This may directly involve hiring a local community-member to be part of the research team who is invited to provide input every step of the way, from project design through to dissemination of findings. As our team discusses with respect to our collaboration with Tsawout Nation on a transportation safety project, visual media projects can engage members of a community from many backgrounds and walks of life (Wiebe et al., 2016). After following community protocols as well as receiving ethical approval from the University of Victoria’s ethics board, we incorporated digital storytelling into the research design, with the support of a community-based lead research assistant to guide our team through the process. Eventually we produced a public service announcement video that reflected youth participation, ideas and energies as well as a digital story that involved interviews with decision-makers within and external to the community. Each of our community meetings involved skillsbuilding, food and music, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of ease and humour. Mentorship and capacity-building, for instance developing workshops on how to operate a video camera, were central to our approach. Our *Traveling Together* video was published on the Victoria and Region Community Green Map and thus publicly available to shed light on community and policy-maker perspectives on

transportation safety concerns and insights on and off the Tsawout Reserve.

A relational approach to research also informed the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* project located in Treaty 9 territory. As a post-doctoral researcher, my entry point involved accepting the invitation to attend the annual pow wow as a way to first connect with the community. This led to volunteering with the host organizers as well as dancing and feasting together. It meant entering the community in ceremony as well as sharing gifts and allowing time to hear from community leaders about their concerns. Although I was mainly interested in environmental issues, many with whom I spoke encouraged me to make the connection between community health and wellness and the environment, as well as to include youth voices in the research process. With the support from the local high school art teacher and education board, I developed a research proposal with community input prior to submission to the university ethics board and committed to returning in the winter to kickstart a critical media studies workshop, which led to the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* project with the leadership of Attawapiskat community-member Keisha PaulMartin. After the initial workshop in the community, I returned in June that year to see the art students' final projects. It was during this visit that I learned about recently received funding to continue the digital storytelling work. The next time I went to Attawapiskat in the fall of 2016, our broader team of artists and academic-activists came together to hear directly from the youth about their perspectives on the connection between culture, environment and community health to challenge the dominant crisis narrative that began to frame the community following the high profile State of Emergency declaration in response to an escalation of youth suicide attempts.

Collective Action

Collaborative mixed media storytelling projects create connections. According to Cunsolo Willox and her team, digital storytelling is:

...a way to celebrate the individual and the collective and to lend respect and credence to the lived experiences of individuals through the collective co-creation of individual narratives, and provides participants with the opportunity to work together, tell and share stories, listen to others, and learn. (2013, p. 132)

In *Indian Givers*, our crew sought to intervene as a collective on the predominant portrayals of Indigenous peoples through documentary film. Our intervention was first of all a way to make the youth voices audible for a wider audience unfamiliar with Indigenous culture. As a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous crew members, we engaged in the shared, collective praxis of co-creation as a form of radical political interruption (Rancière, 2004). On one hand, we sought to enhance the visibility of the youth by providing a platform for them to tell their own stories on their own terms. As evident in the film's narrative vignettes, which refer to non-linear, multilayered stories that travel throughout the film, and in the concluding scene, there is still a long way to go towards reconciliation in Canada. *Indian Givers* was a collective effort to shift consciousness. It was a starting point and certainly cannot claim to

resolve the ultimate aim of reconciling differences; however, it is one small step towards trying to reframe perceptions of Indigenous peoples and to engage in broader dialogue about Canadian-Indigenous relations.

