

Canadian Review of Art Education

Research and Issues

Revue canadienne d'éducation artistique

Recherche et questions d'actualité artistique



Braiding A/r/tography & Métissage: Thinking together on the work of Sonny Assu

Tressage d'a/r/tographie et métissage : réflexion concertée sur l'oeuvre de Sonny Assu

Nicole Rallis, Shannon Leddy et Rita L. Irwin

Volume 50, numéro 1, 2024

Special Issue- Indigenous Perspectives and Art Education/Research/Practice

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112539ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Education through Art

ISSN

2290-3747 (imprimé)

2563-6383 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Rallis, N., Leddy, S. & Irwin, R. (2024). Braiding A/r/tography & Métissage: Thinking together on the work of Sonny Assu. *Canadian Review of Art Education / Revue canadienne d'éducation artistique*, 50(1), 5–21.

Résumé de l'article

Trois éducatrices en arts se réunissent pour réagir à l'oeuvre de Sonny Assu, Ligwilda'xw du groupe de Nations Kwakwaka'wakw, invité à titre d'artiste-résident à un symposium du cycle supérieur sur l'expression visuelle autochtone en tant que pédagogie. Intégrant les concepts de métissage autochtone, de diffraction et d'a/r/tographie, nous entremêlons nos récits personnels, nos identités et nos pratiques. Nous discutons des modes de mise en oeuvre de pratiques pédagogiques anticoloniales pour offrir aux étudiant.e.s la possibilité de retracer, de réimaginer et de réconcilier leurs perceptions des relations autochtones-colons au Canada. Notre appel à l'action encourage les éducateurs et éducatrices en arts à considérer le métissage autochtone comme une pratique de recherche diffractive importante et comme une praxie pédagogique.

© Nicole Rallis, Shannon Leddy et Rita L. Irwin, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Braiding A/r/tography & Métissage: Thinking together on the work of Sonny Assu

Nicole Rallis, The University of British Columbia
nicolerallis@gmail.com

Shannon Leddy, The University of British Columbia
sledgy@mail.ubc.ca

Rita L. Irwin, The University of British Columbia
rita.irwin@ubc.ca

Abstract: Three art educators come together to respond to the work of Sonny Assu, Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations, who was invited as an artist-in-residence to a graduate seminar on Indigenous visual expression as pedagogy. Engaging with the concepts of Indigenous métissage, diffraction, and a/r/tography, we weave together our personal stories, identities, and practices. We discuss ways to engage in anti-colonial teaching practices that provide openings for students to retrace, reimagine, and reconcile their understandings of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. Our call to action asks art educators to consider Indigenous métissage as an important diffractive research practice and pedagogical praxis.

Keywords: Indigenous métissage, a/r/tography, anti-colonial teaching, Indigenous visual expression, pedagogical praxis, diffraction

Braid One: Combing through the threads

In the winter of 2022, Sonny Assu, Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations, was invited as an artist-in-residence to the University of British Columbia graduate seminar, Indigenous visual expression as pedagogy. Assu's artwork and storytelling provided an opening for students to retrace, reimagine, and reconcile their understandings of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada and to question what it might mean to implement meaningful actions towards decolonizing the classroom. Assu presented many of his evocative conceptual works that explored "multiple mediums and materials to negotiate western and Kwakwaka'wakw principles of artmaking" that "deal with the realities of being Indigenous in the colonial state of Canada" (Assu, 2022). In this paper we respond to three of Assu's works, *1884-1951* (2010), *Leila's Desk* (2013), and *Inherent* (2014), and engage with two questions: 1) What is possible when we center Indigeneity in the classroom? and 2) How are Indigenous research methods impacting, informing, and transforming a/r/tographical research? We consider the concepts of Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2009; 2012), a/r/tographical engagements with métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Chambers, 2009; Irwin, 2004), and Karen Barad's (2010, 2014) theory of diffraction as we weave and cut together (apart) personal stories, identities, and practices. Our aim is not to stabilize Indigenous knowledge, but to highlight how centering

Indigenous voices in the art classroom allows students to better understand Indigenous knowledges, practices, and stories as contemporary, living ideas.

