Translating Encounters: Connecting Indigenous Young People with Higher Education through a Transmedia Project

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ABSTRACT

This piece draws on multiple voices to reflect on a collaborative project between university-based researchers and a local community organization devoted to Indigenous Blackfoot children and their families. The evolution of the project from one based on photo-elicitation to one devoted to building a digital storytelling library meant a methodological shift to acknowledge the role of translation in encounters between university researchers and community practitioners, between Elders and youth, and between settlers and Indigenous people. Our experience provides lessons on the importance of taking seriously the moments when difference is encountered and translated during the research and community-building process.

Keywords: collaborative research, ethical space, Canada, Indigenous, intergenerational, settler colonialism

Raising Spirit is a collaborative project between a small university on the Canadian prairies and a local non-profit dedicated to supporting Indigenous children and their families. Our work is based in Lethbridge, a small regional hub located in Treaty 7 territory in Alberta, an area defined by settlers that includes the traditional lands of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Nakoda (Stoney), and Tsuut'ina nations. It is also just over 60 kilometers away from the largest Indigenous reserve in all of Canada.

From its beginning as a photo-elicitation project on local childrearing values among Blackfoot families to its expansion to include a digital storytelling library and arts-based education and exhibition, this project has evolved to become a transmedia collaboration with significant implications for methods. Ultimately, we came to see that what we learned methodologically was as important as any of the project goals. We discovered that it was the moments of encounter requiring translation across difference that were central to the process of building relationships in our community-university partnership.

In the wake of the release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015) on the

genocidal legacy of colonialism and residential schools, we describe a series of translating encounters that were produced by our methods. We argue that these sometimes unexpected moments of encounter have the potential to produce an ethical space of collaboration across difference. While difference in this context refers primarily to differences between settler and Indigenous and between young and older, it also marks the difference produced by university researchers at different levels interacting with high school students and with young children attending an early childhood program. Some of our richest work happened when graduate students, undergraduate students, high school students, teens and young children encountered one another and sought to translate between worlds. In this preliminary report, we provide a multiperspectival view of what we learned in the research process and the unsettling and transformative effects of translation between different subject positions. By detailing this process from the perspective of different members of the research team, we hope to share lessons on the importance of these seemingly mundane moments in the research process in building effective university and community collaboration.

We begin by briefly introducing the context of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada before considering the implications of translating encounters. Next, individual team members describe the encounters that characterized each stage of the project. The sections unfold chronologically to demonstrate the growing recognition that our most important results were in fact these encounters themselves, as they illustrate the critical pedagogical value of productive but uncomfortable translation across multiple sites of difference.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION: WHY UNIVERSITIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE MATTER IN CANADA
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University of Lethbridge is the biggest employer in our city, and the majority of its faculty, students, and staff are non-Indigenous—a fact that in many ways is a result of the persistent underfunding of education for Indigenous children and youth in Alberta and across Canada. This underfunding of education and services for Indigenous children, which the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal recently condemned as an example of racial discrimination, is one of the numerous ways that settler colonialism continues to shape the lives of Indigenous young people and families in 21st century Canada (Fontaine, 2016). Since its establishment in 1867, the Canadian settler nation-state has sought to erase and displace Indigenous populations in order to control land and natural resources. Indigenous children were—and continue to be—central to the Canadian government's assimilatory vision, and like their counterparts in other settler societies, they have been targeted through child abduction, attempts at religious conversion, and what the late anthropologist Patrick Wolfe called "resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools" (2006, p. 388). The best-known Canadian example of Indigenous child removal is the network of government-funded and church-run residential schools that separated approximately 150,000 Indigenous children from their families and communities between the late 19th and late 20th centuries.

The traumatic and disruptive effects of colonialism in general and residential schooling in particular were explicitly addressed in 2015, with the release of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). The TRC's commissioners spent six years listening to the testimony of survivors, and their final report calls residential schooling an act of cultural genocide and insists that "colonialism remains an ongoing process" in Canada (p. 45). In addition to document-

ing these institutions' history of harm and injustice, the report also includes 94 Calls to Action "to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation" (p. 319). The TRC's Calls to Action make it clear that Canadian governments, educators, health care providers, legal systems, and universities need to do better. Our project has been shaped by this political, social, and economic context.

