

inVISIBILITY: Indigenous in the city

Indigenous artists, Indigenous youth and the project of survivance

Susan D. Dion

York University

Angela Salamanca

York University

Abstract

The *inVISIBILITY* exhibition featured urban Indigenous artists whose work addresses issues of urban Indigeneity and education. Through their work, the artists simultaneously clarify and complicate stories of schooling told by Indigenous students, resulting in an exhibition that called on stakeholders in education and the public to think and respond. In this paper we consider visual art in the exhibition alongside stories told by Indigenous students. Both the artists and the students describe the ways in which they “don’t (didn’t) fit in school and schools don’t (didn’t) fit them.” It is their Indigeneity that, in different ways, creates the rupture. Working with a particular conception of presence articulated by Gerald Vizenor (1994), who explains that survival plus resistance equals survivance, we investigate and describe the rupture. Drawing on the work of scholars in the field of Indigenous art including Jolene Rickard (20013, 1992), Greg Hill (2013, 2011), Gerald Vizenor (2008, 2013), Gerald McMaster (2013) and Heather Igloliorte (2013), we position our analysis within an emerging body of literature addressing the continuous presence of Indigenous peoples in spaces of cultural significance for knowledge-making - including museums, galleries and schools.

Keywords: *urban Indigenous education; urban youth; art and education; survivance*

Introduction

*I came from a reserve in the north, it has no name
Would it make a difference to you, as we play
the Indian Act game?
Me and my buddies we have our own way.
We tell our stories in comic books and hip hop.
So that you can hear what we have to say.*
Lucas, Gr. 11 Student

*I always knew that I was not a Canadian of
European ancestry. In school I heard stories of
immigration and the celebration of settler history
and I knew that I was not a part of that history. I
knew what I wasn't. But the colonial project of
forced assimilation makes it very hard to
recognize my self as I am - an Indigenous woman.*
Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Artist



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The *inVISIBILITY Exhibition*¹ featured artists whose work addresses issues of urban Indigeneity and education. Through their work, the artists simultaneously clarify and complicate stories of schooling told by the students, resulting in an exhibition that called on stakeholders in education and the public to think and respond. In this paper we consider visual art in the exhibition alongside stories told by Indigenous students. Both the artists and the students describe the ways in which they “don’t (didn’t) fit in school and schools don’t (didn’t) fit them.” It is their Indigeneity² that in different ways creates the rupture. Working with a particular conception of presence articulated by Gerald Vizenor (1994), who explains that survival plus resistance equals survivance, we investigate and describe the rupture.

In the overlay of their visual and written texts, complex stories of Indigeneity and schooling emerge that contribute to our understanding of students’ experiences. Drawing on the work of scholars in the field of Indigenous art, including Jolene Rickard (2013, 1992), Greg Hill (2013, 2010), Gerald Vizenor (2013, 2008, 1994, 1984), Gerald McMaster (2013, 1999, 1993)

¹ Curated by Anna Hudson, the *inVISIBILITY Exhibition* was part of a Knowledge Mobilization Project led by S. Dion, C. Rice, A. Hudson, T. Senk, and H. Fowlie. A. Moffat, A. Salamanca, and R. Dickenson were Research Assistants on the project and the authors acknowledge the team for the success of the project and their contributions to the work that informs this paper.

² Our understanding of Indigeneity refers to practices of “living heritage, being part of a tradition—shared stories, beliefs, ways of thinking, ways of moving about in the world, lived experiences—that generates identities which, while ever changing and diverse, are deeply rooted in the common ground of our heritages as original peoples” (Alfred, 2009, p. 139).

and Heather Igloliorte (2013, 2010), we position our analysis within an emerging body of literature addressing the continuous presence of Indigenous peoples in spaces of cultural significance for knowledge-making—including museums, galleries and schools. In our reading of the *inVISIBILITY* texts (the stories and the artwork), survivance is articulated in multiple ways that share an inherent and undeniable statement of presence; a need to exist as an Indigenous person and an impossibility of hiding it; a complication of the position bestowed on Indigenous peoples of being “at-risk”, and an invitation to follow the traces and to learn; and a willingness to be vulnerable and fragile in this articulation and displacement. These themes weave through both the artists’ work and the students’ stories. Through their creative work artists initiate sensation, sensation as Elizabeth Grosz (2008) explains, “draws us, living beings of all kinds, into the artwork in a strange becoming in which the living being empties itself of its interior to be filled with the sensation of that work alone” (p. 73). Sharing their creative expression, youth who participated in *inVISIBILITY* are contributing to the project of decolonizing the self and creating decolonized spaces within institutions. Most significantly they’ve taught us that students’ *first need* is for learning experiences that honour Indigenous presence and cultivate their capacities to know themselves as Indigenous people.

Background and context

Installed at the John B. Aird Gallery (Toronto) in the summer of 2013, *inVISIBILITY: Indigenous In The City* was both an exhibition and an invitation sent by Indigenous artists and educators to politicians, administrators, policy makers, and the public to attend, to listen and converse with the urban Indigenous community. Funded by a SSHRC Connections grant, the *inVISIBILITY Exhibition* and speaker series aimed to mobilize knowledge from the *Talking Stick Project*. In 2009, co-author Dr. Susan D. Dion (Lenape/Potawatomi) received a research grant from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) for the *Talking Stick* research. The purpose of the research was to investigate, evaluate, and learn from the work undertaken and accomplished by the Board’s Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project (UAEPP).³ With its activities, the pilot project worked to transform school experiences for Aboriginal students and to address the teaching of Aboriginal subject material (Dion, Johnston, & Rice, 2010, p.vi, vii).

Drawing on knowledge, understanding, and insights gained from the *Talking Stick* research, the goal of the *inVISIBILITY* project was to create an Indigenous space within the gallery where artists, scholars, film makers, teachers, students, and parents would creatively share their experiences and perspectives with each other, with stakeholders in education, and the broader community. Representing the experiences and perspectives of urban Indigenous

³ In 2009 the Ontario Aboriginal Education Office (AEO) created the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project to develop models for engagement with First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, families and/or communities and the TDSB was identified as a pilot project site. The project began in September 2008 and finished in 2010.

communities through art allows for complex representations of people's lived experiences that support learning in relationship.

The *inVISIBILITY Exhibition* had a specific pedagogical purpose. If those of us involved in education hope to positively impact Indigenous education for all students, First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in all of our diversities and complexities must be rendered visible. This includes recognizing how our experiences of history, our languages and cultures contribute to who we are in the city, and what we want and what we need from education. Motivated by a serious commitment to close the achievement gap, educators across Canada are searching for policies, practices, and strategies that will support the inclusion of Indigenous experiences and perspectives across the curriculum. Informed by my work in the field of Aboriginal education and particularly the writing of *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board*, I have come to know that if we as educators take that commitment seriously, our first step must be to close the gap in knowledge and understanding on the part of teachers, administrators, curriculum writers, and policy makers (Dion, 2013).

Survivance through Indigenous art production

It is the relationships to place, family, and community, combined with the spiritual beliefs of our ancestors' that create the pattern for our own way of being. It is a path that leads us to a journey of creativity as we explore new ways to manifest those old realities. (Hill, R., 2011, p. 4)

We start our investigation from the position of knowing that Indigenous students in urban settings confront particular problems including not being recognized as Indigenous; not seeing themselves represented in the curriculum; and being situated in school communities that know very little about the history and ongoing presence of Indigenous people in Canada and in Canadian cities (Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Battiste, 1998; Dion, 2000). In urban settings, school board administrators, teachers, and other service providers also confront particular challenges, including having limited knowledge and understanding of urban Indigeneity, Indigenous students' needs and experiences, and the complexities of teaching Indigenous subject material (Deyhle, 1998; Leroy, 2001; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Dion, Johnston & Rice, 2010). Initially our turn toward visual art was in service of mobilizing knowledge; what we found was deep learning that affirms and advances our understanding of Indigenous youth and their experiences in urban schools. As Pueblo artist/educator Gregory Cajete (2000) reminds us, "Visual art is another way Pueblo express their worldview. In art forms such as Pueblo pottery, we are reminded of our connection with those things that give life to ourselves and our community" (p. 185). In the case of the *inVISIBILITY Exhibition*, the overlay of visual and written texts brought to life the centrality of schooling experiences in the lives of Indigenous youth.