Following the etymology of the word *métissage*, to mix, we come together as female teachers, artists, and researchers to weave our lived experiences alongside our reflections on Assu's artist-in-residency. While writing collectively, we express our unique identities through changes in font: *A) one of whom is a Metis academic, B) one of whom is a settler academic, and C) one of whom is a settler graduate student.*¹ Two of us are writing from the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and Sel̓ilwítulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, and one of us is writing from the unceded, ancestral, and traditional territories of the Hul'qumi'num and SENĆOTEN speaking Peoples of the Cowichan Valley, home to the Quw'utsun, Malahat, Ts'uubaa-asatx, Halalt, Penelakut, Stz'uminus, Lyackson, Pauquachin, Ditidaht ad Pacheedaht Nations. We draw inspiration from the feminist-collective writing practices of academics engaging in *métissage* that emphasize the inherent relationality between individually lived experiences (Shilling, Miller, & Leddy, 2021). We engage with the practice of thinking through and thinking together. Conceptually, we also embrace what Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) call a collective praxis of *métissage*: "a way of speaking and acting that is both political and redemptive... a rapprochement between alternative and mainstream curriculum discourses ...The braiding becomes an interpretation of the narratives as well as a form of representation and reporting of the research, individual and collective" (p.9).

¹ *Shannon Leddy =Arial italic; Rita L. Irwin= Calibri light italic; Nicole Rallis= Hoefler text*

Figure 1

Sonny Assu. (2013). Leila's Desk. [Vintage 1930's school desk (wood, metal), vintage Lifebuoy soap, copper leaf]. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Photo by: Rachel Topman.



A/r/tography was initially conceived as a rich space for researching, teaching, learning and artmaking, woven together as affect, actions and concepts were explored (e.g., LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019). While there was a recognition of similarities and differences often aligned within taken-for-granted categorizations such as the identities of artist, researcher and teacher/learner, there was also a desire to confront that which was uncomfortable. The weaving together of concepts, actions, identities and more, purposely resisted the prevailing research and pedagogical practices. Confronting the existing borderlands and embracing acts of dialogue became an effort to decolonize the oppressive reductionist policies and practices. In spirit, it is an anti-colonial strategy. Adopting the metaphor of métissage in a/r/tography (Irwin, 2004) recognized the

borderlands and offered a way to be alongside, to be in relation, and to be in dialogue with others. The metaphor offered a third in-between space that intentionally disrupted binaries. While these borderlands may be challenging, they were often liberatory as new spaces, entities, or practices were conceived and realized. The metaphor of métissage (Chambers et al., 2008) created an openness to embracing the conjunction 'and': where binaries once existed, creating a third space, where relations emerged. Métissage is often recognized in hyphenated relations, where the hyphen stands for 'and', bridging perceived differences. The forward slash in a/r/tography offers an 'and' space conceptualized as a fold in-between, emphasizing the potential for expanding and contracting, twisting and turning, reimagining artmaking, researching, teaching and learning in a myriad of ways. In the mode of improv, métissage is the performance of 'yes', and...' approach to work. Nothing is off the table. Everything is a risk.

Métissage is
active literary stance
political strategy
pedagogical praxis

transforming socio-spatial assumptions
challenging binaries
weary of placelessness
yet welcoming hybridity & third spaces

against prescribed methods
nurturing and withholding
understandings held
in tension and suspension

métissage is ethical relationality
a philosophical commitment
the peeling back of layers
developing place based consciousness

the care-full attention to details
requiring a hermeneutic imagination
personal stories
part of the larger picture²

As we start our writing for this paper, we each begin to anticipate the approaching Canada Day long weekend. Growing up as a settler in rural Ontario near Algonquin Park, Canada Day meant gathering with extended family, swimming in the lake, watermelons,

² This is a cento poem inspired by Donald (2012), Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo (2009). and Irwin (2004).

bbq-ing, sparklers and fireworks. For most of my early childhood I did not question the social, political, or cultural implications of the holiday. For my Greek immigrant Dad and grandparents, Canada symbolized opportunity and a way out of poverty. My Irish, English, German side of the family had settled in Canada in the mid-1800s and to them, Canada meant hockey, hunting, fishing, and farming. In my public school civics class in the mid-90s, we were taught that Canada Day was the anniversary of the Confederation which occurred on July 1, 1867, with the passing of the *British North America Act*. We learned that prior to the *Canada Act of 1982* the holiday was called Dominion Day, and that the term dominion meant that Canada was a self-governing nation within the British Empire. Terms like dominion, empire, and patriotism were presented to us as benign and historical, without any deeper investigation into the horrors of colonialism.

In recent years, many Canadians have begun to recognize that Canada Day is a complicated and even contested holiday as settler communities learn about and acknowledge the ongoing violences towards Indigenous peoples through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015), and the National Report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019). On June 19, 2022, the Neskantaga First Nation marked it's 10,000th consecutive day on a boil water advisory (Neskantaga First Nation Media Release, 2022). The month of June also quickly follows on the heels of the one year anniversary of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation identifying 215 unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in May of 2021 (Supernant & Carleton, 2022). Since the announcement by the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation thousands of more unidentified graves of children have been located at former Residential Schools across Canada.

