

Pass the Mic: Identity and Agency in Child and Youth Care Environments

Ahna Vasilyevna Berikova and Kelsey Reed

Beginning with this issue, *RCYCP* has invited participants in the *Write On and Pass the Mic* project to share their work. Individuals taking part in this writing/podcast project - are students and post-grads from the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care at MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada. They are the sharers of knowledge; the storytellers. As supporters of this project providing gentle guidance, we both recognize the integral role of storytellers to inform, challenge, exchange and learn collectively. We have the privilege of being with these individuals as they share with openness and vulnerability the dimensionality of their identities and experiences. They share with intimacy, transparency and poignancy. As a starting point we, supporters of this project, invite you into our stories communicating who we are and where we are from along the passages of our ancestry.

My name, my uncolonized name that is, is Ahna Vasilyevna Berikova. It is a name that hails back along an ancestral trail emerging in Eastern Europe, namely Russia and Ukraine. My people, the Doukhobors (Dykho-borets, translated into English as Spirit Wrestlers), were persecuted for their unorthodox beliefs in Russia and after much recognition and tireless support from Leo Tolstoy and the Quakers, we arrived in Canada in 1899. The doors to Canada were open to us because we were agricultural people which aligned well with the colonial purpose of appropriating Indigenous lands for occupation and development. However, this did not occur without conflict, as a faction of the Doukhobors, the Sons of Freedom (Sini Svobodi) (my cultural home) immediately resisted British colonial policies. Resistance occurred early on in the 1900s through to the 1980s - although by that time numbers significantly diminished. The colonial project

of assimilation finally subsumed us, but not completely. We have deeply informed roots based on collectivity from a belief that mother earth cannot be bought or sold, ceremonies based on community song and prayer, working the soil and a deep-seated respect reflected in bowing to one another and to the earth. Initial and longstanding resistance to colonialism resulted in displacement as we would not purchase land, children and adults were incarcerated as we would not send our children to public schools, and incarceration occurred for increasing modes of protest to protect our cultural and spiritual principles that informed our lifestyles. Over time our language and values were weakened. We became 'othered' with debilitating discourses powerfully playing out in social media, academia and in government reports, decisions and actions to silence us with the hammer of assimilation – it was defeating in integral ways. We became single storied and objectified, as terrorists, crazy, insane, dirty douks and deviant. We deviated.

If you ask me where I am from, I may answer with the following ...

I am from trees, rivers and leaves. I am from the soft brown earth, in between garden rows of vegetables and weeds. I am from the grass, looking skyward at the shape shifting clouds disappearing over the mountainous horizon. I am from 'baba' kitchens of fresh bread smells, Russian sounds and songs and debates.

I am from Siberian prisons and chains. I am from a ship crossing the ocean and from a train chugging across the prairies. I am from settlers who settled on Indigenous lands. I am a settler. I am from a clash with colonialism that measured my people against the metal edge of the ruler that cut deep when we did not measure up by standing our ground in our cultural and spiritual home.

I am from grandparents, uncles, aunts and a mom incarcerated for their beliefs. Spirit wrestlers as well as nurturers, gardeners, bakers, cooks, writers and workers of all trades.

I am from my love of being a mom and grandmother, artist, writer, dreamer and fumbler.

I am from children's laughs and cries, wonder and wander, songs and prayers. I am from Child and Youth Care landscapes, heartache, trauma and unlimited strength, curiosities and meetings eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart.

My Doukhobor identity and experiences of living in the margins, historically and somewhat presently, on a personal and collective manner provides me with an understanding of the insidious and genocidal colonialism upon Indigenous peoples. In the same breath I acknowledge my privilege as a white settler, a settler that has over time attained class and land privilege. As a Doukhobor settler and as a university faculty member and instructor I do not forget this.

My identity as a Doukhobor informs me in all my relations and roles, including this project, which is an invitation to claim identity as something not to hide, or to be silenced, be mis-represented or not represented. This project is an invitation to 'take the mic' and occupy a forum of discussion, reflection, writing and recording to examine and inform how we in Child and Youth Care (CYC) can foster inclusivity, or rather radical inclusivity in our spaces of learning, teaching and working.