Within Indigenous traditions visual art—like the art of storytelling—is recognized as something more than entertainment. Lenore Keeshig Tobias writes, "Stories are power. They

reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture thinks” (in Dion, 2009, p. 16). Expanding on Keeshig Tobias, Igloliorte explains,

[A]rt is not separate from the community – it is of the community and includes participation and interactivity – we come to know through observing and then joining-in, listening and looking, and take up our responsibility to participate according to our own capacities and gifts always with respect and in service of knowing self in relationship with community and nation. (Igloliorte, 2013, p. 25)

Artists in the exhibition draw on their own life experiences as Indigenous peoples within an urban context; and in turn clarify and complicate the experiences of Indigenous students in urban schools who must contend with forces, both subtle and blunt, to at times blend in and hide and at other times assert the markers and signifiers of their own Indigeneity.

While simultaneously creating a sensation for the audience that enlivens the students’ lived experiences, the art invites the audience to go deeper and to engage, asking viewers to complicate their understanding of what they have sensed. Through the art and stories, Indigenous youth are demanding to be seen as they are, to be respected in their Indigenous identity and to be a part of the discussion that frames their identities and presence in schools. Art is about “making sense”, creating beauty and initiating sensation out of chaos (Grosz, pp. 4-8). Contemporary Indigenous art reflects our stories and our current story is one of recuperating from and speaking back to the violence of colonization, decolonizing our selves, our communities, and institutional spaces including art institutions, museums and schools (Igloriorte, p. 23).

In her article, *The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art* (2013), Jolene Rickard writes, “There is a need to expand art criticism and visual theory to include a discourse read across Indigeneity, colonization and sovereignty” (p. 54). This broader framework would contextualize art created by Indigenous artists who seek to ‘talk back’ to the marginalization of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Art in this sense does not exist in a cultural, social or political vacuum; it is a part of a larger conversation, a discourse in which artists take part. We agree with Rickard and consider the work created by artists in *inVISIBILITY* within a historical and political context. Our purpose is not to limit analysis; it would be a disservice to Indigenous artists to understand or analyze their art solely as a function of ‘righting wrongs’, or speaking to a colonial world order. Instead, making art in an Indigenous context can also be understood as “participating in creation. It is making oneself available to the spirit, the vision, the invisible, the imagined” (Trépanier, 2008, p. 15). As Vizenor (1994) explains, the contemporary Indigenous artist performing postindian warrior is informed by tribal consciousness in the recreation of the real (p. 5).

Artistic creation as both evidence and means of cultural survival and resistance (survivance) is a theme explored by France Trépanier and Chris Creighton Kelly (2011). In their report, Nicole Obomsawin writes:

Aboriginal heritage is based on spiritual heritage passed on by oral tradition. It's what defines us and has allowed us to survive as a culture. Observing, listening, remembering and transmitting are the foundations of Aboriginal education . . . The Aboriginal cultural identification movement has generated excitement and many nations have instituted organizations devoted to safeguarding and promoting language and culture, while artists and creators are increasingly present on every stage. (p. 39-40)

Indigenous people resisted the negative incursions in their way of life made by oppressive government policies that outlawed cultural expressions, traditions and practices by continuing their practices of art creation. Bringing together the students' stories with the work of contemporary Indigenous artists to deepen our understanding, we begin with a 'broad strokes' review of an emerging body of literature in the field of contemporary Indigenous art production. Our review begins with essays written in response to the National Gallery of Canada 2013 International Indigenous Art Exhibition, *Sakahàn*.

Representation and survivance

Drawing attention to the significance of self-representation and cultural sovereignty for Indigenous people, Gerald Vizenor begins his essay, *Native Cosmototemic Art* (2013), with a reference to the constitution of the White Earth Nation. As Vizenor explains, the "Constitution of the White Earth Nation is probably the only constitution in the world to specifically protect the rights of artistic practices, manner and cultural sovereignty." Quoting the preamble that states, "The Anishinaabeg create stories of natural reason, of courage, loyalty, humor, spiritual inspiration, survivance, reciprocal altruism and native cultural sovereignty" (p. 42), Vizenor's emphasis is on presence and artistic representation. It is through the practices of self-representation that we tell of our presence, our resistance and our survivance.

Vizenor grounds his theory in artistic practices of Indigenous peoples, revealed in ancient cave art and in the work of contemporary Indigenous artists including Oscar Howe, George Morrison, Norval Morrisseau and Carl Beam, whose art Vizenor understands as creative resistance to "dominance, separation and the curatorial exclusion of abstract and innovative native art" (2013, p. 42). Refusing dominant narratives, Vizenor insists on "a sense of native presence and actuality over academic absence, nihilism and the romantic sentiments of native victimry" (p. 44).

Indigenous people in the Americas have been resisting dominant representations from the time of first contact. Since Columbus arrived and named us 'Indians' our identities have been constructed as savage, heathen, pitiful, mythical; terms designed to marginalize and render us helpless (McMaster, 1993). Describing the Canadian context, Greg Hill provides background explaining that the Indian Act of 1876,

defined and subjugated “indians” to the policies and laws of the new state, among these, the Potlatch Ban of 1884. Most notoriously, agents of the department of Indian Affairs enforced the ban in 1921 when they had participants attending chief Daniel Cranmer’s potlatch at Alert Bay arrested and their ceremonial objects and regalia seized. Some of the confiscated items found their way into collections in Canada and the United States and were exhibited as artifacts of “outmoded ways.” (2010, p. 19)

Well into the middle of the last century, representations of Indigenous people were bound up in colonial domination, a practice in which dominant cultures seek to control the telling of Indigenous stories. As such, representations of Indigenous people were limited to the archive, the museum and documentary film.

Anthropology museums are concerned with collecting, salvaging and exhibiting objects representing material culture of what they deem to be authentic and vanishing Indigenous people. Art galleries represent the history of “aesthetic” objects by Western peoples from a distinctly western perspective. Contemporary Indigenous artists don’t see themselves in the museum and, until recently, have been marginalized by the gallery. Acknowledging Indigenous experiences, perspectives, and histories challenges the dominant narrative; evidence of this shift began to take place during the 1980s. Change informed by feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critiques and importantly by Indigenous activism contributed to the breaking down of institutional canons. Finally in 1986 contemporary Indigenous artists saw their work represented in the National Gallery of Canada. The purchase of Carl Beam’s work, *North American Iceberg* (1985), signaled an initial shift within the existing hierarchical system that privileged European and western art (Hill, 2010, 2013; McMaster, 1999). While this was a significant move, the presence of Indigenous artists and curators at the National Gallery continues to be an exception rather than the norm; as Greg Hill points out, “when *Sakahàn* took place in 2013, it had been twenty-one years since the Gallery’s first foray into a major exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art with the North American survey show *Land, Spirit, Power*” (Hill, 2013, p. 136).

