

Anishinaabe Narratives of Nationhood in Deshkan Ziibing

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Abstract

Exclusionary Indian Policy has attempted to make absent Indigenous narratives of Nationhood and sovereignty—those based in Indigenous forms of knowledge and epistemological production (Coulthard 2014, Vizenor 2000). Today, Indigenous issues are cast as tragic narratives; while healing and participation in society-at-large is postured as a pre-requisite to self-determination (Million, 2013, p. 74). Contemporary Indigenous scholars posit that self-determination cannot be imparted via recognition, guilt, or pity; and more controversially, reconciliation—but rather through modes of self-reflection, resurgent politics of self-recognition (Coulthard 2014, Alfred & Corntassel 2005) and actions of existential presence—that “everyday culture and traditional culture must form a composite of an Indigenous sense of self if a healthy Indigenous epistemology is to take hold” (Hokuwhitu, 2009, p. 108). This paper will explore the methodology of creating narratives of presence in Deshkan Ziibing (also known as the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation). Keywords: Indigenous methodology, Indigenous narrative, Anishinaabe Nationhood

Introduction

At Chippewas of the Thames First Nation (COTTFN), located in present day Southwestern Ontario, the Community Story and Planning process seeks to inquire about the pulse in the community to better adjust programs and services to respond to community needs. This is a very practical and well-established endeavour, as Metcalfe notes: “The need for a better way of interpreting physical events in order to suggest how best to act in the future was identified and well-articulated by pragmatists over 100 years ago” (2008, p. 1091). But perhaps more important to the purposes of storying is that of Indigenous Nationhood. Storying can be conceived as an act of what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1998) calls *native sovenance*: “that sense of presence in remembrance, that trace of creation and natural reason in native stories...the connotation of *sovenance* is a *native presence*...not the romance of an aesthetic absence or victimry” [emphasis added]. The absence of authentic Indigenous narrative (meaning those based in Indigenous forms of knowledge production) in the current mainstream political system is caused by invalidating Indigenous Nationhood and narratives of sovereignty. This is a phenomenon referred to as “exclusion through Indian Policy” (Coulthard, 2014). Stark (2012) states, “Anishinaabe conceptions of nationhood were and remain expressly linked to their inherent constructions of their identity” (p. 123). Since a fundamental aspect of self-determination is the requirement of creating presence in sovereignty, in this paper I discuss how producing knowledge that informs a First Nation’s direction can be a foundational act of Indigenous presence.

If a fundamental aspect of self-determination is the requirement of creating presence in sovereignty, the ability to produce knowledge that informs the direction we take into the future is a foundational act of Indigenous presence. Storying, used in the Ethnoautobiography style by Kremer (2003) “explores consciousness from a subjective perspective and relates it to objective factors—thus it is also a moral and politico-historical discourse, enlivened and enspirited by the subjectivity of the teller. It is in this way that we may be able to travel with roots and address issues of sovereignty imaginatively” (p. 10). Articulating the subjective position of Anishinaabe Nationhood is ostensibly a further outcome to the endeavour of storying.

Community-based inquiry as an organizational practice has the potential to evolve into a regular process so that a clearer picture of what composes quality of life for Chippewas of the Thames First Nation members is considered in political leadership. In theory, community inclusion as a means for empowerment provides an avenue for the peoples’ input into the Nation’s strategic direction. At COTTFN, we have been tasked with updating and researching our community story to inform the Comprehensive Community Plan (CCP). The CCP is a document used by the First Nation organization and political leadership as a guide for strategic direction. The core value of using community narrative

as the foundation for COTTfN's organizational direction is *Community Inclusion* as per a Band Council Resolution passed by the leadership in 2012. In the BCR, the council recognizes that in order to develop viable solutions to issues in the COTTfN community, the people have to be involved in the process of inquiring about our current situation (The COTTfN Story), and developing an action plan toward quality of life (COTTfN Community Plan) (BCR 2012-2013/25). This sentiment was further enhanced with the 2015-2017 Chief and Council Priorities (September 23, 2015 council minutes).

