



# Artist Métissage: Re-Storying Indigenous-Canadian Relations through Winter Count Making

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Article abstract

Through critical and creative reflection, I consider what it means to be a Treaty Person in so-called Canada from the perspective of a settler educator. I focus on winter count making, which is a traditional practice of the Lakota (Sioux), Blackfoot, Kiowa, and Mandan Nations of the Prairies where symbols are created and used to recall significant events. I share about my own winter count making journey to invite reflection on Indigenous-Canadian relations in connection to education and shifting learning contexts. I build on my practice of activism to decolonize curriculum by incorporating Indigenous métissage. The resulting artist métissage offers a set of possibilities for learning from and with Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing in an embodied way informed by an artful and relational stance. This approach is tied to an ecological understanding of imagination as inclusive and interconnected with human and non-human relations. Attentive to the risk of appropriation of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous people, it offers educators and students, including pre-service teachers, entry points for thoughtful learning from and with Indigenous teachings. The paper concludes with considerations for thoughtfully incorporating the winter count tradition into educational contexts.

# Artist Métissage: Re-Storying Indigenous-Canadian Relations through Winter Count Making

Leslie Obol

PolicyWise for Children & Families

*Through critical and creative reflection, I consider what it means to be a Treaty Person in so-called Canada from the perspective of a settler educator. I focus on winter count making, which is a traditional practice of the Lakota (Sioux), Blackfoot, Kiowa, and Mandan Nations of the Prairies where symbols are created and used to recall significant events. I share about my own winter count making journey to invite reflection on Indigenous-Canadian relations in connection to education and shifting learning contexts. I build on my practice of activism to decolonize curriculum by incorporating Indigenous métissage. The resulting artist métissage offers a set of possibilities for learning from and with Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing in an embodied way informed by an artful and relational stance. This approach is tied to an ecological understanding of imagination as inclusive and interconnected with human and non-human relations. Attentive to the risk of appropriation of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous people, it offers educators and students, including pre-service teachers, entry points for thoughtful learning from and with Indigenous teachings. The paper concludes with considerations for thoughtfully incorporating the winter count tradition into educational contexts.*

*Par le biais d'une réflexion critique et créative, j'examine ce que signifie être une personne issue d'un traité dans ce qu'on appelle le Canada, du point de vue d'un éducateur issu de la colonisation. Je me concentre sur les décomptes d'hiver, une pratique traditionnelle des nations Lakota (Sioux), Blackfoot, Kiowa et Mandan des Prairies, qui consiste à créer des symboles et à les utiliser pour rappeler des événements importants. Je parle de mon propre voyage de fabrication des décomptes d'hiver pour inviter à la réflexion sur les relations autochtones-canadiennes en rapport avec l'éducation et les contextes d'apprentissage changeants. Je m'appuie sur ma pratique de l'artivisme pour décoloniser le programme d'études en y intégrant le métissage autochtone. Le métissage artiste qui en résulte offre un ensemble de possibilités d'apprentissage à partir et avec les savoirs et les modes de connaissance autochtones, d'une manière incarnée et informée par une position artistique et relationnelle. Cette approche est liée à une compréhension écologique de l'imagination comme étant inclusive et interconnectée avec les relations humaines et non-humaines. Attentive au risque d'appropriation des modes de connaissance autochtones par les non-autochtones, elle offre aux éducateurs et aux étudiants, y compris aux enseignants en formation, des points d'entrée pour un apprentissage réfléchi à partir des enseignements autochtones et avec eux. L'article se termine par des considérations sur l'intégration réfléchie de la tradition des décomptes d'hiver dans les contextes éducatifs.*

Figure 1

*Winter Count: Planting the Seeds/Lighting the Fire*



*Note.* This count speaks of new interconnected beginnings and becomings invited by a grounding and liberating space that opens up to engaging with stories and storying processes. While the foundation of a circular space is set, the only predictable outcome is transformation. (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 7, 2018).

“If you want to change society, you change the stories you tell” (King, 2003, 47:31).

Aboriginal people and Euro-Canadians are intimately connected through the stories they tell of living together in this place. This relationship persists to this day, despite the distrust, misunderstandings, and animosities that punctuate it. It is in these relationships between people, and the ways in which the stories people tell reveal these relationships, that a new form of Canadian citizenship can be imagined. (Donald, 2004, p. 25)

### **Inviting Circular Imagination**

Six years ago, I put black ink on paper to create *Winter Count: Planting the Seeds/Lighting the Fire* (see Figure 1). It was spring and I was making my first ever winter count. I was learning from and with Dwayne Donald’s stories, alongside—often in circle with—other students. I now understand that this image and statement came out of an ongoing storytelling tradition connected to many other storytellers. I was invited into a storying process, a collective and shared way of knowing—one of engaging with stories in a circular way. Six years later, I am still circling back to this winter count.

This paper is a personal and relational engagement with a new kind of curricular imagination (Chambers, 1999) that asks and re-asks: what does it mean to be a Treaty Person in so-called Canada today? The grounding and liberating space that opened up to me that spring was shaped by stories and the opportunity to sit with them. This conceptual space is circular, it has no discernible beginning or end. It is where stories of those contributing to this living curriculum (Irwin et al., 2005) come together to imagine toward answers. This sensibility is rooted in the understanding that beings do not enter into relationships, but instead we become in and through our relationships (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). Each of the winter counts that I speak to come from this place of creative and collective synergy—always innovated through relationship and in the enunciation.

Figure 2

*Winter Count: When Stories Sent Work on You*



Note. Stories—when we are open to them—can enter into us and work on us in mysterious ways. (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 18, 2018).