The first of July will never feel the same again. Like most kids in the prairie community where I grew up, I looked forward to Canada Day. It was a long weekend that marked the beginning of summer holidays, and usually ended in fireworks and the promise of road trips, days of swimming and biking, and two long months of freedom. Even for other Indigenous kids in my school, it was a much-anticipated event. I have long known that even in families who held intergenerational trauma, many of the stories of injustice, abuse, and degradation were not shared. There was too much shame and pain involved. What difference would it have made to us if we had learned more than the stories of colonial success and excess? What difference would it have made to our classmates?

What it means to be 'Canadian' or to live in colonial Canada is something increasingly questioned and troubled by many art educators and artists. From the maple leaf to the Group of Seven, the shaping of a colonial-Canadian lexicon has been intentionally curated over the centuries and often part of public policy and education. Canada's Broadcasting Act, for example, states that media should encourage the development of 'Canadian expression', "offering information and analysis concerning Canada...from a Canadian point of view" (Gov of Canada, 1991). What exactly are Canadian expressions and points of view, and how do Indigenous artists help challenge these mainstream narratives about reconciliation, colonialism, and Canada found in our classrooms? Engaging with

Sonny Assu's installations and storytelling helped students begin a conversation around these questions.

In a country that has an Indian Act, a Multicultural Act, and an official policy of French/English bilingualism, the hegemonious assumption of a singular mode of Canadian expression quickly falls apart.

Braid two: Retracing, reimagining, and reconciling the classroom

A desk is a neat little concept. On the surface and at its most innocent level, it is intended to provide a student with a discreet space in which to accomplish the business of school. A desk provides a place to store the accoutrements of learning: pencils, erasers, rulers, notebooks. A desk is a space of one's own, a place to belong in the context of a larger classroom amid a room full of half-strangers, all of whom also need a place to belong. It is equally easy to see as innocent the rationale behind arranging desks into neat little rows or small pods. Learning aspires to be orderly, structured, sequential. A physical space is said to mirror the mind of its occupant(s); ergo, tidy classroom, tidy minds.

Figure 2

Sonny Assu. (2014). Inherent. [1970's school desk (metal, wood), copper leaf]. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Photo by: Rachel Topman.



Education confined us, contained us, defined us. Yes, I am critical of the limiting structures that stole creativity and forced particular disciplinary futures on me. Yet, there were even more detrimental schooling structures not far from me. As a student I wasn't aware of the five residential schools approximately 85-90 kms away with students from the Blood Nation near what is now called Cardston and with students from the Piikani Nation near what is now known as Brocket³. I wasn't aware of the shameful regard for difference and the attempts at obliterating cultural practices and histories. I wasn't aware of the tremendous pain, indifference and trauma being inflicted on students my own age yet of a different cultural background. I wasn't aware of the tragedies unfolding under the guise of education. The wooden desks of those students had their own stories and I never heard their stories.

Neither of Assu's desks are like the one I had as a child. But seeing them in their singularity outside of the context of a classroom evokes strong memory of my own little desk from long ago. Assu's desks, however, are not so innocent. Containment, judgement, punishment, secrecy, disdain, humiliation, separation, isolation. These are the words that come to mind when I look at his work. I know the stories, the history he points to. It isn't easy. It isn't meant to be. If only soap could have been a life saver rather than a tool of humiliation and punishment. Imagine those children. Imagine all those children.

The power of story is immense. The power of story portrayed in visual form is exponentially more powerful. It is the coming together of layered stories that is sobering, breath-taking, disturbing. Sonny Assu's installations situate us in settings that may resonate with our own experience on some level, yet through his oral and written stories alongside his visual forms, we are confronted by the racist and colonial trauma inflicted on his family members and himself in very similar settings. Leila's Desk (Assu, 2013) and Inherent (2014) are such examples. We learned from Sonny that his grandmother was allowed to go beyond grade eight and truly excited to be learning more than what she anticipated. Unfortunately, the racism of fellow students and her teacher obstructed that perspective, and her experience was changed forever. I recall going to my own country school where wooden desks were standard furniture. To me, these desks represented the structure of schooling that was imprinted on every student. While I appreciate much of what my education offered me, I am also critical of it in many ways. Indeed, that is what inspired me to be a teacher: to help change a failing system.

Yet, I now know that Indigenous children had even more difficult experiences. For me, what was written on those desks, like graffiti hidden from view on first glance, was permanently inscribed in full view for the life of the desk. I remember initials and symbols that seemed innocent enough. I don't remember any that shamed me, ridiculed me, or harmed me. Sonny, as an artist, inscribed the racist term [Chug] he was called on the underside of the desktop – out of view and yet not out of view. The metaphor isn't lost on me. The life of that desk symbolizes the life of a student.