TRANSLATING ENCOUNTER AS METHOD
JAN NEWBERRY AND KRISTINE ALEXANDER

As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have noted, media coverage and mainstream educational research tends to depict Indigenous communities in two main ways: As "at-risk" peoples (in crisis, on the verge of extinction, engaging in self-destructive behaviours) or as "asterisk" peoples ("meaning they are represented by an asterisk in large and crucial data sets, many of which are conducted to inform public policy that affects their lives"; p. 22). Frustrated with this reductive, settler-focused and often negative approach to describing Indigenous families and cultures, we decided to work together to investigate Indigenous (in this case, mostly Blackfoot) families and child-rearing practices to counter "asterisk" and "at-risk" discourses. In designing this project, we decided that unlike conventional "extractive" academic research, which takes knowledge from communities and repackages it for academic consumption, the work would instead be driven by the needs of University of Lethbridge's community partner, Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society.

The beginning of our project coincided with the establishment of the Institute for Child and Youth Studies at University of Lethbridge, a multidisciplinary institute composed of faculty, students, and community members with a shared interest in doing interdisciplinary, curiosity-based, and policy-relevant research about young peo-

ple. It also meshed with the University's mandate to provide its students with a liberal education emphasizing cross-disciplinary critical thinking, student involvement in research, and engaged, socially responsible citizenship. The evolution of our project has been an exercise in respectful relationship-building through which all of us have had to mindfully negotiate power relationships and the history of the modern university as a colonial institution (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This work, designed to meet the needs of an Indigenous community organization, has allowed knowledge and skills to flow in multiple directions. We soon discovered, however, that this required translation work on all sides.

The Raising Spirit team included students and faculty working in anthropology, history, children's literature, digital studies, and education. Project staff has included professors, post-docs, graduate and undergraduate students, high school students, agency staff, and members of local Indigenous communities, including Elders. Finding a way to work together required multiple moments of translation and connection across difference, not just the translation of Blackfoot child-rearing values at the center of the project. For example, university-based team members were trained in archival research, literary analysis, and ethnography. These differences alone can be obstacles to collaboration. Here they were compounded by the differences between those working inside the university and those working in a social service setting. We discovered early on the constraints of different reporting procedures, time frames, audiences, and legitimating authorities. Moreover, university team members are primarily settler researchers, while the social service agency is staffed primarily by Indigenous peoples and serves local First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities. Their clients were mostly people who identify as Blackfoot, and yet the differences between Kainai and Piikani peoples of the Blackfoot Confederacy are significant locally. Even further, the Indige-

nous population served by this early childhood learning centre is predominantly urban, in some contrast to the rural population living on the nearby reserve. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this work, associated with a university institute for child and youth studies were differences based on age: adult, youth, child, Elder.

As the project developed, the lack of clear boundaries around "the community" under study became a key reason for focusing on the encounters themselves as part of our methodology. In other words, and as will be described below, we found that it was when the young and the older were brought together in an encounter that boundaries between these groups were recognized, made real, and bridged. Rather than any clear, "authentic" categorization of people or community, we found that identification took place during encounters that required translation in at least two directions. This was equally the case when Indigenous and settler researchers worked to collect field data and identify important themes. And again, when high school students worked alongside graduate students and Elders from the community, translations across differences were effected even as these differences were recognized in these encounters.