### **Becoming Story-Ready**

This sense of imagination as circular and collective in *Winter Count: When Stories Sent Work on You* (see Figure 2) is informed by Jo-ann Archibald's (Q'um Q'um Xiiem) conception of Indigenous storywork. For Archibald (2008), following Stó:lō tradition, storywork is about educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit. She coined the term storywork to signify that Indigenous stories and storytelling need to be taken seriously (2003, p. 3). For Archibald (2008), storywork not only involves storytelling, but working to become story-ready by paying attention to protocol and emphasizing making meaning from the story. She described it as a process that involves paying attention to one's role in a holistic process, where "one must be ready to share and teach ... respectfully and responsibly to others in order for this knowledge, and its power, to continue" (Archibald, 2008, p. 3). I have come to understand winter count making as a form of storywork that emphasizes reciprocity, where we work to make meaning, while allowing the story to work on us.

Although I was not yet ready to share these winter counts at the time of making *Winter Count: When Stories Sent Work on You*, this teaching about reciprocity has slowly worked on me as I have slowly become ready to share my winter counts. Archibald's notion of storywork as an educational practice aligns with what I learned in Dwayne Donald's class (D. Donald, personal communication, May 18, 2018): When we have the honour of entering into spaces guided by Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous knowledge holders, we have a responsibility to make sense of resonant teachings so they can be put in motion in our own lives and the work we do.

In this paper, I recall the experiences and understandings I worked to articulate through winter counts and reconsider them with an eye to past, present, and future learning and teaching possibilities. This paper is a manifestation of my becoming ready to share what has entered into and worked on my consciousness. I strive to share respectfully and responsibly how winter count making can offer an opportunity for sustained meaning-making with Indigenous teachings. My hope is that others might benefit from learning about winter count making through my experience of it as storywork.

## **Indigenous-Canadian Relations and Settler Colonialism**

Before proceeding to outlining the work, it is important to define important terms. Throughout this paper, *Indigenous-Canadian relations* is used to refer to two broadly defined groups. The term *Indigenous* is used to refer to all Indigenous Peoples living on Turtle Island who are of Indigenous ancestry. The term *Canadian* includes all who have settled onto the lands of the many different Indigenous Peoples in what is now known as Canada. With the use of any intentional defining of groups of people, there are always generalizations made that make the terms problematic, yet this distinction is necessary for discussion. In many contexts it is imperative to make distinctions between settlers of European descent and elsewhere, or between white settlers and racialized settlers, or between newcomers and those who have settled here less recently, and so on. For the purposes of this paper, however, the distinction is between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people, understanding that there are individuals that occupy both positions. Finally, the term *relations* is significant because it points to the ongoing and evolving dynamics not only between peoples, but importantly with more-than-human beings (Donald, 2016).

Today, Indigenous-Canadian relations remain underpinned by the unrelenting problem of settler colonialism and its underlying colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2009; Wolfe, 2006). In what is now called Canada, some Canadians are coming to realize that we have been taught an incomplete version of the complex history of our nation and our nationality. The stories of the experiences of Indigenous Peoples and their communities as subjects of the Canadian nation are being revealed in truths that disrupt and trouble the story of Canada as it has been taught in schools for generations (Donald, 2009, 2012).

Prominent contemporary examples of settler colonialism include the horrific atrocities that occurred in the Indian residential schools perpetrated on children by church and government officials along with the multigenerational traumas that have ensued. Details of these histories have been made public through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) on Indian Residential Schools in its *Final Report* (2015). The TRC's 94 *Calls to Action* are underpinned by a commitment to improving relationships between Indigenous Peoples and settlers in Canada. Many of these Calls to Action specifically call on educators and the institutions they occupy to act as critical leaders in facilitating change and creating relevant educational opportunities to engage in reconciliation. Following the release of the *Final Report* and the *Calls to Action*, universities across the country began to address the calls through various action plans: 96 universities committed to a set of 13 principles for closing the education gap and taking steps toward reconciliation (Universities Canada, 2015). These efforts have coincided with ever-increasing practices of making land acknowledgements and inviting Elders to perform welcoming prayers at university events, among other gestures (Asher et al., 2018; Wilkes et al., 2017). Yet, amidst these indicators of change—Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge holders, along with Indigenous scholars and other engaged scholars committed to co-creating new kinds of relationalities—are warning us not to conflate this ever-accumulating list of “apologies” and “accomplishments” with a new historical consciousness (Mackey, 2016; Manuel & Derrickson, 2015). They are warning that these gestures can serve as moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) by symbolically addressing the underlying issues at stake by using decolonization as a metaphor. Instead, many such scholars are calling for the re-making of settler-colonial relations where citizens move beyond acknowledging the wrongs of the past, by acting in relation to how these wrongs continue to perpetuate in the present (Brant-Birioukov et al., 2019). This appeal by scholars to put policy into practice is in alignment with the TRC's Call to “fully adopt and

Figure 3

*Winter Count: The Flip Side of Using the Land*



*Note.* This count builds on the gesture of two hands coming together to measure a half a foot—what was understood at the time of the treaty signings by nêhiyawak as the depth of land settlers needed to till for their survival. (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 17, 2018).

implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation” (2015, p. 5). It also directly responds to Call 45(iii), which asks Canadian governments to “Renew or establish Treaty relationships based on principles of mutual recognition, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future” (p. 5).