My name is Kelsey Reed and I am a member of the Beardsy's and Okemasis First Nation in Saskatchewan. I currently live on Treaty 6 Territory whose original habitants were members of the Papachase Band. Through colonization, the Papachase Band members were displaced and removed from the area now known as Edmonton, Alberta. As I acknowledge the land that I am currently living on, I humbly admit that I am always learning and in the process of understanding my own relationship to land and place. I privilege an Indigenous onto-epistemology by honouring myself as an Indigenous being before an academic scholar. I am the daughter of Wendy and Randy Reed; the paternal granddaughter of Thelma Hopper and John Reed; and the maternal granddaughter of Nancy and Jack Pederson. When I say their names, in ceremony, sharing circles, research or my writing, it is how I choose to honour them. I come from a long line of resiliency. Within my family, there are survivors of Indian Residential Schools; there are gender non-conforming; extravagant drag queen performers; same-sex parents; survivors of trauma, and those who are recovering from mental illness. That is who we are, unapologetically. My existence is intertwined with their existence and therefor my identity can only be understood in relation to them.

To some, knowing and understanding one's identity comes naturally as self-reflection where awareness has been a fundamental aspect of childhood and upbringing. For others, this can be the most difficult task that they will face in both their professional and personal lives. In discovering and articulating my own identity as a Queer, Indigenous, Female Child and Youth Care Practitioner, the process has presented several challenges and times of deep self-reflection. Understanding my positioning in the world has really forced me to critically reflect on our society, our institutions, and our CYC field. My academic journey has guided me into my doctoral work in understanding urban Indigenous identity and to put it simply, how we can, as practitioners, be better for our Indigenous youth. This process has required me to face head on the impact of being othered, being different, being gay, Indigenous, oppression, privilege, my own privilege and so on.

What I have discovered is that the struggles I have as someone who identifies as a Queer Indigenous woman are because of the contradictions that exist between my identity and our society. These contradictions exist in our communities, our institutions, places of work, and our classrooms. History has honoured and elevated certain voices and perspectives and, as a result, silenced others. Through this project, I hope that students can use their voice (not find, because it has always been there) to advocate for the changes so desperately needed in our tumultuous political climate.

Kelsey and I are colleagues, friends, co-presenters, co-writers, co-researchers and like-minded inquirers. With significant differences in age, orientation and history we have found common ground and relentless appetites to name and speak about social inequities and injustice. On a lighter note we also have an appetite that includes sitting and eating at a kitchen table (or office, or restaurant etc.), often.

The inception of this project was a happenstance conversation with a group of Muslim CYC students in 2016. I approached the students who were gathered outside of a classroom I had just exited and was invited to join them. I knew some but not all the students and after initial introductions we engaged in conversation and they addressed their experiences of being Muslim, female, and persons of colour in the university. Over a two-hour period of time I learned about their perspectives which included experiences of being 'othered' by students as well as instructors, of feeling 'silenced' and not completely accepted, let alone represented in curriculum. I was privileged to sit among them, to listen, share and ask questions and I was astounded by their experiences and knowledge. When I asked why they never share their perspectives and knowledge in a classroom

context their responses clearly stated that there was no room for that in the classroom, you comply and do what is asked of you – that is just what university is. This was the first student group to spearhead this project.

This project at the time known as *Write On* gained momentum with students and post-grads coming together to discuss and write about identity. The groups included individuals over four cohorts at MacEwan’s BCYC department including post-grads. Some of the groups focused on their experiences of mental health, racialization, religious orientation, dis-Abilities, gender and sexual orientation, body image, gender roles and grief and loss and more. Of course, individuals have complex identities that are not siloed in any one identity location but intersect across locations and experiences and as a result, individuals are often in more than one group with conversations reflecting the complex, not to mention messy, intersections of identity. The conversations provided and continue to provide individuals with openings to discuss freely with emotion, empathy and humor and in turn to write about, for example, their experiences of racism, sexism, ableism, genderism, religious discrimination, Islamophobia, body-shaming, and other points of social inequity. They easily disrupted hegemonic discourses and generated ideas for greater social equity, especially in classroom and work contexts. The passions; laughter, tears and bold critiques defined every group. Discussions took place and continue to take place around kitchen tables, living room spaces and office spaces. The project has currently advanced to include podcasting and is now known as *Pass the Mic*. The idea of podcasting emerged during a collaborative brainstorming in one of the writing groups.