³ To find residential school sites in Canada: <https://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/beyond-94-residential-school-map/>

Assu's installations and storytelling provokes, inspires, lingers, and haunts. It invites me to enter a contemplative space. Listening to him speak about his grandmother's and his own experiences in school, I am transported to my earliest childhood memories. The excitement of the first day of grade one. How I would decorate the side of my desk with Lisa Frank stickers purchased at the library book fair. The way the classroom offered an escape from whatever troubles were waiting for me back at home. In this contemplative space I also remember the homogeneity of my predominantly white rural Ontario school, and how little we learned about colonialism and racism. It was not until I was eleven, when a social studies teacher made us watch *Where the Spirit Lives* (Pittman, 1989), that I slowly began to learn about the atrocities of the residential school system. Like the Dixon Pink Pearl eraser that I used to try to erase doodles I would etch into my desktop, Assu reminds me that colonial erasure runs deep in Canada's public schools.

Sonny brings us up close and uncomfortable to a desk of his own. We are faced with the reality, told through a visual story. Sonny's art becomes the intermediary arena where we can enter into a solemn space of discussion: to recognize, to retrace, to remember, to reconcile. Accessing the work of Indigenous artists as we Indigenize our curriculum, implementing First Nations principles of learning, and addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), is an essential approach to decolonizing our teaching and learning practices. Indeed, the power of art is its ability to tell visual stories we can approach tenderly and with concern, simultaneously. We can be ready to understand difference and find affinities. And we can create new works of art that continue the discussion, orally, in text and through images.

Figure 3

Sonny Assu. (2010). 1884-1951. [Cup size: Grande, Copper, Hudson's Bay Point Blanket]. Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Photo by: Sonny Assu.



Like the relating of personal childhood memories about school desks, Assu's conceptual piece *1884-1951* (2010) also invites us to rethink our relationship with materials and how they flow through time and space into shared and complicated contexts. In *1884-1951* Sonny incorporated a maroon and black Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Point blanket with sixty-seven large copper-cast Starbucks coffee cups resting atop. He described that through trade with European colonists his community incorporated these woollen blankets in traditional potlatch ceremonies. Each of the copper cups represents one year for which the potlatch ceremonies were banned through the Indian Act. The placement of the blanket and cups raises awareness to the policing of sacred Indigenous cultural ceremonies by the colonial Canadian state. In an interview conducted when the installation was part of his solo exhibition at Equinox Gallery in Vancouver, Assu stated that, "the blanket was a tool of trade, which then became a tool of oppression, which then became a tool of genocide" (Cottingham, 2011, quoted in, McDonald, 2012, p.11).

Canonically, we might call these works found objects or ready-mades. We might take them up as semiotic exercises that draw our attention to broader social themes, to discussions of materiality, intention, and zeitgeist. We might wonder at the word Chug, at the time period signified by the soap box, even at the angle and lighting of each desk as an object in and of itself and in relation to proximal works. All of this is true. All of this counts. These are diffractions, strands; just a few of the many threads we might weave together to encourage meaning to emerge. None of them alone completes the picture. None of them captures the dialogic potential between viewer and artist, between past and present, between connotation and denotation, between self and other.

Something that occurs to me as I look at 1884-1951 is the tension that Assu creates between material and connotation. A blanket normally suggests comfort, care, and nurturing. But in the 1700s and 1800s, blankets were used to deliberately spread Smallpox and other diseases to Indigenous peoples in order to cull them, denoting genocide instead. Similarly, in many Northwest Coast cultures, copper has always been associated with Potlatching, a symbol of wealth and prestige (McDonald, 2012). To see it used in the replication of a throw-away item like a coffee cup says much about how so many Indigenous people feel about their relationship with Canada.

It is in the way that Assu shares his personal stories and the familiar physical materials he engages with in his installations that bring us into relationship: a relationship that ethically binds us. Reflecting with some of the students after the completion of the course, someone mentioned how they did not know about the complicated history of the HBC blanket until Assu spoke of it. They had grown up in the British Columbia public school system but were unaware of how the blankets were used for biological warfare during colonial expansion. This student's comment reminded me of the transformative power that centering Indigenous art and story work has toward decolonizing classrooms and developing decolonial literacies.