### **Re-Storying Indigenous-Canadian Relations**

The need for new pedagogies for fostering Indigenous-Canadian relations based on mutuality (Donald, 2012; Noble, 2015; Smith, 1999) is documented in a growing body of scholarship in teacher education, educational policy studies, educational leadership, curriculum studies, and teaching and learning scholarship (see for example Burns et al., 2016; Deer, 2015; Manuel et al., 2015; Tupper, 2014; Yeo, et al., 2019). My focus in this paper is to contribute to re-imagining together what such forms of mutuality might look like (and feel like) in university classrooms—where creative expression guided by the tradition of winter count making might make sense. To do so, I draw on the potential of winter count making to record meaning-making in action—as a pedagogy of solidarity committed to decolonization in education (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012); one that takes up the call to re-story Indigenous-Canadian relations with students by troubling and disrupting dominant narratives in favour of mutuality.

I situate this paper in the theoretical framework of storying and re-storying as acts of reconciliation and decolonization (Archibald, 2008; Donald, 2012; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999). The idea of re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations offers opportunities to decolonize education by learning, re-learning, and unlearning. It involves learning from Elders, knowledge holders, and community members in ways that support a revisionist history that takes into account multiple perspectives (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Kovach, 2010).

*Winter Count: The Flip Side of Using the Land* re-stories Indigenous-Canadian relations by bringing side-by-side two very different relationships to the land (see Figure 3). Here contrast is used as two hands are demarcated by colour (black/white) and orientation (thumbs down/thumbs up) to show how Indigenous-Canadian interpretations of Treaty 6 negotiations

manifested (and continue to manifest) differentially—from using or sharing the land to owning or colonizing it.

This count was informed by an idea presented in Donald's class that "Canada wouldn't make a treaty with itself," (D. Donald, personal communication, May 17, 2018) as treaties are made between sovereign nations. This concept seemed to disrupt the class, calling into question normative understandings of nation and nationhood. I recall how some students struggled with the notion that some Indigenous Peoples in Canada might not consider themselves Canadian. I used the maple leaf to intentionally mark settlers as Canadian. Visually labeling the Canadian hand and not labeling the Indigenous hand points to how for the colonized, one's being is defined through the lens of the colonized (Fanon, 1963/1968).

The reference to the land highlights perceptions of what was bargained for through the symbol of the thumb and forefinger, which was used to measure a half a foot—what was needed to grow crops (McLeod, 1999). Referencing Nimosom (his grandfather), McLeod (1999, p. 77) highlights how the *nêhiyawak* understood what was bargained for in relation to Treaty 6:

Settlers who moving westward would use the land only to make a living with. The depth of the ground [settlers] may use would be determined by how far down a plough went, the rest would always belong to the Indian. The white man had promised he would only use as much land as was needed for tilling. Why then was he digging further? (McLeod, 1975, p. 6).

This pattern of digging further—despite promising otherwise—points to the logic of colonialism that erodes the original intention of the treaties, ultimately privileging a dominant story of a Canadian nation and nationality (Donald, 2009; 2012). The opportunity to learn and reflect on the *nêhiyawak* understanding of land lent for tilling—in juxtaposition with settler land exploitation—in one example of re-storying Indigenous-Canadian Relations.

## **Outlining the Work**

I unfold this work in seven subsequent sections. In Section 1, I locate my settler self and describe my identity in relation to educational contexts. In Section 2, I describe how I arrived at winter count making and how I relate with the tradition. In Section 3, I briefly outline my experience of adapting winter count pedagogy in classroom contexts. This leads to a discussion on the concept of ethical space in Section 4. In Section 5, I describe two sensibilities brought into relation—Indigenous *métissage* (Donald, 2009, 2012) and activism (Asante, 2008; Robinson [Obol], 2015) to theorize pedagogical possibilities for re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations through what I call *artist métissage*. In Section 6, I turn to a discussion on treaty aesthetics to elucidate this. Finally, in Section 7 I share a set of reflections from my winter count experiences in educational contexts as entry points for those interested in thoughtfully engaging with the tradition.

## ***Locating Myself Within an Emergent Pedagogical Trajectory***

Before proceeding, it is necessary to introduce myself as a settler in Canada. I am from *amiskwacîwâskahikan*, otherwise known as Edmonton, in Treaty 6 territory, with strong maternal roots in and around Assiniboia, Treaty 4 territory. I have French, Scottish, and British ancestry. I have red hair, blue eyes, and freckled skin. I have worked to recover my Franco-Saskatchewanian roots through connections with relatives and by seeking out francophone communities wherever

I reside. My desire to reclaim my francophone identity led me to encounter many different people, cultures, and languages in Canada and around the world, which has expanded my worldview and honed my appreciation of and desire for intercultural experiences. Living in communities in Senegal and Mali introduced me to more communal ways of being, profoundly impacting both my personal and vocational trajectories, which led me to Uganda, where I engaged in artistic projects with communities throughout both of my graduate degrees.

Working to understand my place in what is now called Canada, I have been on a journey to locate an educational research paradigm (Mertens et al., 2013; Wilson, 2008) that attends to the complex difficulties of Indigenous-Canadian relations while framing them as shared educational concerns and responsibilities. This journey—in the various places where I learn and teach—has unraveled a trajectory centred on the possibility of re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations through pedagogical encounters with Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. The seeds for this trajectory were sewn around 2015 as I transitioned from graduate student life to navigating a mobile and precarious career as an emerging scholar in Canada. 2015, the year I defended my PhD dissertation on activism (Robinson [Obol], 2015), coincided with the release of the *Final Report* of the TRC, and nationwide raising of the question what does it mean to be “Treaty People”? Paying attention to the changing landscape of Indigenous-Canadian relations in Canada obligated me to find new avenues for the activism I had been honing with activists in Uganda. For me, this meant transitioning from grappling with (de)colonization somewhere far away to shifting my attention to settler colonialism back home and the personal question of what does it mean for me to be a Treaty Person?