Building on this experience filming *Indian Givers*, I soon learned about the potential of documentary film and visual media to be a powerful conduit for social change. As Crystal Tremblay and Leila Harris have discussed with respect to critical video engagement in Cape Town and Ghana, participatory video projects can enhance citizen engagement and promote pathways for traditionally marginalized communities to engage in the policymaking process (Tremblay & Harris, 2018). By changing narratives, collaborative film projects have the potential to deepen how multilayered policy topics are understood. *Indian Givers*, *To Fish as Formerly* and the youth digital stories from the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* projects continue to be used as teaching tools in the classroom setting. As mentioned, the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* project specifically grew from a collective effort to challenge the predominant ‘crisis’ narrative framing the community in the wake of ongoing slow-moving crises arising from the built environment and community health concerns. Though the community of Attawapiskat experienced the continuous, ongoing, and systemic conditions of colonialism, which manifested in the form of inadequate housing and repeated State of Emergency Declarations including an escalation of youth suicide attempts in 2016, this is not the only story to tell (NPR, 2016). Through creative collaborations with youth, artists, academics, and collaborators from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds, this medium presents a way to collectively reframe how Indigenous youth are represented in the media and to interrupt monolithic community portrayals.

Creative Methods

Mixed media storytelling in *Indian Givers*, *To Fish as Formerly* and *Reimagining Attawapiskat* each demonstrate opportunities to connect difficult topics about settler-colonialism, environmental injustice and the tricky business of reconciliation with imaginative possibilities for decolonial and sustainable futures. Their projects simultaneously aim to critique colonialism and celebrate culture. In *Reimagining Attawapiskat* the involved youth produced photographs and digital stories to show what they loved about their culture and home. The project involved several phases, including pre-production, production, and post-production. The collaboration began in the high school classroom as youth expressed a desire to tell stories about the strength of their land, ceremonies, traditions, and culture. We asked them where they would like to conduct interviews and to take us to places they cared about, places that made them feel at home. Several of the digital stories illuminated the importance of connecting to the land and water as a source of healing.

Youth were invited to participate in all stages of the pre-production, production and post-production phases of the project including how to feature their voices on a public website. They participated in workshops and activities that encouraged them to produce stories about what community health and wellness means to them. Although several artists played a central role in post-production by editing the youth photo essays and videos, all participating youth were invited to review the footage collected and to provide feedback before they were

screened in the community and published on the website.¹ After a month-long workshop in the community, facilitated by Indigenous academic-artists, youth stories were shared with the high school class in community before they went live. In this process, youth artists were able to represent themselves in a way that they felt most comfortable with on their own terms.

Our *Reimagining Attawapiskat* research team gave significant thought to how best to share the stories produced. We discussed together how part of the benefit of this project was to share youth voices with other communities who might similarly experience issues such as a housing shortages, environmental contamination or mental health concerns. By producing publicly accessible content, the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* project offers the potential to network communities and to create space for youth voices as the visionaries for social change. Now the project website hosts community vignettes: photographs, artworks, and digital stories that tell different stories about life in Attawapiskat. The images and videos selected honour the strength of the culture and highlight the beauty of the territory. These mixed media storytelling vignettes are a prism of multidimensional life, offering a spectrum of perspectives about community health and cultural connections. Paintings of dancing as well as photographs of rainbows and boat rides on the river shed light on the vibrant life that exists in Attawapiskat while revealing how this community is not merely a place in duress. There is so much to learn from the young people who shared their lived-experiences and perspectives about wellbeing throughout the project. The next step for this collaborative initiative includes identifying ways to imagine possible connections between the youth voices, experiences and stories to the more formal policy process. Scholars who engage in creative arts-based research have a responsibility to think creatively with communities about how best to ensure that this collaborative storytelling speaks back to policy in pursuit of social change. This requires creating space for not just hearing from communities through consultation but listening to communities about their ideas for how to transform the status quo.

Speaking Story to Policy

Local stories have the potential to address place-based experiences and inform policy. Finished products can offer a “rich, detailed, and nuanced tapestry of voices” that emerge and provide “context and depth to localized narratives and collective experiences” (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013, p. 132). There are numerous examples of instances where creative methods of research engagement through storytelling can connect situated experiences to the more formal policy process. For instance, Cunsolo Willox et al., describe how their research project focused on health and climate change in Rigolet spoke back to the policy process through providing the stories to not only members of the community but also policy makers, health professionals, and academics (2013, p. 133). Screening community productions is a central component of how this work can lead to greater dialogue. This can take place within and external to the community. As was our experience in Attawapiskat, the participating youth screened their works at the end of a month long digital storytelling workshop and received certificates of

¹ www.reimaginingattawapiskat.com.

completion. In light of the fluid vignette format of mixed media, the final products are now on a publicly accessible website and can be screened in a variety of settings as appropriate.