Although non-Indigenous people controlled the production, publication and circulation of representations of Indigenous people, there has always been resistance. In response to a little known photograph of Geronimo, Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham (1992) writes,

Geronimo uses the photograph to “get at” those people who imagine themselves as the “audience” of his struggles. He seems to be trying to see us. He is demanding to be seen, on his own terms. (p. 56)

In this photo he does more than present his existence in the face of attempts to “disappear” him. But, as usual, his message is not one that asks for anything – not even “understanding.” Instead, a part of his message here is, as always, a demand to be recognized. (p. 57)

This demand “to be seen on our own terms” reflects the tension in the discussion of representation and survivance. Though we demand work to accomplish and focus our attention

on representations created by Indigenous people, we live within a social-political-historical context that has worked to make Indigenous presence invisible. In spite of the recent amplification of Indigenous voices, our youth attend schools structured by non-Indigenous ways of knowing and being, where for the most part they encounter representations *of* us rather than those created *by* us. As youth they are immersed in the task of identity construction and do so within a system that fails to provide a space for Indigenous self-representation:

Have you ever felt, in the moment you speak, someone else has spoken for you? Or that when you hear others speaking, you are only going to be the object of their speech? Imagine living in a world of others, a world that exists for others, a world made real only because you have been spoken to. The construction of a healthy and positive self-image is made exceedingly difficult by the confounding fallacies of stereotyping and discrimination. (Houle, 2008).

Subjectivity, survivance and a sovereignty of self

The word Indian, however, is a colonial enactment...and the dominance is sustained by the simulation that has superseded the real tribal names. (Vizenor, 1994, p. 11)

The word *Indian* is a colonial enactment that sustains dominance as it collapses and erases the singularity of tribal identities. The word has no referent in tribal languages or cultures and, as Vizenor (1994) explains, “the Indian” was an invention; an invention implicated in a legacy of dominance and the erasure of Indigenous people’s ways of knowing and being: “The *postindian* is the absence of the invention... and *postindian warriors* ensnare the contrivances with their own simulations of survivance” (p. 11).

Escaping dominance is not easily accomplished and taking up the position of *postindian warrior* offers no assurances. Indigenous people construct identities in the shadow cast by the invented Indian. No one was more aware of the breadth of that shadow than Carl Beam, who reflected on the experience of being the first contemporary Indigenous artist to have work purchased by the National Gallery of Canada:

I realized that when they bought my work it wasn’t from Carl the artist but from Carl the Indian. At the time, I felt honored, but now I know that I was used politically – Indian art that’s made as Indian is racially motivated and I just can’t do that. My work is not made for Indian people but for thinking people. In the global and evolutionary scheme, the difference between humans is negligible. (Beam, in McMaster, 2010, p. 36)

Beam was aware, proud and informed by his Anishnaabe identity. He was equally conscious of how the word “Indian” was used as a qualifier and by taking up the position of *postindian warrior* he rejected the descriptor. Insisting on both the quality of his work and the recognition

of Indigenous humanity, Beam refused acclamation on the basis of his status as an ‘Indian artist’. He was concerned with questions confronting all of humanity and created art that reflected his understanding that human kind, the natural world, and the environment are all related, and challenged all people to live life respectful of one’s place in the universe. Beam’s artistic work further emphasized a human consciousness of responsibility toward all of creation.

The Invented Indian is implicated in the fraught terrain of Indigenous identity, creating expectations that are more invented than real. Indigenous people construct identities within a social-political-historical context, the world acts on us, and we act on it. The impact of the colonial experience is significant and while identity is a shifting context-specific construction for many Indigenous artists – positioning themselves as Indigenous is about accepting responsibility to their aesthetic, historical, political, social and economic identities (McMaster, 1999, p. 88). Like Beam, Indigenous artists work conscious of and informed by their Indigeneity. They also insist on being recognized for the *quality* of their work and not only for their Indigeneity. Heather Igloliorte (2012) explains it this way:

I believe that we continue to assert our identities as Indigenous artists, curators, students, scholars and activists because it is through our arts that we demonstrate the incontrovertible continuity of Indigenous cultures, and our ability to survive and thrive despite centuries of colonization, oppression and imperialism. (p. 21)

There is a tension between recognizing the specificity of Indigeneity, the experiences, perspectives, philosophies that accompany the subject position and the imposition of expectations that limit and constrain what is acceptable, even permissible. Indigenous art makes a vital and important contribution to contemporary art discourses in ways that are unique to Indigenous artists (Hill, 2013, p. 136). Among these contributions, Indigenous art grounds itself in “incredible diversity, a testament to the creativity of Indigenous artists that honors, challenges, invigorates and proposes emergent understandings of what it means to create art from this position – as an Indigenous artist (p. 136). Just as colonialism was imposed differently across a range of political and social environments, during different time periods, it was experienced differently and artists respond differently: “However, the relationship between colonial experience and formation of indigeneity is direct. It is a strategic relationship rather than a causal one” (p. 137).

Ancestral teachings: Necessities of survivance

In the oral tradition, the mythic origins of tribal people are creative expressions, original eruptions in time, not a mere recitation or a recorded narrative in grammatical time. The teller of stories is an artist, a person of wit and imagination, who relumes the diverse memories of the visual past into the experiences and metaphors of the present. (Vizenor, 1984, p. 7)

Drawing on ancestral teachings Indigenous artists are illuminating ways of knowing and being. Through their artistic creation they access and pass on teachings, thus bringing forward and translating knowledge for use in the making of a contemporary Indigenous world. It is about looking back, not returning to the past but rather re-creating and living our interpretations of the teachings in support of a new emergence (Simpson, 2011).

This process of recovering and rebuilding requires an enormous amount of energy. Ancestral knowledge is accessed through relationships with family, community elders and from oral and written documentation. It is also recuperated through participation in ceremony and traditional practices. Following pathways not always easily found or traversable, contemporary artists create work that is informed by the past and of use in understanding our Indigenous selves in the present.

Greg Staats draws on community history, ritual and relationship with home and land in his art, which explores memory, loss of language, family and culture. Rick Hill Senior (2011), describes this work as Staats' model for a restorative aesthetic that functions to,

recall our own memories, connections and consternations, and use the Haudenosaunee model of condolence as a vehicle by which we connect to our sources of resiliency. His art transports us inward in order to rethink what it has meant, or what it could mean, but not be stuck in the past. (p. 16)

This restorative work, in his *Condolence Exhibition* (2011), is a complex and subtle operation. It takes time, patience and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable enough to confront the pain associated with loss and the significance of not knowing. It is simultaneously enriching and a service to the broader community of Indigenous people who are also purposefully searching for affirmation and strength in the knowledge of our ancestors.

In the search for ways to translate, transform, and reinvent, artistic production by contemporary artists provide access to Indigenous ways of knowing. Artists are equally conscious of the appropriateness of withholding knowledge: "Long ago her mother had to sing this song and so she had to grind along with it. The corn people have a song too. It is very good. I refuse to tell it" (Rothenberg, in Townsend-Gault, 1992, p. 99). Sometimes the art conceals more than it reveals, in service of protecting knowledge from abuse, oversimplification and to acknowledge that some knowledge is not translatable.

Initiating a conversation in service of survivance

A condition contrary to dominance, survivance creates a sense of presence and defines a resistance to sentiments of tragedy and the legacy of victimry. (Vizenor, 2013, p. 42)

Speaking from the position of *postindian warrior* to "define and accomplish a sense of presence," the artistic creations of contemporary Indigenous artists speak back to dominant

representations of the invented Indian. Viewers looking for traditional themes or naturalistic, pastoral scenes do not necessarily recognize their creations as art. The position of dominance is not easily disrupted; audiences would rather not look too closely at the reality of Indigenous people's experiences, favoring instead a view that maintains dominance and innocence:⁴ "From First Nations perspectives, however, the past is a complex and entangled territory defined largely by cultural tenacity, unresolved disputes, and perpetual misunderstandings that continue to manifest themselves today" (Martin, 2012, p. 61).