One of my steps toward beginning to answer this question was to seek mentorship from Papaschase Cree scholar and knowledge keeper Dr. Dwayne Donald, who had been a member of my doctoral committee in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. In spring of 2018, I took Dwayne’s undergraduate/graduate course Indigenous Perspectives in Curriculum. As an ongoing component of the course, Dwayne introduced winter counting making, which offered a tangible yet open-ended framework for making sense of the teachings shared in class. In the next section I describe the winter count tradition, Dwayne’s winter count assignment, and how this approach helped set into motion my commitment to learning how to act as a Treaty Person.

After drafting this paper, I followed up with Dwayne to ask for his blessing to share about my winter count journey stemming from his course teachings. He reminded me that he did not invent winter counts and encouraged me to centre my writing on the winter count tradition itself (D. Donald, personal communication, July 27, 2020). As such, I am striving to honour the teachings that Dwayne introduced me to, while paying attention to the expansiveness of all the relations that have come together to support the winter count tradition’s way of working on me and my relations.

### ***Arriving at Winter Count Making***

The tradition of making winter counts is a form of visual literacy that was widely practiced by Indigenous Peoples living on the Prairies including the Lakota (Sioux), Blackfoot, Kiowa, and Mandan Nations (Therrell & Trotter, 2011; see Figure 4). This approach to storytelling was a symbolic way to recall significant events that took place in the lives of the people. Symbols descriptive of events were drawn and painted on buffalo robes by community members skilled to do so (D. Donald, personal communication, May 7, 2018). Winter count makers recorded significant events that happened “in the previous trip around the sun,” usually in a spiral moving



Figure 4

*Lone Dog's Winter Count (Mallery, 1894).*



outward from the centre. A winter count robe “could have 70 to 80 years of memory” (Donald cited in Dubois, n.d., para. 35). Although recording events on buffalo robes and sharing stories about them is largely a tradition of the past, it is important to note that many aspects of the practice are carried on by Indigenous Peoples in the present. For example, the use of symbols, such as in beadwork or through powerful imagery in annual pow wows, support the passing down of histories from one generation to the next, much like winter counts did traditionally (Fiddler, 2021).

Dwayne introduced the winter count tradition in his 2018 spring session course as a practical assignment adapted for the contemporary context of curriculum studies. In the course we were invited to create winter counts on paper over the course of the three-week term, rather than over months or years. The assignment asked us to create a series of symbols, along with short written descriptions, for each day in class based on a resonant teaching or experience. The final task was to bring all the symbols together as a unified story or composition to express the significance of our learning in the course. My drawings shared throughout this paper are from the set of 12 counts that came together as my *Winter Count Storywork* during the course (see Figure 5).

A video interview featuring Donald titled *Beyond a Pedagogy of the Fort* showed some of the ways that four students in an earlier version of the course interpreted his assignment in thoughtful and meaningful ways through collage, ink work, drawings, and even melodies. These students together with Donald discuss how winter count pedagogy supports ecologies of understanding by holding multiple stories together and “getting away from the either/or thinking” through a circular process of visualizing, thinking, moving, and seeing over and over (Government of Alberta, n.d. 13:41–13:45).

Figure 5

*Winter Count Storywork (Leslie Obol in EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 23, 2018).*



### ***Re-Imagining Winter Count Making in New Contexts***

After experiencing the opportunity to create winter counts in the context of Dwayne’s course, I began to wonder what it might look like for me to continue the practice as an educator learning with students in other contexts. I first began to re-imagine winter count making related to teaching opportunities in design studies, at MacEwan University in amiskwacîwâskahikan in the winter of 2019. To do this, I sought permission from Dwayne to adapt his winter count assignment to share with my own students, in my own way, from my own settler perspective. My intention was never to teach the same content as one might find in Dwayne’s course, or in any other Indigenous perspectives course, but rather to engage the winter count assignment as a framework for approaching various course themes through a commitment to re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations. I adapted and explored the winter count assignment from a curriculum and pedagogical standpoint with support from the late Roxanne Tootoosis, Indigenous Knowledge Keeper, and the team at kihêw waciston (MacEwan’s Indigenous Centre) to facilitate the

involvement of Indigenous knowledge holders. The resulting winter count assignments, as well as student and community feedback, were generally positive, encouraging me to continue exploring winter count pedagogy.

The next phase began in the fall of 2019 when I taught a design course at Mount Saint Vincent University in the Department of Communication Studies. In this phase, I sought to learn ways to adapt the pedagogy to this new context in Mi'kmaq Territory. This began with conversations with the Mount's Aboriginal Advisor to the President, Patrick Small Legs-Nagge, and was formalized through an internal research grant and ethics approval for the study *Circles and Symbols: Co-Creating Curriculum for Re-Storying Indigenous Canadian Relations*. Although preliminary data for this study was collected in winter 2020 from participants in my Communication Design course, I did not complete the study due to constraints brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. I taught another version of the winter count assignment in an online graduate student course titled *Multiculturalism in Education* in summer 2020 at Mount Saint Vincent University. In fall 2021, I adapted the winter count assignment for two sections of the course *Philosophical Foundations of Education* with pre-service elementary education teachers at Mount Saint Vincent University and for the course *Intercultural Communication and Design* at NSCAD University. I write this paper with an eye to these contexts and the possibilities they presented. With the exception of the one study mentioned above, I did not obtain research ethics for these contexts, thus I can not share examples of student work and instead focus on my own winter counts.

Drawing on some of the ways the winter count assignment has worked on me and moved with me across territories, disciplines, faculties, and classrooms, I reflect on the foundational role of ethical spaces in the next section.