To connect storytelling with the policymaking process requires innovative and imaginative thought about decision-making. This involves finding ways to include those directly affected by policy issues and to involve them in deliberations about desired outcomes. In particular, it means identifying opportunities to engage people from all walks of life, including youth and Elders to envision alternatives. One way to do so is through *sensing policy* (Wiebe, 2016). This sensing policy approach to policymaking builds on intersectionality-based policy analysis and interpretive research methods to bring social justice central to the design and dissemination of research findings (Hankivsky, 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). In practice, what this means is involving those most directly affected by issues arising in the determination of recommendations and outcomes. In an Indigenous context, this also requires respect for self-determination. For instance, it is not the place of an external researcher to tell communities what to do or how. In contrast, community-engaged scholars are most useful to communities when acting in service to communities.

In order to challenge oppressive policies and envision brighter futures, a sensing policy framework simultaneously sheds light on the visceral ways in which communities are affected by oppressive policies while also making space for their voices and perspectives about how life could be felt otherwise. As discussed elsewhere, sensing policy involves engaging lived-experience, situated bodies of knowledge, multilayered analysis and geopolitical location (Wiebe, 2016). This framework is a shift away from linear, technocratic avenues of policy development. Instead, this sensing policy approach means dialogical, iterative policy that develops solutions that are placed-based and grounded in community. Instead of referring heavily upon outsider experts, sensing policy aims to centre expertise from within communities. For instance, to address issues related to mental health in Attawapiskat, public officials should turn to youth and their own experiences to identify solutions. Young people in Attawapiskat are carriers of *situated bodies of knowledge*, they are the experts of their own life-experience. Creative collaborations like digital storytelling open up space for sharing this knowledge with wider audience beyond the situated community.

Furthermore, a sensing policy lens requires simultaneously honouring community strength and acknowledging the ongoing perpetuation of settler-colonialism. It aims to both critique and create. This lens refuses colonialism and cultivates conditions for alternative environmentally just and decolonial futures. As Glen Coulthard has discussed in *Red Skin, White Masks*, this involves interrogating asymmetrical power relations between Indigenous peoples in Canada today (Coulthard, 2014). His analysis highlights how colonialism is a structure, not an event. Thus, creative mixed media storytelling, while a valuable approach to community-engagement and a practical avenue for sensing policy, cannot simply celebrate beauty and culture. It necessarily requires a critical interrogation of the legacy of settler-colonialism. This coincides with a careful and conscientious examination of the geopolitical forces that have led to territorial acquisition, cultural dislocation and state-led attempts to separate Indigenous peoples from their communities, as was the case with Canada's Residential Schools policy, which

is now documented in depth in the Truth and Reconciliation's final report (2015). Connected to this critical examination of geopolitics, the connection between power and place and the long-term effects and affects on everyday life, is the importance of multilayered analysis. In terms of policy development, this involves a close look at multidimensional policy issues from multiple angles and perspectives. For instance, to develop an understanding of the underlying conditions and forces that led to repeated State of Emergency declarations in Attawapiskat requires an examination of federal, provincial, and local policy decisions (Pasternak, 2017; Simpson, 2016). This entails a close investigation of relevant laws and treaties and a shift in orientation to envision what it means to be in a treaty relationship today.