The changing political climate of the 1960s created an atmosphere that opened space for a conversation that was not limited to 'tragedy, victimry and the invented Indian.' Response to the work of Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig and Carl Beam contributed to an initial shift in the conversation. Contemporary Indigenous artists did not wait for acknowledgement from the art world to begin producing art. Survivance occurs independent of a response from the non-Indigenous world, yet Indigenous artistic practice does offer the possibility of disruption and, in some instances, an invitation to participate in a conversation. The invitation to engage is not about non-Indigenous people having control of the conversation, it is an assertion of the right of Indigenous people to be seen – to reflect their experiences and perspectives. It can also be an invitation to gain from Indigenous art a critical understanding of what life is like for us.

Sometimes contemporary Indigenous art comes in a form that creates extreme discomfort for non-Indigenous people. The art of Ruth Cuthand is a good example. Cuthand maintains that her work is made for Aboriginal audiences. White audiences are often unable to appreciate the use of humour in her work that addresses serious topics including cultural genocide, forced assimilation, sexism and racism. Provoking discomfort and serious thought, as well as amusement, Cuthand confronts stories of sadness, resistance, resilience, triumph and despair, and stories that she reflects in ways that are accessible and understandable and create a record of the complexities of women's lives. Challenging and uncomfortable as they are, compelling and unconventionally beautiful, Cuthand speaks from the heart about women's lives and her own particular experiences as a Cree woman in contemporary Canada (Budney & Martin, 2012).

Greg Hill (2013) asserts there is a "connection between Indigenous politics and Indigenous art. During both times of peace and unrest, Indigenous art can be a celebration of culture and identity as well as a tool for education and renewal. It is always political" (p. 137). The decision to engage, in spite of discomfort, is up to the audience. In the *Decolonize Me* (2012) exhibition, Igloliorte set out with the direct purpose of speaking back to non-Indigenous people. Her exhibition specifically, "participates in the examination of the long and complicated history of colonization in Canada, the emergent processes of decolonization, and the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty and cultural continuity within our borders and beyond" (p. 20). The exhibition contributes to the newly revived national conversation on social and economic issues confronting Indigenous people in Canada.

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of the positions of innocence taken up by non-Indigenous audiences, the discomfort in seeing themselves implicated in colonization, and learning from Indigenous peoples, see *Braiding Histories* (Dion, 2009).

Self-representation, unique positions, ancestral teachings, and engaging in conversation, these strands weave together and inform our understanding of contemporary Indigenous art practice: “Indigenous artists have asserted their aesthetic sovereignty and developed new forms of expression that maintain links to concepts and values of their heritage while also looking ahead to the creative and aesthetic needs of future generations” (Hill, 2013, p. 137). In the following section we address these strands in our discussion of the art and the students’ stories.

Embodying survivance

In response to Gerald Vizenor’s concept of survivance, Karl Kroeber (2008) explains,

He uses survivance to subordinate *survival’s* implications of escape from catastrophe and marginal preservation; *survivance* subtly reduces the power of the destroyer. He seizes on *survivance’s* older sense of *succession*, orienting its connotations not toward loss but renewal and continuity into the future rather than memorializing the past. (authors’ emphasis, p. 25)

At the exhibition site, the art hangs under a quote by an Indigenous student from the *Decolonizing our Schools* report, selected by the artist and with no other written explanations of the artwork. The artists’ statements were printed in the exhibition catalogue, not beside the artwork. Observing the audience’s reaction from our position at the gallery desk, the experience was akin to a gentle lapping of waves upon a shore. The initial reaction was of curiosity; viewers came closer to inspect the fine details in the photographs - the intricate beading patterns of the moccasins or in the thirteen hanging frames, or the enigmatic video of writing on the wall. Upon closer inspection, or after reading the quotes, a second wave would arrive; as the viewers’ curiosity was piqued a gesture might betray their inner process.

The art offers layers of meaning; exhibited alongside the students’ words, we see and hear survivance. Actively participating in the ways Indigenous identities, cultures and presence are constructed and reconstructed, it embodies a sense of renewal, as evidenced in the artists’ emphasis on the cultural connections needed for their own sovereignty of self. The negotiation of the artists’ and the students’ identities is a fluid process in which they investigate and explore what is available to them of their cultural heritage; interrogating their experiences provoked by a need to understand why. We reflect on the *inVISIBILITY* texts as an exploration of the stories Indigenous youth tell about living within an urban environment; and the multiple meanings of their experiences in an education system that systematically attempts to erase their presence. The students’ stories, written by Michael Dion, are based on a series of interviews with the students and are originally published in the *Decolonizing Our Schools Report* (2010)⁵.

⁵ Michael Dion, a First Nations creative writer, wrote the stories based on his reading of the students interview transcripts. The stories were then taken back to the students for their review and approval.

Reflecting on Inuit Art produced in the last sixty years, Heather Igloliorte (2010) points to a marked shift in the themes portrayed by the artist:

This new work, uncommon and introspective, is a significant departure from the typical imagery of past decades, but I think it serves similar ends: to strengthen from within a culture threatened by dominant outside forces and to examine the way of life as Inuit know it. (p. 7)

In moving towards an aesthetic that depicts the changes in their way of life as a way of speaking back to these outside forces, the artists in the *inVISIBILITY Exhibition*—like the Inuit artists that Igloliorte describes—enact the stories of survivance (Breinig, 2008), extending an invitation to the audience to learn what that entails without “memorializing the past,” but rather engaging with it.

BRIANNA’S POINT OF VIEW

I wanted school, but school did not want me. Drop out; drop in, being out was easier.

Higher education, I did not think was an option for me I did not come from a wealthy family. The story is oh so familiar. I felt, they let me fall through the cracks. But now they have extended their hand A gateway is here, for me to pass through. My thoughts are always welcome, Finally, the world can get “my point of view.”



Marked, (2013) Vanessa Dion Fletcher

Growing up I imagined myself having a good job and being able to take care of myself and having a future that I wanted to live. As I got older, it kind of faded, and I stopped dreaming, my dreams were unreasonable because of what was going on in my life. The road I was going down was not good, school didn't fit me, and then I didn't fit school. No matter what, I always tried going back, even tried the alternative schools. I always wanted to finish, I'd go for a month or maybe two, and then I would leave again. I didn't really have any hope that school would ever have a program that would fit me.

When I first heard about the AEC, I was enrolled in an Alternative School and still it was not working. Freya the counselor from the AEC was the one who found me. She suggested I check out the AEC and I came, and here I found the hope of finishing school. Freya believed in me and took the time to show me all the programs and resources, she took the time and that inspired me. Over the past two years I've noticed that I'm happier and more hopeful.

Growing up I knew that I was native, but I didn't know that there were resources out there for me. When I first came to help in the office I knew almost nothing about my culture and it really opened doors for me, it has taught me so many things about my background, and allowed me to explore that side of myself. The projects going on at the Centre interest me, get me involved in the community and now I want to give back to Aboriginal Education, and the Aboriginal community in the city.

The Center keeps me doing positive things and keeps me motivated to stay in school. Working with people here has kind of given me insight into what can go on within the TDSB. I'm working on a project locating and mapping all the Aboriginal agencies and organizations in Toronto. It will be a resource for teachers; there will be an historical aspect to it because archaeological sites will be included.

The Centre has given me the opportunity to work different sorts of jobs, with different people in various organizations. I can see what I might want to do with my life. It taught me a lot of interpersonal skills, communication skills, self-motivation, and a good work ethic too. For a long time I felt like I was stuck in a rut. Now I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile, something productive. It makes me feel as if I'm moving forward and I am.