### ***Cultivating Ethical Spaces***

By relating my experiences learning about and through winter count making—by writing this paper and incorporating winter count making into curriculum—I am taking risks, putting personal thoughts and reflections “out there,” and attesting to the importance of opening up to a new approach of learning together (hooks, 2010). Modeling a practice of winter count making—or at the very least trying it out with students—demonstrates a willingness to be vulnerable. This is important because if we as educators ask students to take risks, then we should too (hooks, 2010). When I introduced the tradition of winter count making, along with my own practice of it, I made it clear that I did so from the perspective of a learner and a settler. I framed it as a way of taking up my responsibility to engage in education for Truth and Reconciliation. I explained that I was not attempting to teach Indigenous knowledge or history, but rather highlight and cautiously pass along a learned reflective process for grappling with the difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998, 2003) that underpins Indigenous-Canadian relations of both the past and present.

The concept of *ethical spaces*—entering into relations with Indigenous knowledges and knowledge holders as learners (Donald, 2009; Ermine, 2007)—offers a point of departure for the pedagogical possibilities of winter count making in contemporary educational contexts. This concept is especially helpful for settler-educators positioning ourselves to engage in education for Truth and Reconciliation because it necessitates listening to Indigenous perspectives and recognizing our complacency in ongoing colonialism (Manuel et al., 2015).

Ethical spaces of this nature are guided by the holistic *nêhiyawak* (Cree) concepts of *miyo wicihitowin* and *miyo wahkohtowin*, which I was introduced to by Dwayne. *miyo wicihitowin* or

“having or possessing good relations” (Cardinal & Hilderbrant, 2000, p. 15) supports the flow of life-giving energy as people face each other as fellow human beings in respectful relationship (Donald, 2016).

I drew *Winter Count: Planting the Seeds/Lighting the Fire* (see Figure 1) with this concept in heart/mind/body/spirit (Archibald, 2008). For me, learning while facing one another in a circular space guided by miyo wicihitowin opened up new inter-connected beginnings and becomings. Although I did not know it right away, this planted a desire to find ways to engage with future students in my own classrooms, facing each other in the spirit of kinship.

The related concept of miyo wahkohtowin understands that we are all entangled and enmeshed in a series of sacred relationships. These kinship relations teach us to expand our relational network in four directions to include the more-than-human beings with whom we live among (D. Donald, 2016; personal communication, May 16, 2018). This concept supports the cultivation of ethical spaces for winter count pedagogy because it encourages us to engage our imaginations by being receptive to Indigenous teachings.

The image for *Winter Count: The Ground Squirrel’s Teaching* came to me from an experience on the land at a sacred site where our class sat together on the grass for a pipe ceremony with Elder Bob Cardinal near Viking, Alberta (see Figure 6). It represents a series of interconnected moments that day where a single ground squirrel quickly moved into, around, about, and out of our circle—pausing at four intervals—modeling paying attention in all four directions. Returning to class the following day, I noticed that many other students also seemed to be captivated by the ground squirrel’s agility as they too created counts related to this moment. I sense that it is this kind of attentiveness to the more-than-human—inclusive of all four physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental aspects of co-existence—that supports us to develop our own learning spirits (Battiste, 2009) that are unique, yet connected. Paying attention to how we are entangled supports the creation of ethical space, and in turn, invites us to imagine in all directions. Imagination in this sense moves away from dominant conceptions that tend to understand it as a quality of mind and an individualistic pursuit, often presumed to require artistic “talent.” Here, it is understood as openness to embracing all that is offered by the ways of “being” of Turtle Island where “imagination becomes the spiritual medium of those powers that engage humans without humans being the prime movers of the act” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 370).

Figure 6

*Winter Count: The Ground Squirrel’s Teaching*



*Note.* This count represents unflinching attentiveness to sacred protocol through a disposition of paying attention in all four directions (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 11, 2018).

Taken together, this understanding of spatial imagination—informed and formed by miyo wicihitowin and miyo wahkohtowin—can guide winter count making in holistic ways: one draws upon teachings and experiences shared (spiritually/emotionally) while moving toward drawing out their significance (physically/mentally). *Winter Count: The Ground Squirrel's Teaching* speaks to how my understanding of imagination shifted from something that comes from within me to something that communicates with me when I am attuned and receptive (See Figure 6). In this way, “the encounter with imagination is a living communication within a sentient landscape” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 369) that allows us to expand not only our relational network, but our abilities to imagine and act with the teachings so their powers can continue (Archibald, 2008).

### ***Theorizing Artist Métissage***

In this section I theorize pedagogical possibilities for re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations through what I call artist métissage. *Indigenous métissage* is a “curriculum sensibility” and research praxis that supports decolonizing processes by understanding pedagogy as inter-relational (Donald, 2009). It focuses on decolonizing Indigenous-Canadian relations through a commitment to ethical relationality “that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other” (Donald, 2012, p. 535).

Métissage itself is not an Indigenous concept. The word métissage has roots in the Latin *mixticius*, referring to the weaving of fibres (Mish, 1990). Métissage, in the Canadian context, has emerged as an artful practice and pedagogical strategy premised on the mixing and coming together of differences across boundaries including race, culture, class, gender, place, and language (Chambers et al., 2008). Métissage of this kind seeks to support mutuality by engaging the “messy threads of relatedness and belonging” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 1) by paying attention to others’ stories with an eye to the histories and mythologies of the places we live. Métissage has been explored as a kind of critical pedagogical practice and as a research framework and praxis that works to offer counternarratives (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009).

The Indigenous métissage that I have been drawn to, primarily through Dwayne’s teachings, builds on this métissage tradition, through which Dwayne himself was mentored, especially through the guidance of Chambers (D. Donald, personal communication, April 25, 2020). I align my work with Indigenous métissage because of its “foundational premise of having unique Indigenous and non-Indigenous qualities ... while honouring the strength and resilience of Indigenous cultures and realities” (Burke & Robinson, 2019, p. 156), but I also look to métissage for methodological and theoretical insights.