Recent work on translation in anthropology highlights its character as an "event-based, real-time practice" (Gal, 2015, p. 229) that occurs across difference. Gal notes how such translational encounters require a double voice, one that is both foreign and domestic. In other words, these interactional accomplishments require that speakers "double voice their knowledge rather than simply inhabiting their professional role. They take on a different voice and role than they would with co-experts" (p. 233). One principle of our work has been to recognize the expertise of not only local Indigenous people, but also the young; this approach to translation was quite productive. In other words, when young Indigenous people translated for settler university students, they were demon-

strating a kind of double-voiced expertise, one that had them reflecting on their own lives and circumstances, but also reaching across to those in a different position in pursuit of a shared understanding. For example, young high school students had to articulate an understanding of their own culture to settler university researchers to help orient them to the community they were entering, even as these young people sought to understand and explore their own relationships to tradition and connection to land.

The space produced by this translation work resonates with the ethical space of engagement described by Ermine (2007), when two societies with different worldviews seek to engage one another. We elaborate this space by noting the multiple forms of difference at play here and by including conceptual work as well as ethical and moral work. In the research described here, the translational encounter is understood to produce a collaborative sphere of co-conceptualization (Rappaport, 2008). That is to say, the translation work produced in these encounters represented collaborative analysis as well. This resulted in the production of a kind of third space (Putnam, 2000; cf. Bhabha, 2004): a critical pedagogical and ethical space for recognition, renegotiation, and possible reconciliation of epistemic, ontological, and ethical worlds. The production of these kinds of spaces is particularly pressing in the context of ongoing settler colonialism and the Calls to Action of the TRC.

PHOTO ENCOUNTERS
TANYA PACE-CROSSCHILD (EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OPOKAA'SIN EARLY INTERVENTION SOCIETY) AND JAN NEWBERRY

The origins of Raising Spirit predate the TRC by several years. The project began with shared questions about the effect of the global push to support Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Indigenous child-rearing values and the implication of renewed attention to young children

in this decolonizing moment (Newberry, 2010; Newberry, 2012; Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2012). Jan has conducted ethnographic research on early childhood in Indonesia, and Tanya is the executive director of an agency devoted to Indigenous children and their families. Based on our shared interest in articulating local child-rearing values to aid early childhood programs and challenge globalized frameworks and continuing settler colonialism, we designed a collaborative photo-elicitation project. Briefly, photo-elicitation uses images to provoke responses from the viewer (Pauwel, 2015). The elicitation approach is based on the idea that values are generally not articulated and reproduced as a written corpus of organized ideas. Instead, they exist as everyday, mundane knowledge shared informally and anecdotally. Following Kärtner et al. (2007) who elicited parental "ethnotheories" through photographs, we used pictures of local Indigenous (primarily Blackfoot) families engaging in child-rearing practices as a prompt for others to describe the values represented.

Eight parents and caregivers, including several agency staff members, were asked to photograph everyday moments of child rearing. Choosing to work with participant-photographers added a layer of data on local values (what did they choose to photograph and why), which expanded this collaborative project to include auto-ethnographic, participatory action research. These photographs were then used as prompts about childhood and child-rearing values in semi-structured interviews. Two Indigenous undergraduate students interviewed the participant photographers to draw out the implications of the choices they had made. They also took a subset of these photographs to powwows in the historic Blackfoot Territory where they gathered responses from self-selected passersby. Interviews were also conducted with Blackfoot Elders whose wisdom is recognized as authoritative. Indigenous agency staff conducted these interviews because of their knowledge of Blackfoot language and the protocols necessary for speaking to Elders.

These encounters all required translation. Parents were asked to translate the meaning of the photographs they took. In a series of encounters at powwow, the students asked passersby to use the same photographs to translate their own child-rearing experiences. In staff members' interviews with Elders, translation in and across the Blackfoot language was necessary. At each stage, differences within the broader Blackfoot community were confronted and mediated, which produced spaces for discussion about the unspoken child-rearing values disrupted by residential schooling and colonial violence. By using the photographs as a prompt, young Blackfoot researchers asked family members, Elders, and strangers to articulate their own experience and expertise as an act of translation and collaborative analysis. These encounters were moments of recognition that were both heartbreaking and empowering. We heard from Elders about pride, generosity, and the importance of family in teaching values, even as we heard stories of institutional violence in residential schools aimed at "killing the Indian in the child."