To move from engaging communities to listening to storytelling requires humility. This means decentering expertise from elites outside of community and finding ways to hear from the voices of those calling for action. When former Chief Theresa Spence embarked on a hunger strike in the Winter of 2012, she sought to cultivate dialogue about the failures of the Canadian state to acknowledge its commitment as a treaty partner. While Canadian officials signed on to Treaty 9 in 1905, the relationship between Indigenous people in this territory and Canadians at large is not simply constrained by this agreement. It is fluid and emergent. While many today may consider treaties something of the past, a historic contract or land secession, her hunger strike drew attention to the need to reignite a vital dialogue about how to better honour treaty responsibilities and envision decolonial futures. Her effort also cast light on the ways in which the Canadian state continued to allow the latent dying of Indigenous communities who find themselves encountering environmental injustices that are out of sight and out of mind. Beyond Attawapiskat, these range from chemical exposure in Aamjiwnaang to mercury contamination in Grassy Narrows. Increasingly, as the widespread Idle No More movement demonstrated, Indigenous communities are speaking up and out about how to transform these relationships and to envision brighter decolonial futures. Community-engaged scholars, as academic-activists may find themselves entangled within these relations as they take up the call to act in solidarity with Indigenous partners in the collective pursuit of systemic social change.

What mixed media storytelling can contribute to this end is a way to respond to this call for dialogue. This creative mode of co-creation is a means to enhance communication about tricky issues of systemic slow-moving settler-colonialism. At once, this creative form of engagement is radical and regenerative. It functions as a tool for academic-activists to collaborate with marginalized communities and speak back to harmful laws and policies that affect their everyday lives. Through long-term community-engaged research, which requires a commitment to holistic research, relationship-building, collective action and creativity, scholars can learn from communities and find innovative ways to interrupt colonial policy development. This requires starting from community voices, learning from situated bodies of knowledge, reflecting on one's positionality and a commitment to ongoing dialogue. As efforts to cultivate dialogue about reconciliation continue, non-Indigenous academic-activists must be prepared to take up the uncomfortable and unsettling work required to challenge ongoing environmental violence and systemic social injustice.

To deepen the theory and practice of arts-based community-engaged scholarship, we can learn from past experiences to move this field of study forward. This requires a close look at ethics, relationships and timelines. First, with respect to ethical commitments, it was imperative to develop ethical protocols in line with the University of Victoria's research ethics board as well as ground the research in community protocols. For instance, this involved first visiting the community from a place of learning and volunteering during the annual Summer pow wow. While based at the University of Victoria as a post-doctoral researcher, I first connected with community members on the phone and then received an invitation to visit and to develop my research project from within the community. It was during this initial visit that I met the high school art teacher who invited me to return and provide a critical media studies workshop in the community. I submitted a proposal to the education board, developed workshop materials and returned the following Winter. What I learned from this is that there are layers of ethical protocols that must be adhered to, including formal administrative applications from the university institutional setting as well as administrative protocols from within the community. In my experience, those in the community involved written and oral ethics. For instance, I would spend hours visiting with community leaders introducing myself, sharing food and tea, and listening to their advice and wisdom to get my bearings. Developing an ethical practice as a researcher is directly linked to relational accountability and ensuring that a researcher grounds one's commitment to community beyond the tight confines of an academic timeline.

Centering relationships is essential to being an ethical community-engaged researcher. This often means taking time to build rapport and trust with research participants while treating them in their full humanness — and more-than-humanness — and not simply as research subjects (Wall Kimmerer, 2013). In my experience, this involved attending ceremonies such as a sweat lodge, spending time outdoors with youth walking around the community, and cooking meals together. This kind of relational approach brings academics up close and personal with the terrain of study and cultivates a kind of intimate atmosphere. As was our experience with the *Reimagining Attawapiskat* project, by hiring Keisha PaulMartin as a youth leader and research assistant, she was a crucial part of the team. We learned from her about her community knowledge and her lived-experience and we shared with her our academic and artistic skills. At the same time, it is imperative that community-engaged researchers clarify what they bring to the table and how their skills and expertise can be of benefit. This may include the ability to access archival materials, synthesize literature, examine media articles, conduct arts-based workshops or facilitate community conversations. Central to a relational approach to community-engaged research is sharing. Sharing knowledge, sharing food, and sharing ceremony. This is in direct opposition to the standard positivist mode of research that assumes a kind of objectivity, or what Donna Haraway has referred to as a god trick (Haraway, 1988). Rather than treating knowledge as a standalone object, from this relational approach, knowledge is co-constituted between the researcher and the community. Thus, researchers have the responsibility to report on their findings and to share what they learn with the communities.