Indigenous métissage centres the juxtaposition of dominant historical perspectives (often taken for granted), with Indigenous perspectives (often hidden or silenced) by encouraging the entwining of larger narratives about nation and nationality with personal and family stories. By placing contradicting narratives side by side in relation to both past and present patterns of colonization it resists the choosing of sides (and masking or hiding of the unchosen side) by instead centring incongruities in relationships across differences so that complex and layered stories can unfold (Donald, 2004; 2009).

Taken together, I am drawn to the métissage tradition because it resists “the fear of mixing, and the desire for a pure untainted space, language, or form of research” and because as “a writing praxis [it] enables researchers and their audiences to imagine and create plural selves and

Figure 7

*Winter Count: Un-Storying to Re-Story*



*Note.* This count draws on the notions of unlearning and relearning, or braiding, through Indigenous *métissage*. It depicts a kind of double consciousness that seeks to understand the multiple “truths” of both past and present colonization while looking to create a new story of peaceful and respectful co-existence (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 10, 2018).

communities that thrive on ambiguity and multiplicity” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 142). Through an active commitment to paying attention it supports the unfolding of new understandings by attempting to interpret insights gained in relational ways by drawing out meaning through a commitment to creative language and expression (Atleo, 2008). As such, it allows for emergence of overlaps and intersections as the inquiry process unfolds, opening up possibilities for becoming in and through relationships.

*Artivism* is embodied art that acts in the struggle against all forms of oppression. It is epitomized by artist/activists working—in any media necessary—at the interstices of creative expression, social/political change and personal/community empowerment (Asante, 2008; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008; Robinson [Obol], 2015). Artivism is more of an ideological orientation than a strict methodology; it soaks up new insights and engages new processes in each and every encounter. It is contingent on the specific circumstances that call it into action; artivism is mobile, always adapting, always becoming. Artivism confronts colonizing tendencies through an ethical commitment to making visible the invisible through emphasis on creative reflection and artistic action that serves to intervene in shared circumstances of oppression. Opening up new forms of relationality is an underlying motivation of artivism. As such, artivism supports a pedagogy of solidarity by working to “reveal new horizons, against which we might not only imagine, but also produce new ways of being together” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 58) that support creative expression that is inclusive and responsive to the circumstances that call it into action.

Artivism lends itself well to broad educational contexts because it un-stories art as something restricted to professionals or so-called artist geniuses, opening up art making to anyone. It re-stories art as an entry point to meaning making through critical and relational consciousness (Robinson [Obol], 2015).

Although I drew this count with Indigenous *métissage* in mind I can also see within it artivism’s ability to take two sets of notes (Asante, 2008, pp. 192–193; See Figure 7). For me, the synergy of these two approaches in solidarity invites learning from and with Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing in a subjective and embodied way informed by an artful and interventionist stance. This relationship is tied to an ecological understanding of imagination as

inclusive and interconnected with human and more than human relations. Artist *métissage* is like the braiding of braids in *Winter Count: Un-Storying to Re-Story* (see Figure 7). I conceptualize it as the bringing together of two different already mixed methods, through an affinity for unlearning and relearning through making. The fusion is akin to what Sandoval called a differential mode of consciousness that engages and transforms subjectivity, “deploying an action that re-creates the agent even as the agent is creating the action—in an ongoing, chiasmic loop of transformation” (2000, p. 157). Through artist *métissage* pedagogical possibilities for re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations open up. The task of creating symbols based on resonant teachings/experiences grounds the pedagogy in a sustained pattern of reflection and action. The opportunity to engage imagination liberates us from knowledge as fixed or finite as a new curricular imaginary with the potential for transformation arises.

### ***Turning to Treaty Aesthetics***

To elucidate the kind of relational consciousness that artist *métissage* might unfold, I point to three winter counts that speak to re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations by learning from Treaties. As I began to learn in Dwayne’s class, a pedagogical sensibility informed by the Treaties requires engaging with them as more than original paperwork documenting 19<sup>th</sup> century business deals. Honing a treaty sensibility means shifting away from learning about treaties to learning from them by allowing for more complex and interreferential understandings of the relationalities at work and the consequent lived realities of all of us Treaty People (D. Donald, personal communication, May 17, 2018). This “requires engagement with the holistic and ethical philosophies that inform how First Nations peoples remember the Treaties as sacred covenants through which newcomers were adopted as relatives” (Donald, 2014, as cited in Solvey, 2018, p. 146).

This treaty sensibility supports moving beyond the confines of Treaties as informational documents to engaging with them as living and dynamic entities. Aligned with the notion of treaty sensibilities, and specific to the parameters and possibilities of winter count making, I propose treaty aesthetics as an imaginative orientation toward confronting and traversing normative and

Figure 8

*Winter Count: Treating Treaties as Living and Layered*



*Note.* This count points to the layered and complex nature of treaty processes, implications, and manifestations with subtle reference to the earth, sun, grass, and rivers. (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 16, 2018).

fixed conceptions of Treaties created and controlled by colonial logic. Emphasis on aesthetics makes explicit the goal of liberating sensing and sensibilities by emphasizing *aesthesis*, or the pre-reflective awareness of sensation, closely related to perception (Lockward et al., 2011). The opportunity to think and act differently through winter count making introduces ambiguity, allowing for the construction of new meanings and understandings of previously held assumptions.

*Winter Count: Treating Treaties as Living and Layered* can serve as an entry point for imagining treaty aesthetics (see Figure 8). The creation of this count was informed by the notion of *pentimento* as articulated by Donald (2012) as a way of rereading history.