Beth Kotierk & Brianna: Bearing the weight – being locked out

I wanted to go to school but school didn't want me. Drop in, drop out - being out was easier. (Brianna⁶)



Tusk, Names, Patterns (2011-2012) Beth Kotierk

⁶ In this paper we are using the students' pseudonyms from the *Decolonizing Our Schools* report.

Beth Kotierk

- Inuk - born in Iqaluit, Nunavut, working in Toronto
 - Painting, installation, video and performance art
- 1) *Names* (2011) [videoclip]: In this Video Performance the artist, wearing a simple black dress enters the screen moving from behind the camera to the board, she takes up a marker and begins writing. Methodically, she writes a long line of Inuktitut syllabics, turns to face the camera and walks off screen.
 - 2) *Tusk* (2012): A walrus tusk locked behind the glass door of a display case. The tusk is raw, unmarked simply placed, it rests in the bottom left corner, the curve of the tusk not quite fitting the right angle of the glass and metal frame. The cabinet is secured with three tiny locks.
 - 3) *Patterns* (2012): Mixed media collage of superimposed sewing patterns, framed.

The walrus tusk evokes a feeling of anxiety as one is confronted by it. It is locked behind glass, completely visible but inaccessible, even trying to make sense of why it is locked away is difficult. There is a feeling of confusion, of denial at not knowing why this tusk is locked away, or what one is supposed to understand from it (Salamanca).

In her artist talk, Kotierk told the audience: “in school they called me Beth, but that is not my name.” Watching her performance video, I (Dion) see her write on the board in syllabics and the distance between us becomes exceedingly close, as I am flooded with memories of my time as a classroom teacher. When, on a daily basis, I would ask students, “write your name on your paper, don’t forget to put your name on your work, write your name on the board, hang your coat on the hook with your name,” Kotierk’s work compels me to ask: “how am I implicated in creating conditions of alienation and marginalization for the students I encounter?” (Dion).

Schools represent a place of learning – students are promised answers to their questions, and they are told, “go to school, work hard and you’ll learn.” Education is supposed to provide opportunity for student success. Like all students, Indigenous students go to school looking for answers to their core questions – “Who am I? What is my history? Where do my family and I belong in the stories you tell?” School didn’t offer Kotierk answers, it added to the distance she experiences between the self she knows and representations of her culture made precious by southern art collectors. In her artist statement, Kotierk writes:

Culture is not stagnate. We live it, we act it out and create it. My works explore the confrontation of culture and stagnation. After many failed attempts to stamp out Indigenous culture, our educational system is still lacking in Indigenous content. The full impact this has on young Indigenous students is not yet known, but it is known that if you do not know your history or your culture, you cannot know who you are and you cannot know where you are going. Frustration, alienation and lack of direction are symptomatic of systems that don’t encourage the expression of self or exploration of cultural identity. My works come from a place of nervous frustration about these systems of reward and punishment and

use the barriers, the fragmentation and stagnation of culture to depict a cause of conflict. (2013, *inVISIBILITY Exhibition Catalogue*)

Kotierk's art initiates sensations of confusion, distance, and constraint. Similarly, in her story Brianna describes her experiences of schooling as feeling inadequate, out of place: "school did not fit me, and then I didn't fit school" (Dion, et al. p. 18). She then describes finding a place of learning that provided her with confirmation of her identity. In the overlay of these texts we sense "the limits of schooling" from a system that didn't meet either Kotierk's or Brianna's needs.

Brianna wanted to attend school. She had dreams of graduation, of getting a job and being self-sufficient. She was also conscious of the ways in which she could not accomplish what school expected of her. In her interviews, Brianna explains, "I was not the typical little school girl the system expects to arrive at the classroom door" (Dion et al, p. 18). In spite of her desire to succeed, Brianna found she could not make it work. She left school and found a place for herself at the Aboriginal Education Centre (AEC). During her time at the AEC Brianna completed secondary school courses, participated in a university class and acquired credits through a credit recovery program. In her story Brianna describes what made the difference between institutions of formal schooling and what she found at the AEC. For her, learning about Native history and culture, being treated as a young adult with knowledge, understanding and capacities was an acknowledgment of her presence, and of being seen by the school system. These lessons are not new – a growing body of literature documents the needs of young adult learners (Dion, 2013; Ignace, 2011; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003); yet within institutions of formal schooling decolonized spaces for Aboriginal youth are difficult to find.⁷

In the overlay of these texts we hear Indigenous youth talking back to educators about the broken promise of education and the impact of a system that fails to recognize their need for survivance. It is in the telling of intimate details that we come to understand the ways in which classroom life rips at students' understanding of their Indigeneity. Both texts reveal the desire for a learning environment that reflects Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world. It is an environment that allows for an exploration of the impacts of colonialism and recognizes complexities and diversities of Indigenous students' experiences.

In the exhibition the audience is invited in to see and learn from the work of artists who are sharing stories of possibility. There is hope and strength in what Brianna and Kotierk offer, they situate themselves in a position of renewal. They create within that space as they come to feel engaged and connected to the Indigenous teaching and learning community around them. As a statement of presence, the texts reflect survivance:

The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native reason and remembrance, is observable in trickster stories and the humanistic tease, or vital irony, and is

⁷ In 2010 Brianna reviewed this story and gave me permission to use it. Since that time she has been out of touch. In the time Brianna spent working with us she did contribute to the urban Aboriginal community in Toronto and I appreciate her contribution to our learning.

manifest in the spirited resistance to archival, museum and cultural dominance.
(2013, p. 44)

Kotierk and Brianna's stories of discomfort in an environment that is supposed to prepare them to live in the world and to help them grow as people is disquieting. The denial, the constraint and the confusion of not fitting in and not knowing are expressed eloquently. However, in the telling of their experiences, they also offer ways in which the school system could better engage and support Indigenous students, by providing space for a dialogue, and by listening and then responding to the students' articulation of their *first need*.



Enframe (2010) Nigit'stil Norbert

Lucas' Story

*I came from a reserve in the north it has no name.
Would it make a difference to you, as we play the
Indian Act game?
Me and my buddies we have our own way.
We tell our stories in comic books and hip hop.
So that you can hear what we have to say.
I wrote a song, I need to forgive to cleanse our
souls. It seems to me they ain't sorry for playing
their role.*

I am from a northern Ontario reserve and I went to school up there. In 2008 I came to Toronto and started grade 11. My first year was difficult, I had no friends, I had no connection to any community here. Fitting in to a new high school is never easy; being singled out as the only Native student did not help. There was a big communication problem between me and the teachers and just because I couldn't understand most of what they were saying they were like, "Oh you're a bad kid."

Then in November, a transformation happened. A teacher heard about an event that was happening at the AEC and I was the only identified Native kid in the school, so he took me out of

class and brought me to the assembly. There was drumming and kids dancing. I no longer felt alone in the city, I was like, whoa, I want to be a part of this.

So with the help of Mr. Russell I organized a powwow at my school with dancers, singers and an activist who gave an interesting talk. This event at the school turned things around. Now they have Aboriginal art on the walls, the principals and teachers are giving me handshakes and saying, "Wow, you're a pretty bright kid."

This was the jumping off point for me. I met some staff at the AEC. I began to get involved with the community. I got involved with the youth mentorship, doing the Debwewin, helping with the camp on the Island. The Pilot Project got me involved and pushed me, it transformed a rez kid into an active leader. Then came my second year and I was introduced to the Native Learning Centre, the Riverdale Course, and the Drama Co-op. In these programs I spent a lot of time on social interaction and learning the teachings. I was told, "I came out of my shell" whatever that means; I became a people person. "I'm just myself right now," and it is the Pilot Project that enabled me to believe I am capable of big things. I've got to take back all these things I got here now, and take that to the reserve so that the students there can have the option. They deserve much more than what they are working with now. The government needs to help us out; we are not getting that much attention. In my Riverdale course I learned that I could speak out in class, I learned that Aboriginality was something special.