However, systematic inquiry about what solutions might be can become problematic as Indigenous peoples often resist the systematic research of their lives, even when it is an inter-community affair. Linda Tuhiwai Smith stated rather famously that research is the “dirtiest word” in the Indigenous world's vocabulary (Smith, 1999, p. 1). As Kovach (2009) states, “regardless of whether research emerges from a positivist, constructivist, or transformative paradigm, it is still ‘researching’ Indigenous people, and it is still deeply political” (p. 29). One issue that we find in Community Planning is that over-engagement of the community on a direction without adequate follow-up to finalized decisions can create the perception that the organization doesn't know what to do—it fosters community uncertainty. Essentially, if the COTTfN community does not perceive the outcome or impact of their engagement to be relevant, there is continued apathy for the entire process. Yet, lack of communication about political intentions in COTTfN continues to be a source of frustration for community members.

As an Anishinaabe researcher in my First Nation, creating a process of engagement that can occur yearly along with our Nation's financial laws requires us to develop a methodology that will address several layers of concerns. Firstly, the research must be participatory in design—the community has to own the solution to issues we collectively face. Metcalfe (2008) makes this clear in stating, “The research problem is socially constructed, and only deemed solved, by a community” (p. 1092). Secondly, research designed to foster Indigenous resurgence and Nationhood must also regenerate Indigenous governance values in its design.

Thus, community-based research at COTTfN seeks to employ qualitative methodologies through an Anishinaabe lens via Indigenous Methodology (IM) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). These methodologies are best suited for the practical purposes of adapting to the readiness of the COTTfN community in action toward quality of life (PAR) and guiding the research using Anishinaabe techniques of knowledge production, or Indigenous Methodologies (IM). The participatory act of inquiry and gathering community *dibaajmowinan* (stories) to mobilize action toward Anishinaabe aadziwin (ways of living, being, and expressing Anishinaabe worldview) might create better certainty and community inclusion in the Nation's strategic direction, and by extension, its assertion of a rights-based agenda. Ultimately, mobilization is the goal of this project; it extends beyond the reaches of collecting stories—it's as much about doing as it is about telling.

Indigenous Methodology

Our research goals include developing the process of Community Storying into its potential to be much more than an administrative or research tool; Indigenous methodologies are most appropriate to employ when exploring Anishinaabe concepts as a means of empowering community. In pursuing self-determination, an Anishinaabe community requires Indigenous ways to produce collective knowledge and subsequent action. The epistemological pretences through which Indigenous methodologies are employed match the already existing values and expressions of the COTTfN community. In this section, I will explore these more thoroughly.

Anishinaabe people have always been a visioning people, our prophecies and stories preparing future generations for what's to come. To start, the Anishinaabeg people, situated in the Great Lakes region, are one of the largest Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island, originally from the eastern seaboard of North America. Oral history tells us that epic migration, called *Chibimoodaywin* (variations include Gchi-Bimoodegoziwin) (Simpson, 2011, p. 67), occurred around 1,100 years ago when the Anishinaabeg were advised by spiritual prophecy and vision to move westward toward the *manoomin*, “Food growing

on the Water” (Wild Rice found as far west as Minnesota) or face great hardship. Along this epic migration, there were seven stopping places in which bands of Anishinaabeg awaited further spiritual guidance to continue. In some of these stopping places, bands of Anishinaabeg settled and have remained ever since. Deshkan Ziiwing Anishinaabeg, today known as Chippewas of the Thames First Nation (COTTFN), is a smaller band of Wawayatanong Anishinaabeg, or the Round Lake Anishinaabeg—those that are situated around present day Lake St. Clair, between Lakes Huron and Erie. Our sister bands in this area include Aamjiwnaang First Nation, Walpole Island First Nation, Kettle & Stony Point First Nation, and Caldwell First Nation. Together we compose the Anishinaabeg who remained in the 3rd stopping place of Chibimoodaywin (Deleary, 2012, n.p).