Predicated on the desire to recover the stories and memories that have been “painted over”. *Pentimento* implies a desire to peel back the layers that have obscured an artifact or a memory as a way to intimately examine those layers. The idea of *pentimento* operates on the acknowledgement that each layer mixes with the others and renders irreversible influences on our perceptions of it. (pp. 543–544)

This count represents this effort to peel back, in order to see what is concealed, and then learn from what is revealed. With three enmeshed layers it shows Indigenous-Canadian relations through attentiveness to an ethic of historical consciousness that understands that the “past occurs simultaneously in the present and influences how we conceptualize the future” (Donald, 2009, p. 7). Here the past is marked by reference to the emblematic Treaty medal (see Figure 9) and the “signing” of the Treaties through emphasis on the human-to-human “agreement.” Moving outward from the emblematic human-to-human handshake, reference is made to what was bargained for—farming the land to the depth of a plough—through planted seedlings. This tilling

Figure 9

*Indian Chiefs Medal*



*Note.* Medals like this one were presented in the name of Queen Victoria to commemorate Treaties 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 (Library and Archives Canada, n.d.).



Figure 10

*Winter Count: In the Spirit of Mistahi Maskwa*



*Note.* This count takes up the legacy of Mistahi Maskwa’s (Big Bear) resistance to signing the treaties by attending to metaphor, story, and ultimately Indigenous resistance. “Upstreaming” dominant conceptions of treaty negotiations as fixed and fair opens up possibilities for learning from the treaties in relation, and in all four directions. (Leslie Obol in *EDSE 409: Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy*, D. Donald, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, May 16, 2018).

of the land is a metaphor for differential, even incommensurable, perceptions and manifestations of the original agreement. Together these two layers work to suggest the “repeating pattern of connect and disconnect, of engagement and disengagement, of union and rupture” (Ermine, 2007, p. 196) that has characterized Indigenous-Canadian relations. Finally, the outer layer of entwined, contrasting and incongruent worldviews represents the “schism” in understanding, or the “undercurrent” of present day Indigenous–Canadian relations stemming from e-mayikamikahk (where it went wrong). This refers to the horrific events of the 1885 Northwest Resistance (Donald, 2004; McLeod, 1999).

Unlike other counts in this series, the outer layer is not fixed as an enclosed circle, but rather open and expansive to suggest that the future (i.e., reconciliation/self-determination) is contingent on recognizing and addressing the colonial patterns of past and present. Physically putting pen to paper to draw out ideas and relations supports the difficult task of working out or contending with contrasting points of view.

This question of why then was he digging further—or otherwise taking more and more and more and more—arises again and again and again and again as settler colonialism’s pattern of union and rupture continues through a “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 387) that manifests through access to territory. We can look to *Winter Count: In the Spirit of Mistahi Maskwa* for a visual interpretation of Indigenous resistance responding to this pattern of repeating schisms in (mis)understanding of what was bargained for (see Figure 10). This count references the legacy of Mistahi Maskwa, as described from the nêhiyawak perspective of Neal McLeod (1999), to learn from Big Bear’s resistance to signing the treaties.

The Numbered Treaties in western Canada were agreements made between the nêhiyawak (Cree), Anishinabêk (Saulteaux), and Nakota in the 1870s with the intention of guiding people to live together peacefully sharing the land’s resources “as long as the grass grows, and as long as the sun walks” (nêhiyawak memory of *Nisga’a Final Agreement*, cited in McLeod, 1999, p. 72). Although many chiefs accepted the terms of the Treaties, some rejected them. Mistahi Maskwa, or Big Bear, was among them. He sought better terms for the nêhiyawak by resisting the Crown

for the longest but was eventually forced to sign Treaty 6 in 1876. He then fought to renegotiate it, and eventually was imprisoned for his ongoing resistance (McLeod, 1999).

Re-thinking Treaties from a perspective aligned with the resistance exhibited by Mistahi Maskwa (as could a rethinking from the resistance shown by Chief Poundmaker or Chief One Arrow for example) can help discern how different worldviews need to be held together to come closer to a fuller understanding of treaty negotiations. Through the example of Mistahi Maskwa, McLeod (1999) discussed at length the need to look far beyond the historical “signing” of the Treaties to understand relations between the British and the nêhiyawak by incorporating oral understandings, including references to symbols and metaphors:

While Mistahi Maskwa was eventually put in prison, while the buffalo were almost completely annihilated, and the pain of the residential schools is still very much alive, the subordination of Nêhiyawak was never complete. It is through the resistance of people such as Mistahi Maskwa ... that the fully story of Treaty Six, and the moral foundations of Canada come to light and need to be rethought. (p. 85)

McLeod’s (1999) account guides us to rethink Treaty 6 by interrogating the act of signing itself, drawing attention to how many of the treaties were signed with Xs, possibly by Indians that had never held a pen before, or even by clerks on their behalf. In addition, McLeod pointed out the need to think of the existence of Treaties as more than “entities,” by shifting the focus to the circumstances around them. He also emphasized how in the nêhiyawak “oral mode of consciousness” (p. 72) agreements were “signed” through ceremony with reference to the earth, sun, grass, and rivers. Beyond a re-examination of the treaties, McLeod’s re-telling of Mistahi Maskwa’s resistance, offers the metaphor of upstreaming as the condition for any movement through, around, above, or beyond the relentless forces of settler colonialism.

### ***Considerations for Winter Count Making in Educational Contexts***

In this final section I offer reflections on my experiences working to overcome barriers and challenges of incorporating the winter count tradition into curricula from a settler perspective. This list is not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive.