Enframe (2010) Nigit'stil Norbert

Nigit'stil Norbert & Lucas: Vulnerability, recognition and speaking out

I came from a reserve in the north, it has no name, would it make a difference to you as we play the Indian Act game? (Lucas)

Nigit'stil Norbert

- Gwichin/Irish/Russian - born in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, working in Toronto
- Stop-motion, photography, beading and installation

Norbert's black and white photographs require the viewer to move in and look close up. A spray of colour catches the eye, pulling the viewer closer still. The photographs are beaded. Tiny beads that are different shades of green have been stitched to the branches of an otherwise leafless tree - a tall concrete apartment building stands in the background. Her photograph initiates questions and emotions; Where does the alley lead, where did the tracks come from, why is there a lone caribou on the roof of that garage and what is the significance of the colour-filled banner that appears to be the path the caribou followed to arrive on the roof of the garage? Her images engage the viewer in wanting to know more, to see more.

In her artist statement, Norbert writes:

As time passes, our cities become commonplace, everyday surroundings. Sometimes we lose our understanding of what that may mean to others and ourselves. My photographs attempt to capture these habitual frames, which disappear long enough that, through another version of en-framing, a sort of essence is distilled. (2013, *inVISIBILITY Exhibition Catalogue*)

Norbert writes about being a stranger in the city and how she has worked to make the city home. She learned to bead from a memory of watching her grandmother bead. For the viewer, Norbert makes the familiar unfamiliar. In her photographs viewers are drawn in to see up close what has captured their attention, the tiny beads like missing leaves on the winter tree. Similarly, in Lucas' story the desire to be seen is powerful: "we tell our stories in comic books and hip hop/so that you can hear what we have to say" (Dion et al., p. 17). Yet in the risks associated with being seen the vulnerability is also palpable, in both Lucas' story and Norbert's art. Lucas explains, "I had no connection to any community here;" we wonder—what does it take to insert oneself into the urban landscape so as to be seen and recognized as an Indigenous person?

Earlier in the paper, we discussed the connections made by the students and artists that would enable them to negotiate and renegotiate their identities and presence in an urban setting. In Lucas' story and Norbert's art, there are traces of their attempts at sovereignty of self. Both artist and student speak about a journey of finding their place within their new surroundings and both have an intense desire for being seen for who they are, while necessarily challenging stereotypical assumptions about how to perform their Indigeneity. In their longing to be recognized as an active presence, both Nigit'stil and Lucas are at risk of being labeled or being dismissed. The vulnerability in Norbert's positioning comes through in the tiny beading, a viewer could easily miss this small invitation to look closer, or ignore the many details she offers in her photographs by not paying attention. For Lucas, being a visibly Indigenous student, being "singled out as the only Native student did not help," making him vulnerable to being named a "bad kid".

In speaking about Navajo youth who use dance as a way of resisting and speaking back to the discrimination they face at school, Donna Deyhle (1998) explains that, “for some youth, these performances of resistance to assimilation work in opposition to school success” (p. 7). It was only until Lucas made a connection with the Aboriginal community in Toronto that he felt supported in continuing to resist the labels given to him by his teachers, becoming active in fostering cultural visibility in his own school. In refusing to accept his label as a “bad kid,” Lucas performs his survivance as an active presence by instigating change within his school. Initially, in his new school environment, Lucas was forced to participate in his own erasure, living in the shadows of the representation of the imaginary, simulated Indian (Vizenor, 1994). Once he sees himself within the school environment, he is no longer participating in erasure, but takes up the practice of survivance. Norbert also lives in this shadow of the romanticized Indian, and with her tiny traces inserts herself in the urban landscape, such that she can be acknowledged only if one looks closely.

What both texts clarify and complicate about the experiences of Indigenous youth in schools is the concept of fragility in visibility. In the case of Norbert her attempts at visibility are tentative, small and calculated so that the interested person would have to look close, to engage in a more meaningful way than someone just passing by. She inserts herself into the photographs by inserting tiny colorful beads in an otherwise non-descript urban landscape that most city dwellers take for granted. Thus, her presence, like the beads, is barely visible in a sea of grays, whites and blacks, except to those who may be actively looking. Lucas, on the other hand, is barely seen as Indigenous—in a stereotyped way of the “bad kid”—and not recognized until a teacher looks closely and decides to engage him. For both artist and student there is a need to be visible, but also a fear of the negative consequences of this visibility.

The desire to be seen is also complicated by the expectations of performing an “authentic” Indigeneity that burden youth. In his story, Lucas moves from a place of isolation to a place of recognition and his willingness to speak out to teach others about his culture is centered on organizing a powwow at his school. While engaging in cultural activities and reconnecting to dancing, singing and drumming are important connections for belonging, it is important to consider what elements of cultural visibility are accepted. In other words, how are youth constrained in performing their Indigeneity by the stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples in popular media?

The complicated desire of being recognized is present in Norbert’s art and texts, she writes about her own *inVISIBILITY* in contrast to the “trinkets” that are stereotypically “Indigenous”:

I have traveled across Canada many times and have frequently encountered stores that sell ‘Indian’ clothes, memorabilia, dolls, paintings, masks, etc. These were all so disturbing but also of interest to me. I was standing in one store with all these people shopping for ‘Indian’ products and I was thinking to myself, “I’m right here...the real ‘Indian’ is standing right in front of you!!!” (Norbert, cited in Igloliorte, 2012, p. 129)



Enframe (2010) Nigit'stil Norbert

For Lucas and Norbert, there is vulnerability in being recognized. What's at stake for them? What will be expected of them as Indigenous people? Both run the risk of being judged "inauthentic", or being ostracized and questioned for being visible. Lenape/Potawatomi artist Vanessa Dion-Fletcher writes about the fear inherent in identifying herself, thus inviting questions designed to judge how "Indigenous" she is, such as, "do you speak your language? Did you grow up on a reserve?" A further complication for youth who cannot "hide" their Indigenous self is the burden of knowing "how" to perform their Indigeneity, if they have been denied knowledge of their culture and are thus forced to live behind the shadow of the stereotypical representations of Indigenous people. In Erin and Walter Scott's texts discussed below, displacement and wanting to know themselves as Indigenous people complicate the way they can be visible to others.

And Erin said: "Let me show you a picture and tell you a story"

I am part Mohawk. I decided to come forth because I lost my culture, because my grandpa was adopted. So I didn't really inherit the Aboriginal culture from my family. I just really wanted to get to know my culture better and get submerged. One day, teachers from the AEC came to my school and there was a presentation about Native history and they were talking about the medicine wheel. I walked up afterwards and said, "listen, I'm part Mohawk and I know nothing about that." And they said to me "you know what, we're going to help you." And thus began 'the painting of a new self portrait.' My new vision on life includes the complexity of duality, walking between the Native and non-Native ways of life. I was introduced to Debwewin, and then Ms. Evans got me a summer job with some people called POR AMOR and it is there that I started painting murals. Next came Native Child where I met Kevin a youth mentor who teaches me so many things.