As Simpson states: “Chibimoodaywin was a social movement that was inspired by a spiritual vision, debated and planned by spiritual leaders, intellectuals and political leadership, and ultimately carried out by our families. Again, our Elders estimate it took five hundred years to complete ten generations of Nishnaabeg [*sic*] people” (2011, p. 67). The act of prophesising is one of the earliest examples we can allude to when envisioning the Community Story process—our people have always used story and vision to determine our future. As Simpson puts it, the contemporary practice of storying is decolonization at its core, “because it is a process of remembering, visioning, and creating a just reality where Nishnaabeg live as both *Nishnaabeg* and *peoples*” (emphasis in original) (Simpson, 2011, p. 33).

Dibaajmowinan is described by Margaret Noodin (2014) as “the act of collecting and redistributing the truth that you’ve heard” (21). It is speaking truth with “Indigenous intelligence” or Indigenous worldview. There is a clear differentiation between story as how life is for people socially (*dibaajmowin*, or plural *dibaajmowinan*), and story as Anishinaabe ontology and epistemology (*aadizookaanag*): “The closest literal translation is one that connects *dibaajmowinan* to the act of collecting and redistributing the truth that you’ve heard. This is a simpler, more direct narrative style. *Aadizookaanag*, by contrast, in poetry, would be the bones of self-knowing, the core means of communicating the complexity of life” (Noodin, p. 21).

Dibaajmowinan then, is offered with the understanding that one is speaking their truth. This is a core assumption in Anishinaabe *aadziwin* and broader indigeneity, such as the Dakota concept of “Telling it straight” (Wilson, p. 37), wherein integrity is an expectation when transmitting knowledge—either when speaking it or hearing it, and certainly when recording it. It is, to put it in other words, the teaching of the natural law as described by Brenda Rivers: “Be kind with your strength, be kind with your sharing, be kind with your honesty” (Rivers, 2014, Personal Communication). Thus, a false account is a failure of the good mind and heart, deviations from the *Aadizookaanag* that speak of *zaagidiwin* (love, or kindness) as the first knowledge of human form. This can be seen in the Dakota concept of *can̄teyuza*, the word meaning to think, but literally translated as “to form an opinion from the heart” (Wilson, 2005, p. 37).

Positioning Indigenous methodology in an Anishinaabe context means acknowledging and adhering to established protocol and practice. A longstanding protocol is the concept of offering, whether it is offering up time, words, tobacco, food, songs, or stories. Doerfler et al. (2013) state “For most Anishinaabeg, offerings are the currency of life; they constitute ties that form a network of Creation. They can take many forms... a story can be an offering. Knowledge can be an offering... In Anishinaabemowin, the word for an offering is *bagijigan*” (p. xv). The concept of *bagijigan* is integral to the collection of *dibaajmowinan*, for it signifies not only an act of kindness and offering on the part of the narrator, but a stimulating action of offering a question on the part of the researcher.

As an intriguing follow up to the gathering of *dibaajmowinan*, particularly in the context of community storying toward collective direction, what occurs once stories have been gathered? Does the researcher alone, after hearing all of the issues, know what’s best for the people? Does the researcher alone interpret the issues into action? Absolutely not—Wilson notes that the interpretation of such accounts “in many cases be inappropriate to interpret...the purpose of the written sources should not be

to validate, verify, or negate the Indigenous perspective. Rather, they should be used for what is significant about them according to the culture from which they were created” (Wilson, 2005, p. 42-43). Further, Stark in Doerfler et al (2013) states, “There’s a reason why storytellers will often not tell you what these stories mean, because the idea is that we’ll bring our own interpretations and ideas and language, and that can lend insight into addressing the contemporary challenges facing our communities” (Heidi Stark, p. xxv). Certainly both scholars were speaking in the context of aadizokaanag passed along by orators for recording by those employing oral history methodologies. But we are employing an additional methodology that will require an interpretation of the story we are telling for the purposes of visioning—not by the researchers alone, but by those who are telling it.

Participatory Action Research

Action Research was defined early on by Rapaport as aiming “to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework” (Rapaport in Brown & Tandon, 1983, p. 278). PAR operates on values and ideologies as the preference for action pathways and desired outcomes in a community (Brown & Tandon, 1983, p. 280). PAR then, is a very subjective and value-laden process that must be informed by Indigenous values and Anishinaabe aadziwin to form the pathway for developmental change. It’s important to stress again, that the action pathway not only occurs in the grassroots community, but also in the Nation-level organization that is composed of COTTN community members.