- **Being mindful to work closely with local Indigenous knowledge holders and follow appropriate protocols.** This was essential in every phase and iteration of my engagement with the winter count tradition. Before adapting Dwayne Donald’s winter count assignment for my own courses, I first sought permission and guidance from him on how to do so. Then, in each context where I taught courses including a winter count assignment, I engaged with local Indigenous knowledge holders to identify relevant and relational ways to support the various learning objectives, always with an eye to re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations. Indigenous community members and knowledge holders invited to class were offered compensation for their contributions and offered appropriate protocol.
- **Accepting that winter count making is upstreaming kind of work.** In my experience, incorporating Indigenous knowledges into coursework in relation to winter count making is challenging and risky. It goes against conventional and dominant discipline-focused educational practices that represent “knowledge as a thing already made” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 29). Based on having participated in one winter count assignment as a student and six sets of subsequent assignments as an instructor, I have experienced various

levels of resistance to the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and/or artistic ways of knowing. Resistance seemed to vary depending on the extent to which the assignment (mis)aligned with students' expectations of the course. The assignment was perceived by some students as an add-on, out of place, or otherwise unnecessary to the course. Although I have found that such responses can largely be overcome, being prepared to navigate turbulent waters, especially at the onset of the course, helped me to stay on course. For me the risk of introducing the winter count way was worth it: "Through the introduction of ambiguity, we can go beyond the narrow confines of content to the broader exploration of ideas and problems, opening up the curriculum and the world for students" (Ragoonaden, et al., 2020, p. 41).

- **Articulating expectations around "art" making.** In my experience it was very important to communicate to students what is meant by art-making and related expectations. Depending on the nature of the course, my expectations varied, but overall placing emphasis on exploration, reflection and imagination, over artistic merit seemed to reduce student anxiety about the artistic component, especially in courses that are not design or art focused. Further, it was important to emphasize the role of reflection and clearly and succinctly describing symbols in writing. Taken together, through examining symbols and reading interpretations, I sought to understand what each student was thinking/feeling for each symbol. Finally, it was imperative to stress the importance of attending to the process regularly as we moved through the course, through active and timely note-taking and sketching, as creating symbols based on experiences retroactively can be very difficult, and even superficial.
- **Supporting the circular process.** I found that having this assignment span over an entire course was key. This practice served to support ongoing reflection and the development and/or transformation of understandings. Incorporating peer and/or community feedback into the process through regular sharing was also an effective way to support the learning process. I encouraged students to arrive at a system or approach within the first few symbols, such as watercolour, ink, collage, or sharpie, so that they could eventually arrive at the final outcome of the assignment, a compilation of resonant teachings through a unified story or composition.
- **Emphasizing we are learning together.** I always approached teaching winter count assignments as someone who is continuously learning about Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing from a settler perspective. I typically began each course with a land acknowledgement and a discussion about why we do them, then invited students to practice land acknowledgements throughout the course in relation to class presentations. When there was an opportunity to have an Indigenous guest, I also invited students to participate in appropriate protocols.
- **Engaging talking circles.** A key component of this assignment was the talking circle. Early in the course I taught students about circles, exploring with students how circles are symbols themselves, representing equality, unity, and continuity. We often engaged talking circles, or virtual circles in online settings, throughout the course as appropriate.
- **Emphasizing how winter count making supports new ways of seeing.** I found it important to stress that the winter count tradition is available not only for Indigenous content, but for many topics and possibilities. Although the content for at least the first

winter count was based on some form of Indigenous content, the assignment can be effectively used to reflect on and visualize class discussions and experiences based on other topics. Emphasizing this is important not only because it presents the assignment as an opportunity to engage an alternative way of seeing, it also emphasizes how Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing are interconnected with so many other aspects of life and living.

- **Modeling receptivity to learning in new ways.** Having done winter counts myself has positioned me to show students my own process and vulnerabilities. In the same way that my own reflection on the question of what it means to be a Treaty Person has better positioned me to ask students to do the same, making and sharing my winter counts with students helped to not only provide examples, it emphasized the relational emphasis of this kind of storywork.

### Conclusion

As an educator I understand that it is my responsibility to respond more adequately to what it means to be a guest on Indigenous land. Intellectually, I know that being a Treaty Person means inhabiting the Treaties as an ongoing commitment to restoring or establishing ethical relations through forms of mutuality and reciprocity understood as between peoples (Mackey, 2016; Manuel & Derrickson, 2015). I have sought to embody this knowledge—in the particular places I learn and teach—so that I can act upon the obligations that come with it while encouraging others to do the same, in their own ways. The circular process of winter count making has offered a tangible yet open-ended way for making sense of teachings offered and eventually putting them into motion in new contexts. This has involved creating and refining interpretive tools that support a rewriting and righing (Smith, 1999) of who we Treaty Peoples are, “what we know, and where we want to go, all the while remaining cognizant of an important truism: there will be no single answer to these questions” (Chambers, 1999, p. 146).

Moving between symbols and written reflections, I have traced and worked through moments of becoming that mark the manifestation of a mode of differential consciousness (Sandoval, 2000) informed by the concepts of *miyo wicihitowin* and *miyo wahkohtowin* and attuned to the call to honour the spirit and intent of the Treaties. This emergent artist *métissage* draws out an iterative process of learning with and through winter counts, which I hope might offer pedagogical possibilities for educators committed to re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations. From a place of imagination, I hope this emergent artist *métissage* offers an example of developing an ethical research sensibility informed by artistic and Indigenous ways of knowing through creative, critical, collaborative, and contextualized engagement attuned to the goal of re-storying Indigenous-Canadian relations. I often revisit the hundreds of student winter counts that have been shared with me, and have worked on me. I am grateful for the knowledges imparted to me through all those whom have knowingly, or not, supporting this journey taking initial steps to share and teach about the potential of winter count making and its deep tradition.

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