

Indigenous Ways Infiltrating the Research Realm

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Abstract: The summer of 2021 was the beginning of my experience as a researcher from Emily Carr University of Art & Design on a project that connected me with other researchers across Canada. The project was titled Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact, and was an initiative in collaboration with Mass Culture, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Culture Statistics Working Group, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Toronto Arts Foundation. Each researcher had their own area of interest, with my focus being on researching and exploring the innovative ways of reframing research methods and connecting with communities in the arts sector and academic institutions to align with methods derived from an Indigenous way of gathering information.

Keywords: Arts' Civic Impact; Indigenous, Creative Research Methods; Canada; Arts and Culture Sector; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Arts Administration; Managerialism

Résumé : L'été 2021 a marqué le début de mon expérience en tant que chercheur de l'Emily Carr University of Art & Design sur un projet qui m'a connecté avec d'autres chercheurs à travers le Canada. Le projet, intitulé Recherche en Résidence : Impact Civique des Arts, était une initiative en collaboration avec Mass Culture, le Conseil des arts du Canada, le Groupe de travail sur les statistiques culturelles, la Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario et la Fondation des arts de Toronto. Chaque chercheur avait son propre domaine d'intérêt, mon objectif étant de rechercher et d'explorer des moyens innovants de reformuler les méthodes de recherche et de se connecter avec les communautés du secteur des arts et des institutions académiques pour s'aligner avec les méthodes dérivées d'une façon autochtone de recueillir des informations.

Mots clé : L'impact civique des arts, autochtone, Méthodes de recherche créatives, Canada, Secteur des arts et de la culture, Équité, diversité et inclusion, Administration des arts, Gestionarisme

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I acknowledge that the research that took place throughout this project was on the ancestral and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

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Proceeding with Caution and Care

lexláxs izá | remember these things, carry them with you

When I was asked to be part of Mass Culture's Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact project, I was intrigued as it not only allowed me to implement research methods created from a First Nations perspective, but it was encouraged. This article reflects my first time working as a researcher on a project coming from a background in the visual arts and land-based practices. Before this experience I had never considered myself a researcher. My feelings of hesitation and skepticism towards research kept me from fully immersing myself in research-based projects as I knew research was another dark facet of history which furthered the colonial agenda. Described in greater detail in *Decolonizing Research*, a book that brings together Indigenous researchers and activists from Canada, Australia and New Zealand:

A critical tool of colonization was research, of which Indigenous story-taking and story-making was a vital part. Colonial Western research of our traditional stories and research stories of our peoples was used to define, destroy, and deter the valuing of Indigenous knowledge, people, and practices. With an objective façade of research, and an assumed position of racial superiority (sometimes with benevolent intent) on the part of the researcher, the story-takers and story-makers usually misrepresented, misappropriated, and misused our Indigenous stories. More than a theft of cultural property, this "research" was an intellectual, cultural, and spiritual invasion that cast Indigenous characters in particular roles, framed from the vantage point of the "hunter" (p.5).

I will share some examples of research projects involving Indigenous peoples in so-called "Canada" (p.1), to illustrate the scope of damage research has done to Indigenous Peoples with immeasurable effects. Dr. Ian Mosby, author and historian of food, Indigenous health, and the politics of settler colonialism, has uncovered many examples and brought to light cases you can find in his paper, *Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942-1952*, including, but not limited to government-run food experimentation on deliberately malnourished Indigenous children in the 1940's, of which a notable example was the 1947-1948 James Bay Survey of the Attawapiskat and Rupert's House Cree First Nations, and less well known were two separate long-term studies that went so far as to include controlled experiments conducted, apparently without the subjects' informed consent or knowledge, on malnourished Aboriginal populations in Northern Manitoba and, later, in six Indian residential schools. In more recent years, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a familiar mistrust between Indigenous communities and the government. Mosby explains, the problem is trying to solve it in the middle of an emergency, in the middle of a pandemic,

and trying to gain that trust, these solutions needed to start 20, 30, 50 years ago (Malone, 2020).

I want to use my experience in the Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact as a model for how an Indigenous-led project using Indigenous methodologies can create an environment for participants that is safe, reciprocal, and respectful.

Over the summer I prepared to apply to the Research Ethics Board (REB) to have my project ideas approved before involving participants from the arts community in Vancouver. Once I started the REB application process, I found it difficult to describe the project's methodological framework, guided by Indigenous perspectives, in a language that would get the approval of the REB. It felt frustrating and trivial to me to have to not only justify the ways I and my team had been successfully connecting with community already, but to also write and present this to a group of people who I felt might not fully understand our Indigenous ways. My resistance towards the REB process was a result of feeling like I was repeatedly being faced with barriers from colonial institutions as a researcher, student, and practicing artist. I was fortunate to only have been met with support and patience from the REB members at Emily Carr University.