Beginning in 2014-15, the project gained momentum with new personnel, new funding, and a new focus: The production of a digital storytelling library for the use of our community partner in programming with young people. The library would include not just the photographs, but recordings of storytelling by Elders that would then be used in programming for children, teens, and other members of the larger Indigenous community. This new work meant more personnel and a greater need for training across the university and agency settings. These encounters through training became an important part of our work.

FIELDWORK ENCOUNTERS
TAYLOR LITTLE MUSTACHE
(UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION
STUDENT) AND
AMY MACK (PHD STUDENT)

One of the key components of this project is the emphasis on mentorship and training that occurred for all team members in the field. In June 2016, we headed into the field, taking with us the training we received from Drs. Jan Newberry, Kristine Alexander, and Erin Spring, then a postdoctoral fellow at University of Lethbridge. Our goal was to gather stories from Indigenous young people and Elders for a digital library to be used in our partner organization's educational programing. The library was and is meant to be interactive, accessible, and child-friendly. To suit these needs, we selected the online platform ThingLink (https://www.thinglink.com), which allows users to annotate images with audio, video, links, and other images.

The staff at Opokaa'sin asked that we base the library on the idea of the Medicine Wheel, a symbol that holds cultural significance throughout Indigenous North America and is used throughout the organization's educational programming. The Medicine Wheel is divided into four quadrants: belonging, independence, mastery, and generosity. After a multi-day workshop with Elders, our team added a selection of Blackfoot values to each quadrant. After exploration and discussion in both English and Blackfoot, the Elders explained and explored what each of these quadrants meant to them. For example, independence is expressed through "iikaakimatt," or "try hard," and belonging can be achieved in part through "apomikit" or "transfer of knowledge." These values became the words we used to code and understand the data and stories we were given during our time in the field.

This stage of fieldwork began when undergraduate researchers interviewed Indigenous children using the photo elicitation approach of Tanya and Jan's original project. In these fieldwork encounters, where we learned about the rich history and stories of the Blackfoot, we found that training occurred both in research methods and in traditional teachings, which hold relevance for higher education in the era of reconciliation. Amy, a graduate student, mentored Taylor, an undergraduate student, on anthropological methods, such as interviewing and participant observation during the interview process, as well as after when writing field notes. Taylor, who is Blackfoot, along with the organization's staff and Elders, mentored Amy, who is a settler, on traditional values, teaching her about proper protocol and contextualizing the stories. These reciprocal training experiences gave Indigenous and settler University researchers confidence in the field and provided a foundation for training Hudson and Tesla, two Blackfoot high school students who joined the project as youth researchers (see below).

Later in the summer, we went on field trips to cultural sites in Blackfoot territory. We listened to Elders share stories at historical sites; picked sweet grass, chokecherries, and wild mint; visited an important sacred site; and attended ceremonies. The Elders we sat with told stories of the land and how it came to be; they also taught us how to look for the lessons within each story. Being out in the field gave us the opportunity to record these stories on a personal and interactive level, rather than the standard structured interview approach of question and answer. This allowed us to collect data while also creating a strong foundation of community and gaining new traditional teachers. On these trips, Tesla and Hudson were encouraged to put their academic training into practice with the guidance of the team. When other team members joined, our academic abilities and the young people's connections with the university were further developed.

Once again, these encounters allowed us to create a collective sphere (Rappaport, 2008) of shared experiences, vulnerability, and transformation through reciprocal mentorship and training. Everyone had a role to play in training one another. It was in those long car rides out into the prairies that these transformations took place, and true collaboration was achieved.

We brought these teachings and experiences back to campus, and the process of sharing and gifting knowledge continued into the following phases of our research process as we worked towards completing the library.

TRAINING ENCOUNTERS
DR. ERIN SPRING AND TAYLOR LITTLE MUSTACHE WITH
TESLA HEAVY RUNNER AND HUDSON EAGLE BEAR
(HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS)

As a postdoctoral fellow, my role in the Raising Spirit project was to provide research training for settler and Indigenous high school, undergraduate, and graduate students. This training took place over a series of encounters on the land, within the community, and at University of Lethbridge. Our communal office on campus was a safe space where all team members socialized, wrote, read, and discussed the project. The training that took place there was enriched by the disciplinary diversity of our research team, and by the involvement—both on- and off-campus—of Elders, staff, and children from our partner organization and university staff and students.