Erin's interest and curiosity about her often-stymied need to connect to her fractured Aboriginal roots peaked following a controversy at her school over the school's logo. The logo, a "Red Indian Head adorned with a feathered headband," was considered by some to be racist. Initially

Erin liked the logo but the more she learned the more she became convinced the logo was indeed racist and had to change. The UAEPF guided Erin and provided courses, workshops, and a myriad of experiences that enabled her freedom of choice in terms of discovering her heritage, something that she had not been encouraged to do before. In one of her Riverdale Course assignments Erin was able to share some pictures, "Because I always find that everyone loves old pictures." In her story telling with the pictures as a backdrop, Erin was able to describe to her class the discoveries she was making about her biological family and her adopted family and she was finally able to create a family tree that was connected at it's roots by familiarity and necessity.

*I am Erin Elizabeth Hayward Hill,
I am Peaceful Watching Sacred Water Woman
I am passionate and loving, independent and
stubborn (in a good way)
I am a Haudenosaunee woman born and raised
in Scarborough,
Traditionally from Six Nations Ontario
I am turtle clan.
I stand for preserving the earth for six future
generations
Just in the same way my ancestors did before
me.
I stand for researching ancestral roots
in order to discover who you are as a person.*



Marked, (2013) Vanessa Dion Fletcher



A Deeper Love, (2013) Walter Kaheró:ton Scott

Erin & Walter Scott: Displacement, medicine and a restorative aesthetic

I am part Mohawk, I decided to come forth because I lost my culture because my grandpa was adopted. (Erin)

Walter Kahero:ton Scott

- Mohawk from Kahnawake, working in Vancouver
- Print, video, sculpture and comic books

An arm reaches out from the gallery wall; the hand grasps a short black pole. The pole stands precariously on an angle pressed to the ground. There is a string of lime green thread attached to the top of the pole and at the end of the thread hangs a small pill bottle, inside the bottle is a very ordinary pebble. A sealed white envelope leans against the pole; the same lime green thread is attached to the back of the envelope along the seal making a bright green ‘V’. White, black and lime green, the contrasting colours draw attention and the precariousness of the installation is intensified. It is as if the slightest movement, the slightest touch, would cause the entire piece to topple over.

As a viewer I (Dion) experienced an overwhelming compulsion to step into the space and somehow make it more secure, get a closer look at the pebble and perhaps read the letter. In his artist statement Scott writes about how language creates a sense of disconnect for him. He knows the history of his people on the land but doesn’t know the language of commerce and cannot earn a living in his home territory. There is a lot of reaching, leaning and holding in this piece. The rather flimsy arm is holding the pole, pressed into the ground and leaning away from the wall. The pill bottle holds the stone, and the letter is leaning against the pole. It is all a delicate balance at risk of toppling over at any moment. And on many occasions it did topple. Balance, grasping, holding - what is written in that envelope and what is the significance of the stone inside? Is it medicine/poison? There are opposing movements in this installation, the impossibility of being grounded because of the tenuous hold of the arm on the pole, and the careful balance in which everything interacts suggests a fragility that one constantly wants to right, make more solid.

Erin’s story echoes fragility; in her text she explains an experience of “loss.” Erin’s connection to her ancestral roots was severed through adoption and she is searching for a footing or, as she explains, “the painting of a new self-portrait” (Dion et al., p. 19). This reconnection occurs when Erin engages with the urban Aboriginal community at the AEC; at the Centre Erin finds people who support her learning. Erin was motivated to get involved when a controversy erupted over the logo at her High School. The logo was a “stereotypical image of a ‘Red Indian wearing a feathered headdress’ and it divided the school community” (Dion et al, p. 69). Originally, Erin quietly embraced this stereotypical representation as the only representation of Indigenous culture in her school life. Erin didn’t see her Indigenous self anywhere else and harboured a secret attachment to the emblem of a culture she yearned to know. After learning why the school logo was racist, Erin was motivated by her feelings of responsibility to act—she

was aware of what she didn't know but knew enough to experience an obligation to get involved and initiate learning.

Although Erin made herself visible and declared, "I am part Mohawk," she was also struggling with her own unknowing of what that meant, or what it looked like. This visibility positions Erin in a precarious position, if she was questioned, about language skills or her knowledge of cultural teachings; the exploration of her Indigenous identity could become more seriously fraught with feelings of shame, doubt and fear due to her own ignorance. In both Scott and Erin's texts, vulnerability is rooted in displacement and a yearning to be and feel whole. The texts allow us to see the experiences and significance of displacement for Indigenous youth in schools. In the overlay the experience of displacement is clarified and complicated. There is no universal experience of displacement; Erin and Scott have different experiences of being strangers in their own territory, in their own skin.

Rick Hill Sr. helps us understand the relationship between courage and vulnerability. In response to Greg Staats' *Condolence* exhibition, Hill writes:

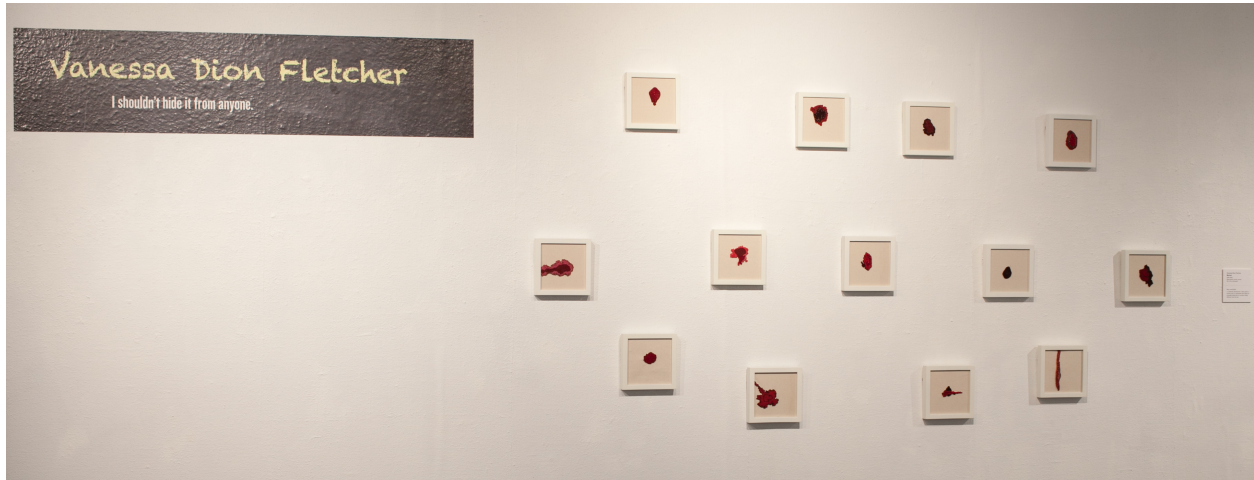
People don't realize the courage it takes to face one's past in such a way. He is not bearing his broken soul, but he is methodically dissecting his past for the precise memories and feeling it can generate, then reaffirming what he finds through his own visual language. He comes across visual clues as he lives in the city that helps him reflect on what his reserve experiences were like. He calls this his Restorative Aesthetic. (2011, p. 10)

Similar to Staats, Erin Hill and Walter Scott teach us that making sense of one's Indigenous identity amidst experiences of displacement from land, language, and culture requires courage.

In Scott's statement, he explains that it was not enough to grow up being nourished by a culture and living in his own territory (Kahnawake), if he could not speak enough French to earn a living in nearby Montreal. He expresses always having an awareness of the kinds of linguistic and cultural borders that existed outside of his community and recalls having to pick and choose "when to drop some of these things [cultural signifiers] to survive and when to carry things with me to express who I am" (Artist video statement). Scott and Erin have very different experiences when trying to negotiate an Indigenous identity that would allow them to feel safer in themselves. After learning more about being Mohawk and about her own identity, Erin has the confidence to reject the troubling representations of Indigenous people she encounters. Scott's experience is what he describes as "cognitive dissonance", in that he was forced to leave his home and family in order to be "spiritually and culturally successful" (Artist video statement). Survivance in both their experiences is characterized by their active presence and in creating a place for themselves as they learn to negotiate their identity in different environments.