It’s clear to see that a community storying process would require the participation of a collective to mobilize. Additionally, the ultimate goal of countering colonial impacts in COTTN requires action in many forms, ranging from offering dibaajmowinan, to Freirean techniques of mobilizing “critical consciousness” for liberation (Brown & Tandon, 1983, p. 279), to actions of Self-Determination. Participatory Action Research creates space for community activators to not only learn the techniques involved with creating change, but to also add experience and Indigenous intelligence to the process-oriented methodology. PAR can also address the needs of the community to move with development as it happens. It also implies engagement plus action, the bringing-along of people, so to speak, in a process where the people need to own and develop the idea of what it means to be Anishinaabe in a contemporary context. This is in direct opposition to the exclusionary intention of Federal Indian Policy in which Indigenous peoples were barred from the decisions that impacted their lives.

In Wicks, Reason, & Bradbury, the role of spirit in PAR was illuminated, making a nice connection with IM: “[T]he conviction that life is not a spectator sport but that participation is *fundamental* to the nature of our being, or an *ontological given*, a view articulated both by action researchers... and other contemporary writers... These perspectives have clear implications for practice and for how our colleagues mentioned above choose to live and act in the world” (2008, p.18). Lafleur explores the IM position of this concept: “The web of life and the medicine wheel are both representative of the circular nature of Anishinaabek [*sic*] values-orientation, of creation and the world, and our journey throughout life. Both demonstrate the continuity of life and the interconnection and interdependency between man and the natural world... We can see this in the Anishinaabek word for ‘having consideration’ expressed as waawekewin, meaning ‘to make round’” (Lafleur, 2014, p. 5).

To further Lafleur’s intriguing concept of “having consideration”, the teaching of the circle is that each being has a place within it, the circle being a metaphor for life. Each being possesses their own knowledge, purpose and affairs to conduct in their walk on this earth. Extending this concept to PAR might mean that each being (person) offers something valuable to the process, even if it is hard to hear.

Collective storying and gathering dibaajmowinan, particularly those that can lend to the detailing of direction toward quality of life, requires relationship building. The Anishinaabe concept *Niin’ diwemaaginidak*, “All my relations” (Miskokomon & Deleary, 2016, Personal Communication) is a core assumption of responsibility, reciprocity, and relationality between people, particularly in an

Anishinaabe context where common ancestry is shared and a common future is projected. Gergen in Wicks et al. commends “[PAR] work for ‘demonstrating the ways in which assumptions about the real, the rational and the good issue from relationships’. ‘Thus, we may use research not simply to reflect the past, but to create new futures’” (Gergen in Wicks et al., 2008, p. 18).

A Case for Indigenous Methodology and Participatory Action Research

Applicability

Communicating the process of community planning and development to the COTTEN membership is sometimes met with low participation rates. PAR might seem as though it won’t work if the fundamental aspect of ‘Participatory’ is missing—but it is an opportunity to measure growth and interest, as well as appropriate methods as needed by the community’s values. There are events and gatherings in the community that draw wide and diverse participation such as celebrations, feasts, cultural events, and annual events. These are the spaces wherein community knowledge is remembered, created, and transferred; it is a space where community discourse and dialogue flourishes.

It is likely that a preliminary study exploring this phenomenon could be conducted—why might people participate in some events, but not others? An early assumption might be that there appears to be high rates of participation when there is something offered such as company, food, or gifts at a Harvest Feast or Children’s Christmas celebration (bakijige); something to be learned like an evening of teachings from elders or well-known cultural leaders (aadizokaanag); physical activities that involve whole families like round dances and all ages tournaments (niin’diwemaaginidak); and large annual events that incorporate neighbouring communities of relations and families such as the annual pow-wow and solidarity day celebrations (waawakewin). It is my sense that the current practice of engaging community does not contain all the necessary pieces needed to successfully apply IM and PAR. In other words, engagement practices must be adjusted to the existing and successful practice of gathering and storying that occurs in COTTEN. In this way, the introduction of IM and PAR methodologies in these existing practices is an opportunity for applicability.