The HBC Point Blanket has become both a romanticized object in the colonial-Canadian gaze and a material symbol of colonial resistance. In 2016, years after Assu first debuted *1884-1951*, and after other Indigenous artists across Canada created important works around the blanket (Belmore, 2011; Decter & Isaac, 2010-2016; Favell, 1999), the

Hudson's Bay Company released its own branded Barbie doll. It donned a woollen winter jacket with the famous yellow, blue, green, and red stripes of the HBC point blanket. The long blonde haired doll with hipster glasses stands as a reminder to the ongoing ways in which the violences of colonialism are white-washed and re-packaged as Canadiana for contemporary consumption. An article written in Maclean's magazine coined the HBC doll 'Colonial Barbie', noting the insensitivity of the company for failing to acknowledge the blankets storied and problematic history (Wiart, 2016). Despite the public backlash surrounding 'Colonial Barbie', in 2020, for their 350th anniversary, HBC created another limited edition of the doll:

Barbie pays homage to the company's original adventurers... Embracing the time-honoured Hudson's Bay Multi-stripe Point Blanket, Barbie is proudly sporting a versatile puffer jacket, belt bag, matching hiking boots, and paddle bearing the iconic stripes. She is ready to embark on a journey of discovery, seizing all of life's adventures no matter how big or small (The Bay, 2020).

I was perhaps in my early 20s when I first made the connection between The Bay, where we shopped often when I was growing up and the Hudson's Bay Company, which did so much to facilitate the entrenchment for colonization. I suppose that says a lot about the power of rebranding. It's another diffraction. Now, HBC blankets are coveted as symbols of status and Canadiana, expensive as they have become. Yet for the past 300 or so years, Métis men and women made regular use of the blankets as capotes, a traditional Métis outer coat. In many ways, the HBC actually supported and even helped to facilitate the birth of my people.

As I think about bringing First Nations artists into classrooms, I recognize how Sonny's art invites a living curriculum or moments of currere (Pinar & Grumet, 1976) into classroom spaces. By witnessing his installations, the sheer materiality of the wooden desks takes me back to time I distantly remember when I was a student using a similar desk. It is a living curriculum moment as my current understanding of First Nations students in residential schools quickly transforms a memory into a visceral experience. I can feel the desk surrounding me with its scars of racial slurs and injustice. And as I transport myself into this confined space of learning, I have another visceral experience. I feel the utter restrictions of someone else's culture upon my own interests. I feel the strength of its materials, at once physical yet abiding with silent authority. There is a fleeting ephemeral touching of moments past when harm took place. My body protects me, and only seems to allow fleeting moments of resonance knowing that a full grasping of the harshness of that time could cause grave harm to me, even now – despite the decades of time in-between. Such is the trauma many First Nations students experience. Sonny's work is a sobering moment of currere. And then my senses recognize his voice. Sonny visits us and tells his stories through a digital platform. I am silent. Students are silent. We listen, practically holding our breath. With each storyline, our bodies are coming to know differently. With each storyline, what was unbelievable becomes believed. The power of story is a living currere, a living curriculum. Seeing and hearing the stories of a living artist confronting Truth and Reconciliation in a Canadian context helps bring history to life. It also helps bring our curriculum to life.

Figure 4

artist unknown. (date unknown). A Métis Capote displayed in the Duck Lake Regional Interpretive Centre, Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, Canada. 2022. Photo by: Shannon Leddy.



Braid three: Métissage as diffraction

Perhaps it works like this: a/r/tography moves us from inside to outside as our experience, collection, reflection, and synthesis is materialised into art. Métissage, then, may ask us to work from the outside in; to take an accounting of what 'is,' of things that are materially or intellectually extant, and merge them with personal versions of 'what is' until our understanding is transformed. Is this writing a/r/tography? Is it métissage? Do I need to decide? In both ways of working, the intent is to disrupt singularity and stasis with the emergence of understandings and insights. In some ways it is a merging of the I and Thou of the artist/art/viewer relation, and so will vary for each viewer. In thinking about Leila's Desk, Inherent, and 1884-1951 someone with less understanding of Residential Schools or anti-Indigenous racist slurs might come away with a completely different experience. Does that make the work any less powerful? Isn't this just another mode of diffraction?

Alison Pryer (2004) has conceptualized a/r/tographers as intellectual nomads, "plunging themselves into the movement and uncertainty of the creative/research/pedagogical process,

brazenly over stepping institutional boundaries and playing on the margins of their identities” (p. 200). This is when a/r/tography often embraces the complicated conversations of what William Pinar understands as currere, the Latin root word for curriculum meaning to run the course (Pinar, 2009). Rather than adopting the noun of curriculum that is a static and defined notion of what is to be learned, a/r/tographers embrace the verb currere meaning to run, refocussing their attention to learning to learn by disrupting the familiar. Embracing movement in this way is encouraging for those who understand the veracity of métissage. Within this movement there is an emergence of new awarenesses, cultures, and identities. This hybridity is important for undermining taken-for-granted, often repressive, beliefs, knowledge and actions. This hybridity becomes a living curriculum (Aoki, 1993) where guaranteed outcomes are not promised yet opportunities that offer pedagogical occasions for learning are contextualized and recognized due to their potential for deep engagement.