Going through the REB made me think how strange it was that there is a mandatory process which ensures we are considering people's well-being. As a result of some researchers' historically disreputable and immoral practices with participants the original TCPS (Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans) was adopted as a federal mandate in 1998, and has since been adapted and evolved to become the TCPS 2 we have today. Part of that mandate is the establishment of REBs within institutions which oversee the research that is conducted. To comply with the principles of the TCPS, the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board (ECU-REB) requires all university-affiliated research involving humans to complete the [TCPS2: CORE 2022 \(Course on Research Ethics\)](#) before receiving approval for their research. All researchers whose work involves Indigenous people, communities, territories, and topics are advised to read [Chapter 9: Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada](#).

Although I think it is clear why an REB is necessary when conducting research with human participants within the science sector, as well as with research involving Indigenous Peoples by non-Indigenous researchers, I find its application could be shifted when applied to the arts and culture sector, even more so with Indigenous researchers that want to work with Indigenous communities. Working with participants in this project involved having conversations and creating with community, not conducting human experiments. Part of me found it discouraging to have to validate the Indigenous methodologies we wanted to use in creating a culturally safe environment for participants. Renee Linklater, author and member of Rainy River First Nations in northwestern Ontario, writes in her book *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies*, "Western thought has opened a space, albeit a limited space, that is intrigued by the diversity of knowledge available. The power issues surrounding knowledge and knowledge validity remain unbalanced, with Indigenous peoples often striving to gain recognition in a colonized territory" (p.29). Her words describe how I often feel when I think about how Indigenous people are always having to adapt to colonial constructs rather than being fully accepted as they are.

How we work with our own communities is unique, and I am thankful that ECU-REB has Indigenous members and is putting in the work that acknowledges these unique cases and supports Indigenous research practices. It can be read in more detail in their statement, [In a Good Way: Principles Guiding Indigenous Research Ethics at Emily Carr University](#).

Artistic and Creative Minds Integral for Healing and Societal Transformation

As a researcher, I also bring my personal experiences as a Lil'wat First Nations person and practicing artist. If you search the definition of an artist online, the first results include, "a person who produces paintings or drawings as a profession or hobby" and "a person who practices any of the various creative arts, such as a sculptor, novelist, poet, or filmmaker." I find this can be the trouble with the English language and its ability to reduce integral aspects of human life such as art, into one word. Within y community of the Interior Salish, as well as within other Coast Salish communities, there never was a word for art in our native languages. What is considered art today was a natural part of our everyday existence, from the woven designs on our cedar root baskets to the pictographs painted in ochre that depicted our ancestors' dreams on the rocks. If the arts could be seen beyond the limiting perspectives of colonial entities and given the high regards that are given to other sectors within research, the arts and culture sector could have greater impacts on society. Considering the state of emergency our planet is in, one would think referring to the ideas and knowledge of creative and Indigenous minds wouldn't be a question.

Over the last few years, I have seen a slow but noticeable recognition and valuing of Indigenous methodologies and community-based approaches in research.

I approached this Researchers in Residence project using Indigenous methodologies that I had already been using within my own art practice: material making and oral knowledge sharing. Organizations which work in the arts sector within Vancouver were invited to participate in a series of material making gatherings at Emily Carr's Aboriginal Gathering Place. By the end of the research project we had connected with several organizations steeped in various practices including performance, visual arts, and reconciliation. Oral knowledge sharing was implemented using what is defined as a Sharing Circle- a practice often used in the Aboriginal Gathering Place to make introductions and bring everyone's voices into the room. This practice further facilitates creating a safe space for challenging and difficult conversations around Indigenous topics. The origin story of the Sharing Circles at Emily Carr began with former Emily Carr student Lou-ann Neel, a descendant of the Mamalillikulla, Da'nax'daxw, Ma'amtigila, 'Namgis, and Kwagiulth tribes of the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwak'wala-speaking people). She created what was then called a Talking Circle, where members of the school could come together and ask difficult questions on Indigenous-related matters in a safe space to educate and understand one another more. Material making was a series of four workshops utilizing Indigenous materials to gather, share knowledge, and create connections with each other and the materials.