In the summer of 2016, the project team hired Indigenous high school students, Hudson and Tesla. They eventually became the youth leaders of our ethnographic summer fieldwork, where we collected stories on the land about Blackfoot culture, history, and language for the digital library. Prior to fieldwork, we spent time together on campus, where Tesla and Hudson received training in the research process including protocol, ethics, participant observation, interviewing, transcribing, coding, and analysis. Involvement in this project—and particularly in its land-based fieldwork—allowed Hudson and Tesla to become more integrated in their own Blackfoot community. It also allowed them to see University of Lethbridge as a place where they belong.

The research team kept extensive field notes through a project blog. The following excerpt from Tesla's field notes highlights what she learned and reflects on how her involvement in the project has shaped her thinking about the future:

> I got the chance to hang out with some anthropologists over the summer and got a look at what they use their knowledge to do including, field work, interviews, community participation, all of what I have been doing over the course of the summer. We started off with learning of what being in the field is like and how to observe everything and how observations are one of the important key things in field work so we got lots of practice with it then we started with interviews. Interviewed small children, youth, adults, and elders, all which were important to collect info from […] I am so lucky to have got the chance to be a part of this project and use the skills that I have learnt for things I may want to achieve after high school. This summer has inspired me to think about Postsecondary, something of which I had no clue about before and at least now I have some idea. I hope to come back to this project in the future.

Similarly, Hudson's field notes highlight the skills he developed:

> I went sweet grass picking for the first time this summer, and I was taught which is real sweet grass and which is fake sweet grass. When you are sweet grass picking, you have to sit there and be patient […] if you rush to pick then you could get tricked by Napi. I also had the honour to help out at the Sundance with a few of the society members and […] attended some sacred ceremonies which was a great honor for me because it opened my eyes to be a part of something that my people

have been doing for hundreds of years […] Personally for me it was just a great and unbelievable experience because I learned way more about my culture then [sic] I thought I would have. If I have the opportunity to be a researcher ever again, I'd definitely take it up because you can meet a lot of interesting people. The only thing about it is that you have to pay very close attention to stories.

In their field notes, Hudson and Tesla identify themselves as researchers and outline how their imagined future trajectories have developed through a series of encounters occurring across time and space, both on- and off-campus. Using the skills they had developed over the past two years, Tesla and Hudson also worked to build the digital library, thereby increasing their own sense of cultural belonging and research capacity, and ensuring a closing of the intergenerational knowledge transmission circle.

Taylor's field notes, which describe her experiences speaking about the project at academic conferences in Calgary and Vancouver, explain the importance of the project in similar terms:

This experience was profound and humbling; it felt as though I got to see a glimpse of my future by presenting alongside great educators. I got to meet Cindy Blackstock [a prominent public critic of the treatment of Indigenous children]…. This presentation changed my perspective completely and better clarified and supported the reason why I too am trying to make a difference for F.N.M.I. people specifically youth. At some points I did feel overwhelmed by the high level of educated people and felt as though I was not yet supposed to be there. However that changed quickly when I made new friends like Erin and Amy who changed my whole way of thinking and encouraged me to continue on with my education.

Taylor is now embarking on a Bachelor of Education degree, Hudson is enrolled in his first year of community college, and Tesla is entering her final year of high school. For them, the encounters facilitated by the project have produced new forms of expertise within academia and the Blackfoot community.