In terms of producing, accounting for, and mobilizing community knowledge, keeping in mind the literal meaning of Chibimoodaywin in Anishinaabemowin will help us to see that the IM and PAR approaches will likely become commitments that outlast a finite research project. *Chi-* is the signifier for large, grand, long, or great. *Bimoode* means to crawl. The *-win* at the end makes it an action. Chibimoodaywin literally means a long, slow, and arduous crawl, a mobilization that is quite lengthy in nature and does not occur quickly (Simpson, 2011, p. 67).

Viability

When considering the viability of IM and PAR, it’s important to note that employing research methodologies in Indigenous communities must necessarily support the ways knowledge is created by people; as well as supporting the vision produced by the people. Indigenous ways of producing knowledge are practiced in diverse Anishinaabe communities, and part of IM and PAR in COTTEN will explore what those practices currently are. Blaaser in Doerfler et al. (2013) gives an example of how to think about the viability of stories in an Anishinaabe context:

When I investigate the Native seed banks that seek to preserve Indigenous varieties of tribal foods like wild rice, I think also of the vast ‘story banks’ that preserve Anishinaabeg beliefs and tradition. Just as each traditional seasonal activity in the Anishinaabeg yearly cycle necessarily involves both doing and telling, likewise each storytelling is both harvest and reseeded...telling stories is also planting stories (p. 253).

Dr. Lee Brown shared with us that a Nation’s Self-Determination includes the development of the “self” in addition to the action of “determination” (Lee Brown, Personal Communication, 2014 July 11). This not only means the personal development of individual selves in COTTEN, but the Nation’s sense of “self”. Storying the knowledge produced by COTTEN members is one more connection that can be made between storying and sovereignty or developing a Nation’s sense of self. IM and PAR can collectively organize COTTEN to cultivate the self where it was once compromised by injustice of Indian Policy. The self, then, is both a concept of the individual and a concept of a Nation. One viable

aspect of IM and PAR that is currently practiced in COTTEN is the support of individuals to become community developers. The established practice of community scholarship wherein individuals have earned university credit to gain community development skills not only leads to the critical consciousness of the people by bringing in Anishinaabe scholars, but also helps to create relationships and trust within cohorts by learning and teaching one another. Creating a critical mass of community developers ensures that the skills of storying and the subsequent action is widely held in COTTEN. Continuing this practice by engaging community as co-researchers in the community inquiry process is an important feature of the viability of community storying.

Advantages

IM and PAR create space for all members to share their perspectives toward collective action. IM provides the depth of Anishinaabe intelligence in the process and action, and PAR gives the practical side to mobilizing community action and growth at an appropriate pace. IM and PAR foster a multitude of perspectives in the research. This need not be a barrier in the work, and is indicative of the diversity that is possible within the process. In this way, there is no wrong perspective, only those that differ; as Sam Osawamick puts it, “*Bkaan so genii ngiizhiiminik gzhemnidoo jinziidminaa*’ you know the Great Mystery has given me a different understanding” (Osawamick in Doerfler et al. p. 365).

Further to this, IM and PAR, when used together, have the potential to resurge Indigenous values and re-indigenization; a goal many Indigenous research endeavors seek to activate: “Today we recognize that Indigenous research holds the capacity to break the silence and bring forth the powerful songs of long-imprisoned Indigenous voices using their own languages” (Weber-Pillwax, 174). One discussion that is becoming increasingly popular in First Nations communities including COTTEN is that of decolonization. In resistance to current systemic injustices First Nations face by the Government of Canada, how might a community be compelled to cast away internal oppression as well as the intergenerational behaviour, actions, and perceptions that perpetuate trauma?

IM and PAR can foster a decolonizing/re-indigenizing aspect of the conversation when we gather dibaajmowinan. Cornthassel et al. (2009) states that “Processes of restorying and truth-telling are not effective without some larger community-centred, decolonizing actions behind them” (p. 3). We can tell the truth and story of our Nations, which include Indigenous intelligence. But, very realistically, these accounts often include trauma; and action of conscious mobility must occur to shift our story from one of overwhelming trauma and dysfunction to that of a flourishing and healthy community that produces unique Anishinaabe knowledge.