Vanessa Dion Fletcher: Affirmation, acknowledgement, recognition and insistence

I shouldn't hide it from anyone. (Brianna)



Marked (2013) Vanessa Dion Fletcher

Vanessa Dion Fletcher

- Potawatomi/Lenape, working in Toronto
- Performance, video, printmaking, beading

Marked consists of thirteen beaded images; each one is distinct in shape and colour. Similar yet different, each image is made with various shades of tiny red beads ranging in colour from near brown to bright pink. Stitched on light beige canvas each is set in its own white wood frame. Hung unevenly in three rows, unequally spaced. The collection calls the viewer to consider each individually, and simultaneously the collection as a whole.

Watching viewers, particularly women, scan the collection, expressions of confusion shift as what is so familiar to them initiates recognition. Shy knowing smiles emerge. Searching the catalogue, as if looking for affirmation, women share knowing nods with each other as they read, “Each one was traced and reproduced from a “stain” created from my menstrual blood” (Artist statement). In this work Dion Fletcher takes that which in the western-Christian world is designated private, dirty, or even shameful, and turns it inside out – making it public, beautiful, and a source of pride. In her artist statement, Dion Fletcher writes:

I always knew that I was not a Canadian of European ancestry. In school I heard stories of immigration and the celebration of settler history and I knew that I was not a part of that history. I knew what I wasn't. But the colonial project of forced assimilation makes it very hard to recognize myself, as I am – an Indigenous woman. (2013, *inVISIBILITY Exhibition Catalogue*)

Dion Fletcher writes about not knowing, of being denied access to “education that would allow me to know my identity and to be proud of that identity” (Artist statement), and the need to know, the need to connect the pride in her culture and her Indigenous womanhood. In her statement, she speaks of the limitation in not knowing her language, in being constrained by speaking only English and how that proves limiting in coming to know herself. It is when she hears other women introducing themselves in their Indigenous language that she understands, connects “their pride in their Nation, culture and gender—in who they are as Indigenous women.” For Dion Fletcher, access to language opens up a different world, a different conception of herself and the relations between herself as an Indigenous woman, and the world around her.

In her performance of survivance, the beading of her stains, depicted in 13 different frames, offer a reminder of the constant presence of Indigenous women on the land. In the section dedicated to this work on her website, Dion-Fletcher affirms,

The process of menstruation has become an important action and a lens for me to produce art through. What is the cultural significance of menstruation within Aboriginal Communities? How does this knowledge contribute to the understanding of Indigenous womanhood? There are centuries of knowledge about menstruation that I have not been able to access. (Mark, Blood Spot Stain)

Her stains are also beaded traces of Dion Fletcher as an Indigenous woman present in her body and in the city, playfully subverting what is thought of as a shameful aspect of womanhood and portraying it as a beautiful, delicate synthesis of culture, pride, womanhood and the earth whereupon she leaves her traces.

Did they know the beads would carry not only physical representations of our understanding of all the living things on this earth, but also a message, a measure of time to adjust to the changes that whirl through our existence? It takes time to put thousands of tiny beads on cloth; it teaches you the patience to observe, the ability to see things as a whole or a multitude of parts. It is important to see how things are connected and what gives them life. (Rickard, 1992, p. 109)

For Dion Fletcher, school only ever taught her what she wasn't, or only positioned her as existing in the past in very limited ways. Her work reflects the experiences of all of the students and artists in terms of the depth and the failure on the part of schools in creating a space for Indigenous students to know who they are. Aboriginal students are not offered what they crave, what they need to know. Instead, they face an impossible task of suffering the consequences of defiance of this narrative or of erasing themselves from the picture. The onus cannot be on Indigenous students to do the work of changing policies and practices within the school system; it is up to educators, policy makers and school boards to work toward creating safer spaces, to offer opportunities for cultural learning and most importantly, to listen actively and deeply to what students are sharing of their experiences. In inviting others to enter into conversation, these

students and artists are embodying survivance; pride in their identities as Indigenous people, a refusal to live under the shadow of the simulated Indian, and a desire to continue growing and creating within and for their community.

Summary and conclusions: Indigeneity, urban schooling and students' first need

The theories of survivance are elusive, obscure, and imprecise by definition, translation, comparison, and catchword histories, but survivance is invariably true and just in native practice and company. (Vizenor, 2008, p. 1)

In schools, acknowledging Indigenous presence creates a confrontation with the narratives embedded in provincial curriculum and school practices that are premised on the absence of Indigenous people. These curricula and school practices require Indigenous students to speak back to the authority of the national narrative, or to dis-appear by essentially participating in their own erasure. There is simplicity in Vizenor's insistence on presence - it requires speaking up and speaking back to "representations of invented Indians" (1994, p. 3). What appears to be simply about being present paradoxically creates a present permeated with an almost unbearable burden for Indigenous youth.

Feeling from the inside of this demand to either disappear or challenge, Indigenous youth find ways to assert their presence. These acts of assertion are frequently constructed as acts of rebellion that contest the power structures that determine what is possible and permissible within institutions of formal schooling. Asserting Indigenous presence requires psychic energy and work. Confronted with representations that construct a simulation that does not reflect the real of their experiences, Indigenous students are required to perform what Vizenor (1994) describes as "postindian warriors of simulations" (p. 4). In the performance of their urban Indigenous identities, students are creating "a new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representations of invented Indians" (p. 3). What do students need to take up the position of warriors speaking back to the representations of the "invented Indian"? In school classrooms no ruins of the representations yet exist, the problematic and exclusionary representations of Indigenous people within the curriculum still hold currency as comfortable narratives that are hard to root out.

"The postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance" (Vizenor, 1994, p. 5). Even though the themes that weave through the artwork and the students' experiences are not new among Indigenous students in formal schooling, the way we can understand and integrate these stories into the conversation can be. Understanding students' refusal to be assimilated as performing survivance and asserting a *first need* and not as misbehavior or "being bad" can radically alter the relationships of teachers, school officials, students and Indigenous communities. Understanding the ways in which Indigenous students perform survivance can shift our understanding about who they are and what they need. If their

first need is that of understanding their Indigenous self and surviving as Indigenous people within the school system, what is our responsibility and relationship to these students?

The school system is fraught with images of the invented Indian, there is very little or no access to a postindian space for students to assert their exploration of self and identity. As evidenced in the stories, the students' performances of survivance are tentative and fragile because they do not feel school is a place safe enough for their Indigeneity. Is there content and dialogue within the classroom and the curriculum that supports these students' sovereignty of self? It is of utmost importance for educators to tread carefully in not assuming to know what content to include or how to approach it. Learning in community and relationship is approached in a reciprocal way, with patience and active listening. Indigenous students are keenly aware of safe spaces when it comes to exploring their Indigeneity.

Indigenous youth feel their Indigeneity, they are conscious of their difference and the particularity of their position. They also have questions about their identities and how to make sense of their own and their families' experiences in relationship to the broader social-political context in which they live. This then is their *first need*, to understand and survive as Indigenous people. Youth seek this understanding in a variety of places: from their families, through community participation and at school. While Indigenous students are clear on what they need, most school systems are not yet responding to those needs. Indigenous youth resist the school's colonizing demand that they accept the story of Canada as their story, the naming of their bodies, the destruction of their culture, and the elimination of their language as progress. They insist on surviving as Indigenous people, their resistance is born out of their refusal to assimilate—giving up their Indigenous self is not an option for these students, who perform survivance. Through their work, the Indigenous artists who participated in the exhibition provided a point of entry, a way to understand and make sense of the students and their own stories of survivance.

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