At first glance this project might be described as ‘inclusive of diversity’. Educational environments typically claim inclusivity - and diversity is a term that has gained much currency in university settings. When we think about it, the term ‘diversity’ meant to suggest inclusivity has instead grown a rhetorical and hegemonic frame referring to that which is different, yet different from what? I am reminded of a conversation I had with a student a number of years ago.

“Ahna, am I the diversity?”

I was puzzled. “What do you mean, the diversity?”

“At the orientation an instructor looked out at all of us and commented, ‘wow, we have so much diversity in this cohort’ – so am I the diversity?”

The first-year student identifying as Somali and Muslim and wore the hijab looked at me with the question flooding her eyes and would not settle for platitudes. I felt troubled

by her question and continue to be. I had to admit without obfuscating that yes, this is what was meant – she is the diversity. This sparked an ongoing conversation important to this project.

No matter how much we mean to use ‘diversity’ as including others, it is reduced to mean ‘not white’, ‘not straight’, ‘not able’, ‘not mentally healthy’, ‘not Christian’. It represents the side of the binary representing inferiority, that which is not quite right. In a university context, it is an invitation to fit (integrate or assimilate?) into an existing curriculum and pedagogy with parameters that inevitably exclude. It can be argued whether this is intentional or not, colonial or not. This project proposes radical inclusion that welcomes students and postgrads to claim the centre. It invites agency to decentre Eurocentric knowledge in CYC contexts, to address socio-historical power relations and inequity; simply put it is a decolonizing project. This project informed by narrative inquiry provides an open ontological and epistemological space of agency, story, inquiry, disruption and re-imagining.

Academic studies show that even though Canada has a significant rise in Indigenous populations and is defined by an increase in ethnic and racial demographics, “racialized and Indigenous peoples are underrepresented in major institutions” (Henry *et al.*, 2016, p. 1). The authors establish that even with an increase in “research on equity and higher education, analyses of racism, racialization, and Indigeneity in the academy are notable by their absence” (Henry *et al.* p.1). University curriculum continues to be based on Eurocentric knowledge and structures designed for a white populace. The result is that “students who easily fit within dominant cultural practices of the classroom see the school reflected back to them” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, cited in Cote-Meek, p. 1, 2014). However, this leaves racialized and Indigenous students experiencing a lack of belonging, misrepresentation or lack of representation in classroom, program and field of practice (Battiste, 2013; Dei, 2016; Dei & Simmons, 2010). Smith (2017) explains that “racialized and Indigenous students do not see themselves reflected in the university professoriate and leadership, and their histories and experiences are inadequately reflected in the curriculum” (p. 262). This emerged as a familiar story for individuals involved in this project, especially so for racialized and Indigenous individuals, but no less for individuals faced with mental health issues, those identifying as queer, those experiencing dis-Abilities, the inequity of gendered roles, body-images measured within a frame considered the norm, religious and/or spiritual belief systems including the intersections of many of these and more identities in flux.

In his work with 'minoritized' students, George Sefa Dei (2016) has found that students experience a shortfall when it comes to addressing topics key to their lived experiences, such as "equity and race" which are discussed in a limited and tokenized manner without noteworthy integration into curriculum (Dei, 2016, p. 31). Dei argues that it is imperative for educators and researchers to develop inclusive curriculum and spaces for "indigeneity and multi-centric ways of knowing" (Dei, 2016). When the curriculum affirms and includes the experiences of 'minority' students and they can see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in discussions they will be more engaged in a meaningful and contributory way (Dei, 2016, p. 45). Depending upon aspects of student's multilayered and complex identities as mentioned above, they can often feel silenced in classroom contexts by not being represented or misrepresented in course curriculum. This suggests the importance of examining how we, as instructors, curriculum designers, administrators, students and practitioners see "race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, language and disability as important identities that learners bring to school" (Dei, 2016, p. 28). It is not a given that students feel accepted, regarded or feel a sense of belonging. Dei (Dei & Simmons, 2010) describes this lack of belonging as a result of "the violence of education" that requires students, especially minoritized students, to "to negate their embodied knowledges and the multiple layers of identity that form their sense of self, individually and collectively, and thus to see this identity as lack, and as a deficit, that must be amputated from their bodies" (p. 16); or a decapitation of identity, as suggested by the key note speaker at the 2018, CYC National Conference, Vicki Reynolds. The "violence of education" (Dei & Simmons 2010, p. 16) is an extension of violence Slavoj Zizek (2008) describes as "part of the fabric of the daily functioning of social life where systemic and symbolic violence passes as natural" (p.140). Depending upon one's identity it is either easy or not to see the norm in educational systems and curriculum based on Western European standards, so 'natural' that it 'naturally' governs and goes unquestioned.