This project is an act of resistance towards colonial and academic approaches in research, and is a refusal to fully comply with colonial systems to practice our right of self-governance. This project

gave us the freedom to centre the research using Indigenous methodologies which when applied helped build meaningful relationships with community and created a culturally safe environment for participants. I believe if researchers want to better their reputation with Indigenous Peoples, they need to either decolonize their approaches or give Indigenous peoples the liberty and support to conduct research within their own communities. Like Jo-ann Archibald, an Indigenous studies scholar from the Sto:lo First Nation here in British Columbia, says in her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*,

The issues and the way that we want to deal with the issues- the types of conversations and talks- must be given space for us to fill. This does not mean that non-Native people should be forever excluded from the conversations, only that First Nations people need some space to talk so that we can share our stories in our own way and create discourses based on our Indigenous knowledge systems. Then we can open the conversation for others to join. (p. 19)

gawílc | to gather, get together

We hosted a total of four Indigenous material practice workshops at Emily Carr University's Aboriginal Gathering Place over the fall and winter which utilized traditional material practice and Sharing Circles to gather, share knowledge, and create connections. We invited organizations that worked in the arts sector within Vancouver, and by the end of the workshops we had connected with several different organizations that worked in performance, museums, community, and reconciliation.

The four workshops included rattle making and caribou tufting, thirteen-inch elk drum making, seal fur projects, and sixteen-inch elk drum making, in that order. The materials each hold their own histories and connections to the land. As conversations flowed during the workshops, their pacing coincided with the making. When steps in the making would become more challenging the concentration in the room increased, but once these challenging moments passed the conversation would resume being more fluid and open. One of the participants noted during one of the workshops that working in this way in the Aboriginal Gathering Place was quite effective because it took people out of their comfort zone in the most generous way.

A form of connecting with my own community was the land-based textile practice of hide tanning. Hide tanning is the rigorous process and tradition of treating a hide of an animal and transforming it into a textile. There is something unique about working with these materials that connects us to the land as well as our ancestral practices and knowledge. There was a moment when one of the participants said,

We have so many people sitting around doing cultural practice and we are having powerful discussions, and we will take them wherever we go to help our work, our relationships. There are reasons why they made laws to ban this stuff before.

I think this is an accurate description of the power within our culture. It was a reminder of how our ancestors fought for this generation to have access to our traditions and the privilege I have in being able to share and implement some of these practices in this project to contribute to the decolonization of research-based work.

This feels like an exchange and building of a relationship (Participant)

When we are making together there is no hierarchy. We are in an environment where people can be vulnerable, respected, and honored because everyone is equal and going through the challenges and successes of creating together. It is the participants that are gifting us with their sharing of stories and knowledge, and I as a researcher am learning from them rather than them learning from me. There would be no information to gather if there were no stories to share. Storytelling is an essential part in understanding our individual experiences and the passing of knowledge. In our project here, this manifested as participants sharing their experiences and thoughts surrounding the impact society has had on the arts sector.

Lost in Translation

From what I understand, western culture does not value Indigenous oral traditions as much as they value the written word. For this project, my research mentor introduced me to reflexive thematic analysis, a method frequently used in qualitative research to organize and summarize the information gathered via dialogue between participants. We applied this method using an app called Miro, a digital whiteboarding tool, where we would both type on sticky notes to categorize and summarize the different themes and moments of discussion participants touched on during the workshops. Although we treated the words that were shared with integrity and respect, I still felt that there was something being lost when translating the oral knowledge shared into text. Archibald says this more eloquently, “Whenever Indigenous oral traditions is presented in textual form, the text limits the level of understanding because it cannot portray the storyteller’s gestures, tone, rhythm, and personality” (p.17). It is hard to put into the written word something which was experienced and lived in the moment. I felt it was even more difficult to follow the formal structure of the research requirements of measuring and quantifying the data we had collected which represented lived experiences. In my creative practice, I tell story through video, sound, and hide tanning that engages with multiple senses of the viewer. That is the beauty of art: having the freedom and ability to connect with people using different mediums. It is about valuing different ways of connecting with one another.

wa7 ha ká kaxílha áti7? | I wonder if it can be done like that?

One of the participants expressed how we shouldn't need to spend so much time dismantling white supremacy when we can work on making our own thing. This research project was an opportunity to understand civic impact of the arts through the lens of Indigenous cultural knowledge, but also an example of how we can challenge and resist the limitations of colonial frameworks. I think this research project is one example of how the future in research can be decolonized. I feel Indigenous people have been patient and are always adapting to survive within colonial society and shouldn't have to compete to have their cultural ways of knowing to be heard and valued. One way of describing and understanding decolonizing research is given by New Zealand academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith as "Decolonizing research aspires to re-cover, re-cognize, re-create, re-present, and 'research back' by using our own ontological and epistemological constructs" (p.6). This project makes me hopeful that there can be a future where Indigenous knowledge systems and stories can be shared and exist within the research realm.

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