Indigenous métissage is an active literary stance, a political strategy, and a pedagogical praxis (Donald, 2012). When this stance, strategy and praxis are enacted disparate ideas are encouraged to be shared and held in tension. It is these (in) tensional spaces where new relationships can emerge. These tensions help us find points of similarity but also help us understand that sometimes different ways of knowing and worldviews will simply be incommensurable with each other (Tuck & Yang, 2012). That the colonial school system, the story of progress, and the subsequent ongoing project of neoliberal education, will never be truly decolonial (Tuck, 2013). It may be difficult to decolonize the classroom because decolonization means the literal repatriation of land. However, Max Liboiron states that “there are anticolonial things you can do—things that aim to stop the reproduction of colonialism in the classroom” (Liboiron, 2019). It feels like engaging in métissage may be one of those anti-colonial things. Shannon speaks of her pedagogy as helping students develop ‘decolonial literacies’ (Leddy, 2021). Bringing Assu into the classroom as an artist-in-residence is one of the ways decolonial literacies are learned. The traditional, hierarchal, and ordered structure of learning is interrupted and transformed into a holistic space and process where teacher, students, and artist are placed in relation to one another through story and experience.

challenging
one’s own identity
disturbing the tranquility of ideas
this is what emerges
when we come into relation
allowing spaces between our breaths
to linger and hold tensions
transforming

In as much as we are adopting the braiding methodology of métissage for our collective writing, I find myself engaged in my own métissage as well. Reading to gain clarity in the affordances and similarities of Indigenous métissage and a/r/tography I encountered the work of Karen Barad and her notions of diffraction, intra-action, and

quantum entanglements as elements of coming-to-be-and-know. For Barad (2010) quantum entanglements “...are not intertwining of separate entities, but rather irreducible relations of responsibility” (p. 265). This immediately brings to mind Donald’s work on Indigenous *métissage*, where he describes the notion of ethical relationality as the central underpinning of *métissage*, which “...instantiates an ethical imperative to acknowledge how our histories and experiences position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people are tied together...” because “we live in the world together” (2012, p. 536).

This acknowledgement of the fundamental interrelatedness of all things and phenomena mirrored in the work of Barad and Donald flies in the face of the Western attachment to binaries, singularities, and certainties. Separability as an analytic goal becomes Quixotic, as does certainty, leaving us only with the constancy of flux and the gift-burden of constantly becoming. As Barad (2010) describes it “...if the indeterminate nature of existence by its nature teeters on the cusp of stability and instability, of possibility and impossibility, then the dynamic relationality between continuity and discontinuity is crucial to the open-ended becoming of the world which resists acausality as much as determinism” (p. 248). There are some certainties, of course. The planets will most likely continue to behave in a way that allows us to perceive the sun as rising in the East and setting in the West. But, ontology, she suggests, citing Derrida, “is a conjuration” (p. 252).

Ultimately, for Barad, reality is a set of intra-relationalities that is emergent, the evidence for which she draws from the discourse of quantum mechanics. When we humans try to approach understanding by breaking things down to their smallest constituent parts, tracking isolates and singularities, things tend to fall apart. The rules no longer apply because the observer of phenomena is fundamentally inextricable from the occurrence of it and is necessarily an influent. All perception and subsequent meaning-making and understanding is emergent and dependant on what is brought to each moment of intra-action. If a tree falls in the forest...

In describing the process of constant becoming, Barad has used the phrase “cutting-apart-together” (Barad, 2014, p.176). This is where diffraction (the multiple possible variations and perspectives that inform and become intra-action) is most germane in thinking about what we hope for when we invite our students into the practices of *a/r/tography* and *métissage*. Every reading, every assignment and experience, is curated precisely because we know it will lead our students (and ourselves together with each iteration of students) to new places, new learnings and understandings. Because each student brings a different set of sensibilities, reality constructs, and experiences, to each phenomenological experience evoked in our classes, each will have a different emergent understanding that both builds on a collection of things past, but also creates a future that is necessarily changed because of the encounter.