ART AS ENCOUNTER
ASHLEY HENRICKSON (MASTER'S STUDENT IN HISTORY) AND KAITLYNN WEAVER (MASTER'S STUDENT IN CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT)

We joined the Raising Spirit team in September 2016 to spearhead the final phase of the project: an art exhibit, "Elders of the Future," which was held at a local community arts centre in September and October 2017. This aspect of the project was funded by a grant intended to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation. However, for many Indigenous communities, the anniversary of a colonial act of Indigenous dispossession and settler nation-building was not an occasion for celebration. Therefore, "Elders of the Future"—co-created by a multigenerational and culturally diverse team of community members and University students— marked the anniversary of Confederation not by celebrating nationalism, but by highlighting and celebrating the resiliency of Indigenous families and communities while looking forward to a future characterized by reconciliation and resurgence.

Young children under 5 also contributed to the exhibition by creating collaborative canvases using diverse materials including shaving cream, glue, and assorted household items. The children clearly had motivation and vision for creating their art, and in order to capture this process, we tried to interview the children about their work. However, we faced challenges creating relationships with the children, because we were outsiders as infrequent visitors, settler university researchers, and adults.

The combination of these factors hindered our ability to translate our questions in a way that resonated with the children. Instead, children demonstrated acts of refusal by choosing not to tell us about their process or personal motivation for their work. For example, when asked who was depicted in his art piece, one child promptly replied, "It's pink." This was quite obvious, as the only colours provided to the children were numerous shades of pink. This demonstrated to us that the children were not yet comfortable sharing personal information about their lives due to our outsider status. Although many of the children refused to share their motivations, the process of collaborative art-making provided a step towards future positive encounters, which will further allow us to translate between cultures and generations.

Visitors to the exhibit, which also functioned as the official debut of the completed digital library, were first greeted by a large Medicine Wheel composed of the art by Indigenous youth and images from the photo-elicitation project. Much of the art showcased in "Elders of the Future" was created during a series of art workshops. These workshops included a tour of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, which at that time featured the work of Mi'kmaw artist Ursula Johnson. Touring the art gallery and viewing Johnson's art, which critiques the appropriation of Indigenous artwork by museum curators, raised questions about how academic and cultural institutions can be used to resist colonialism. Together, our multigenerational settler and Indigenous curation team produced another ethical space facilitated by the translation of encounters across cultures and generations. "Elders of the Future" drew a broad audience, and opened to standing-room-only crowds.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Data collection for Raising Spirit has just finished, and analysis will soon begin. Here we have contemplated the un-expected effect of encounters in the research process that required us to translate across and therefore at least temporarily bridge differences. This process has led us to take seriously how method as a process is as significant as the result of data analysis. Our experience provides lessons for universities working with local communities about the importance of slowing down to notice and be attentive to the moments when difference is encountered and translated in the research and community-building process.

Across the Raising Spirit project, we observed that our ideas about the "Blackfoot" community dissolved as we came to recognize the differences within based on generation, geography, and position within the project. This process was just as evident for the university team. As professors, post-docs, graduate, undergraduate, and high school students, we engaged the very young and those who were older. Our work required translation across our own academic positions as we collaborated with one another but also across age-based experience as we worked with children and Elders. Our positions as producers and receivers of knowledge shifted with each encounter. We learned to acknowledge the power we were given because of our category of identity in some situations and to cede authority and accept our vulnerability in others. When young people refuse to answer researcher questions, when youth become experts rather than university researchers, when recognized categories of identity shatter in the face of discovered sameness, and when our values are challenged, we are unsettled. Many now call for unsettling the settler in post-TRC Canada (Regan, 2010; Manuel & Derrickson, 2015). Our work on the Raising Spirit project has done this as well, for settler and Indigenous, university and community, young and old alike. It was in the third space created through the various encounters that comprised this project that we each engaged in acts of translation that unsettled categories of identity, experience, and val-

ues. We learned in this project to recognize and respect this ethical space where we not only collaborated on conceptualizing values but also reflected on our own values and the possibility for transforming them.

Ultimately, as universities pursue community partnerships, the possibility for transformation in their relationship requires accepting the unsettling aspects of their encounters and making space for the two-way translation necessitated by them. By acknowledging the double-voicing in translation as part of productive pedagogy rather than something to be managed, the power of these encounters can transform both partners in participatory research.

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