Waziyatawin & Yellowbird (2013) describe decolonization as “the meaningful and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands” (p. 3). As Tuck & Yang (2012) reminds us, “Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity”. The ways in which decolonization is expressed in the process of storying and the types of action that follow should be explored in community dialogue using IM and PAR techniques.

Disadvantages

As Taylor stated, “Everything that reveals also conceals” (2014). As with any methodological choice, there are limitations to the type of knowledge that can be produced. PAR in this context will require a process-oriented approach, meaning that the work can move only at the pace of the people as we are relying on community members to engage in the process on their own volition. Participating in this research necessarily explores what quality of life looks like for people in COTTEN; and when many of our people are currently facing the injustices associated with systemic oppression and inherited hardships, being actively involved in this inquiry process is not always an option. This urges us to choose methods of engagement that are inviting or already established in the community. If there are disagreements around Anishinaabe aadziwin as the basis for a quality of life, then it’s possible that the IM approach can be problematized, particularly if Indigenous approaches are questioned within the community. This is a very real consequence of internalized colonization.

Keeping the integrity of oral accounts in its transference to the written document is a challenge for any Indigenous scholar and research group. Kovach, citing Thomas (2009), illuminates this oft-occurring challenge: “In using story methodology, Robina Thomas shares her hesitation about writing stories down. She acknowledges ‘times change’ and for Indigenous stories to be heard they need to be written down. The challenge is to serve the integrity of oral stories by adapting them to this new form.” (Kovach, p. 102).

PAR as noted above, is a commitment that might outlast the timeline of a practical research project with due dates and timelines. Sometimes the results of the research are intangible, such as a higher caliber of conversation through a raised consciousness or wider acceptance around community practices where there was once hesitancy. For this reason, the practices within the methodology have to be stringent to capture the nuances of change in our community.

Another disadvantage to this approach is that some COTTFN members show their concern with there being one story of the community that guides the direction of the Nation. These concerns are reminiscent of John Law’s (2007) discussion of absence and otherness. Research cannot possibly include everything, and will ultimately fail to describe the entirety of a situation (p. 605)—by making something present; we are making others absent (p. 599).

Positionality

The introduction of PAR methodology assumes that change needs to occur. Current reception to the COTTFN Story is not completely satisfactory—some people dispute that the story is an accurate or substantial representation of what life is like for the people. Some are deterred from reading it because of the immense pain felt when reading the content. Poverty, hardship, addictions, and violence are widespread. It’s a hard task to get everyone on the same page because of politics, and the legacies of Indian Policy has created tensions by divide and conquer tactics such as limiting resources, crowding land bases, and consolidating power from many different clan chiefs to a small council. The limited resources of on-reserve life create a reality where more dollars toward one endeavour means fewer dollars somewhere else. The point is that social research and the accompanying methodology (in whatever form it takes) creates change, which creates tension. If the research is proposing social change away from lateral violence and enmeshed negative attitudes, the methodology will have to withstand the test of these behaviours.

We see this research in the community as being much larger than administrative or political positions. This research is increasingly becoming a journey in which we learn more about our roles in the community as Anishinaabeg, our direction, spirituality, and about our Nation. Margaret Noodin (2014) reminds us about the much larger task we are fulfilling in life: “In Anishinaabe tradition *Gichi Manidoo* [Creator] asks each infant a question before birth, and life is shaped by the desire to remember and answer that question” (p. 42). The name of our spirit, ceremony, and the dreams we receive help us in remembering our individual purpose; as Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark puts it, *ando-bawajigeyan*, seeking purpose, seeking dreams, seeking vision (Stark in Doerfler et al., 2013, p. xxv). This research is not only an individual pursuit or the desire to contribute knowledge to a scholarly field; it is an act that cannot happen without relationships, offering, and speaking truth through story. Its purpose is beyond us or even this generation. In reference to Chibimoodaywin, it is but one action in the mass mobilization of our Nations throughout time, informed by knowledge of generations past with the future generations in mind.

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