In coming full circle, we return to the questions of what it means to center Indigeneity in the classroom, and what meaningful engagements towards decolonizing and promoting anti-colonial art and research practices look like? Our call to action asks art educators to consider Indigenous *métissage* as an important diffractive research practice

and pedagogical praxis. We invite art educators to consider centering the written work of Indigenous artists and scholars (Battiste, 2003; King, 2008; Morin, Reid, & Robinson, 2012; Taylor, 2015), showing the works of Indigenous filmmakers (Koostachin, 2017, 2019; Obomsawin, 1993, 2012), and inviting local Indigenous artists, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers from your community into your classroom⁴. Donald (2009) reminds us that Indigenous métissage is inherently a place-based approach to curriculum, and that being cognizant of the different communities and lands we learn with is essential: “in the context of Canadian education, place-stories can help people reread and reframe their understandings of Canadian history as layered and relational, and thus better comprehend ongoing Indigenous presence and participation” (p.10). Leanne Betasamosake-Simpson’s work (2014, 2020) also emphasizes the necessity of place based and relational learning stating that, “the context is the curriculum, and land, *aki*, is the context” (2014, p.155). A commitment to anti-colonial art education necessitates both an ethical connection with Indigenous ways of knowing and the lands on which we learn with.

And here is the point. Inviting an artist like Sonny Assu in to speak with a class, showing work by artists such as Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Rebecca Belmore, Kent Monkman, Dana Claxton, or Marianne Nicolson, is undertaken because of the potential each holds for a diffractive and ultimately intra-active and emergent understanding⁵. I seek to challenge my students to trace the roots of colonial hegemony that was delivered to them through school curriculum framed as neutral. Much in line with Mezirow’s (2003) transformative learning I want them to challenge their old frames of reference and the assumptions and colonial mythologies they contain. Each encounter is a becoming that necessitates an un-becoming and a re-becoming together. Approached in the spirit of ethical relationality, this is the sacred work of teaching and learning. We are magicians, alchemists, always working to make gold out of the everyday.

References

- Aoki, T. T. (1993). Legitimizing lived curriculum: Towards a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 8(3), 255-268.
- Assu, S. (2010). *1884-1951*. [Cup size: Grande, Copper, Hudson’s Bay Point Blanket]. Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
- Assu, S. (2013). *Leila’s Desk*. [Vintage 1930’s school desk (wood, metal), vintage Lifebuoy soap, copper leaf]. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
- Assu, S. (2014). *Inherent*. [1970’s school desk (metal, wood), copper leaf]. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

⁴ It is important to note that the role of educating settler students on the violences of ongoing colonialism should never rely on the emotional and physical labour of Indigenous artists and communities. If you are inviting an Indigenous artist, Elder, or Knowledge Keeper into your classroom, they must be paid appropriately for their time and wisdom. For a helpful resource on how and when to invite Indigenous community members into your classroom please see Hogan, McCracken & Eidenger’s, *How and when to invite Indigenous speakers to the classroom* (2019).

⁵ We recognize that the artists we reference in this article only represent a small fraction of the important Indigenous voices inside and outside of Canada working to decolonize, and encourage readers to explore a myriad of resources to learn more, such as <https://indigenousartscollective.org/artist-directory/page/2/>.

- Assu, S. (2022). *Biography* [personal bio statement]. Retrieved from: <https://www.sonnyassu.com/pages/biography>
- Barad, K. (2014). Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart. *parallax*, 20(3), 168-187.
- Barad, K. (2010). Quantum entanglements and hauntological relations of inheritance: Dis/continuities, spacetime enfoldings, and justice-to-come. *Derrida today*, 3(2), 240-268.
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education. Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich Publishing Limited.
- Belmore, R. (2011). *The Blanket*. [Plug in ICA, Hudson's Bay blanket]. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
- Betasamosake Simpson, L. (2020). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Betasamosake Simpson, L. (2014). Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), 1-25.
- Chambers, C., Hasebe-Ludt, E., Donald, D., Hurren, W., Leggo, C. & Oberg, A. (2008). Métissage. In A. Cole & J. Knowles (Eds). *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues* (pp. 141-153). Sage.
- Decter, L., & Isaac, J. (2010-2016). *(official denial) trade value in progress*. [Hudson's Bay blankets, waxed thread, yarn, beads]. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
- Donald, D. T. (2009). Forts, curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian relations in educational contexts. *First Nations Perspectives*, 2(1), 1-14.
- Donald, D.T. (2012). Indigenous Métissage: A decolonizing research sensibility. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(5), 533-555, DOI:10.1080/09518398.2011.554449
- Favell, R. (1999). *I awoke to find my spirit had returned*. [Digital print]: <https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/rosalie-favell#:~:text=In%20one%20of%20my%20adventures,I%20question%20where%20home%20is>
- Government of Canada. (1991). Broadcasting Act S.C 199, 11. [Retrieved on July 28, 2022]: <https://www.laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/b-9.01/FullText.html>
- Hasebe-Ludt, E., Chambers, C., & Leggo, C. (2009). *Life writing and literary metissage as an ethos for our times*. Peter Lang.
- Hogan, S., McCracken, K., & Eidinger, A. (2019, January 14). How and when to invite Indigenous speakers to the classroom. *Active History*. [Retrieved on July 30, 2022]: <https://activehistory.ca/2019/01/how-and-when-to-invite-indigenous-speakers-to-the-classroom/#comments>
- Irwin, R.L. (2004). A/r/tography: A metonymic métissage. In R.L. Irwin & A. de Cosson (Eds.). *A/r/tography: Rendering self through arts-based living inquiry* (pp.27-40). Pacific Educational Press.
- King, T. (2008). *The truth about stories: A native narrative*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Koostachin, J. (2017). *NiiSoTeWak*. [Film]. VisJuelles Productions Inc.
- Koostachin, J. (2019). *OshKikIShiKaw: A new day*. [Film]. VisJuelles Productions Inc.