As for the notion of inclusivity, inclusion argues Dei, "is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space" (Dei, 2016, p. 28) in other words radical inclusion. Battiste (2013) highlights the importance of teachers yielding "power to the students through encouraging shared listening and witnessing of storytelling experience, the students can build layers of new meaning into their own experiences" (p. 184). It is not giving students voice, can we really be givers of voice? No. But we can provide a forum for voice by stepping aside and *Pass the Mic*. Supporting this project requires

stepping back for student agency and initiative to challenge and in turn cultivate transformative university spaces, and in this case CYC spaces.

As CYC instructors, students and practitioners we can say that we love this program and because we love CYC we must betray it by disrupting inert truths and traditions by cracking them open to keep them on the move for other possibilities (Caputo,1997; Battiste, 2013). Education explains Battiste (2013) “can be liberating, or it can domesticate and maintain domination” (p. 175). She further argues that we need “pedagogies that work to disrupt the structures of inequality” (p.190). This calls for educators and students alike to examine “the cultural and political baggage they bring to each educational encounter” (Giroux, 2012, p. 75). Giroux insists that we cannot ignore the “economic, political, and social structures that shape our daily lives” (p. 28). This also includes the lives of the children, youth and families we work with in the field. We: instructors, students, and practitioners, must look closely at our personal social locations that shape our perspectives, judgements and biases impossible to leave at the door (Battiste, 2013). This project encourages such a close look and although evoking discomfort it is a process that increases introspection and attentiveness among collaborators with a similar purpose to attain social equity. With regard to Cultural Humility we guide this project with an attitude of not-knowing and openness to ‘becoming-to-know-always’ without a claim to knowledge that is static and fixed (yet powerful) but acknowledging that knowledge is multi-faceted and perpetually fluid (Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin, 2015).

Narrative Inquiry is the primary methodological framework informing this research project. As storytellers, writers, poets, artists and academics - collaborators in this project all share in the role of narrative inquirers. Multiple methods to represent experiences include imagery, poetry, discussion, song and photographs toward crafting “research texts that show the complex and multi-layered storied nature of experience” (Clandinin & Huber, 2013, p. 13). Multiple representational techniques that are complicated, multi-layered with intersecting experiences are presented. Single stories are unsettled “shaken up, breached, disturbed, torn – so that new questions and meanings are generated” (Maclure, 2003, cited in Byrne, 2017, p. 40). Tafoya (2005, cited in Episkenew, 2009) describes stories as “a type of medicine and, like medicine, can be healing or poisonous depending on the dosage or type” (p. 13). He brings to light the poisonous stories about Indigenous peoples shaped through colonial discourses, one-sided stories informing policies that have been and continue to be devastating and that have fueled decimation,

namely a genocide of Indigenous peoples. Collaborators involved in this project all face powerful blows from single stories, as Thomas King (2013) describes stories as “wondrous things” and not only wondrous but also “dangerous” (p. 9). This project invites collective knowledge and participation, not to soften the blow, but to examine and exercise agency to share stories that can deconstruct and decentre the single stories into multi-dimensional stories that are complex, fractured, messy, re-storied, in flux and in possibilities.

We recognize that the power differential between student and educator cannot be eradicated. However, it can be mitigated for classroom spaces to become sites of collaborative agency that decentres and re-imagines power and where students, current and former, are the ground-breakers and educators (Giroux, 2012, p. 71). bell hooks (2010) calls for “radical openness” (p. 10) which we interpret as a call to acquire a humble, open and courageous approach to learn and to love. For Paulo Freire (1998) “it is impossible to teach without the courage to love” (p. 5) and we would extend this to include the necessity of love to collaboratively work with students – of necessity with CYC students in CYC classrooms. It is fair to say that Kelsey and I collaboratively engage with the individuals in this project with kindness and love but also with radical openness that is not simple or easy but critical for this decolonizing initiative. Stay tuned!

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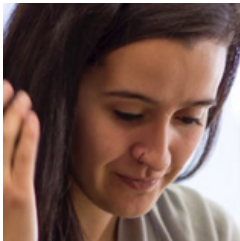
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