Finally, another lesson learned from these arts-based mixed media storytelling initiatives

is that timelines have their own fluidity and these do not always align with academic priorities. Community events, including ceremonies or the passing of a community-member, may prompt the researcher to pause scheduled activities. This requires respect for local knowledge about how to conduct oneself, for instance returning to the community another time to conduct a survey, focus group, or workshop. It may involve rescheduling a meeting at the last minute and certainly entails respect for the circumstances that communities encounter. Sometimes community partners will have their own timelines that may differ from the academic grant cycle. What is crucial to smooth out any misunderstandings is to establish clarity about timelines and expectations early on the relationship. Furthermore, how best to close the circle or loop on a project may vary depending on the shape of the project. With mixed media storytelling, while a project may be finished insofar as the results are made public or published, the ripple effects will continue as different audiences come into contact with the narratives. These discussions are difficult to anticipate or plan for. What can be learned from such openness with participants' personal stories out in the open is the importance of continuing relationships, being available to check-in and communicate about how one feels in response to their deeply personal lived-experiences being shared so widely. With respect to ethics, relationships, and timelines, what is crucial here is acknowledging positionality and being reflexive and open to continued feedback beyond the conclusion of a formal project end date. These types of iterative projects may be more of an opening to alternatives rather than a formal closing as the dialogue about the stories continue.

Conclusion

Mixed media storytelling is a deeply moving, affective ethic of engagement. It is an intimate approach to research that connects personal experiences to political forces that govern peoples' lives and communities. As a creative research process, it can "open up worlds of affect and intimacy" and share "a glimpse of another life" through sounds, pictures, voices and videos (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013, p. 142). There is much that researchers can learn from communities when listening to and witnessing these stories. Crucial to creative engagement in an Indigenous context is being willing to look back on oneself with humility, engage in research holistically, develop relationships, commit to collective action and imagine alternative possibilities. Young people are especially well-positioned for this imaginative work and scholars are in a privileged position to bridge their voices with decision making-processes.

Moving forward, the challenge for most researchers engaging in this kind of research will be to think carefully about how best to impact and speak back to the policy process. These processes take place at multiple levels and scales from within community to the international arena. As a vignette that travels across space and time, moving beyond colonial state boundaries and jurisdictions, mixed media storytelling is one possible avenue for communicating across diverse geographies, translating situated bodies of knowledge for decision-making audiences, and contributing to ongoing dialogue about settler-colonialism and environmental injustices that affect communities in Canada and around the world. Critical then to move this practice along is to give careful consideration to how public officials or decision-makers can listen to the

stories produced, or better yet, how the storytellers can become decision-makers themselves. Community-engaged academic-activists hold a unique position as they bridge worlds between diverse ways of knowing. A starting point to do this difficult but necessary work is to highlight how community-members are the best experts of their own lifeworlds and that policy-makers need to hear from those directly affected in order to enhance environmental justice. This pertains to topics such as Indigenous mental health, disaster response, and climate migration, issues that affect the most marginalized. In sum, mixed media storytelling is a creative practice that incites critical conversations about tricky and messy injustices that affect peoples' everyday lives. Going forward, policy makers must share the responsibility of finding ways to not just hear but *listen* to these stories that emerge from within community. This requires an openness to transform their own practices by centering the voices of community-members at all stages of policy development from the early stages of design through to the open world of dissemination and circulation.

About the Author

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