- LeBlanc, N., & Irwin, R.L. (2019). A/r/tography. In G. Noblit (Ed.). *Oxford Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods in Education*. (pp.1-21). Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.393
- Leddy, S. (2019). Learning to see art as a pedagogical practice. Unpublished manuscript. Vancouver, BC: UBC.
- Leddy, S., & Turner, S.R. (2016). Sharpening the focus: Two voices on Aboriginal pedagogy. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum studies*, 14(2), 10-20.
- Liboiron, M. (2019, August 12). Decolonizing your syllabus? You might have missed some steps: Decolonizing your syllabus is different than including some Indigenous writers on the reading schedule. *Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research*: <https://civiclaboratory.nl/2019/08/12/decolonizing-your-syllabus-you-might-have-missed-some-steps/>
- McDonald, F. (2012). Woollen blankets in contemporary art: Mutable and mobile materials in the work of Sonny Assu. *Material Culture Review*, 76(1), 108-116.
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of transformative education*, 1(1), 58-63.
- Morin, P., Martine, R., & Robinson, M. (2012). *Carrying on "irregardless: Humour in contemporary northwest coast art*. Harbour Publishing
- National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls., Vol 1a.
- Neskantaga First Nation. (2022, June 19). *Neskantaga FN mark 10,000 day in boil water advisory*. [Press release]: <http://www.matawa.on.ca/neskantaga-first-nation-mark-10000-day-in-boil-water-advisory/>
- Obomsawin, A. (1993). *Kanehsatake: 270 years of resistance*. [Film]. National Film Board of Canada.
- Obomsawin, A. (2012). *The people of the Kattawapiskak river*. [Film]. National Film Board of Canada.
- Obomsawin, A. (2017). *Our people will be healed*. [Film]. National Film Board of Canada.
- Pinar, W. F. (2009). *The worldliness of a cosmopolitan education: Passionate lives in public service*. Routledge.
- Pinar, W.F., & Grumet, M. (1976). *Toward a poor curriculum*. Kendall/Hunt.
- Pittman, B. (1989). *Where the spirit lives* [Film]. Screen Door Production.
- Pryer, A. (2004). Living with/in marginal spaces: intellectual nomadism and artist/researcher/teacher praxis. In R. L. Irwin & A. de Cosson (Eds.), *A/r/tography: rendering self through arts-based living inquiry* (pp. 198-213). Pacific Educational Press.
- Shilling, A., Miller, L., & Leddy, S. (2021). A métissage manifesto for decolonizing the academy. In E. Lyle, & S. Mahani (Eds). *Sister scholars: Untangling issues of identity as women in academe*. (pp.21-30). DIO Press.
- Supernaut, K., & Carleton, S. (2022, June 3). Fighting ‘denialists’ for the truth about unmarked graves and residential schooling. *CBC*: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/opinion-residential-schools-unmarked-graves-denialism-1.6474429>
- Taylor, D.H. (2015). *Me artsy*. Douglas & McIntyre.

- The Bay. (2020). *HBC x Barbie 350th anniversary: HBC stripes Barbie doll limited edition*. [Retrieved on July 31, 2022]: <https://www.thebay.com/product/HUDSONS-BAY-COMPANY-HBC-X-BARBIE-350TH-ANNIVERSARY-HBC-STRIPES-BARBIE-DOLL---LIMITED-EDITION-0600091432723.html>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to action*. [Retrieved on July 28, 2022]: https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English_2.pdf
- Tuck, E. (2013). Neoliberalism as nihilism? A commentary on educational accountability, teacher education and school reform. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*. 11(2), 324-347.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K.W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 1(1), 1-40.
- Wiart, N. (2016, December 16). HBC's 'Colonial Barbie' comes with some baggage: The toy, emblazoned in the Hudson's Bay Company's iconic colours, is a hot-ticket reminder of a colonial past. *Maclean's*: <https://www.macleans.ca/society/hbcs-colonial-barbie-comes-with-some-baggage/>