

Storytelling and Trauma: Reflections on “Now I See It,” a digital storytelling project and exhibition in collaboration with the Native Women’s Shelter of Montreal

Récits et traumatismes : réflexions sur « Now I See It », un projet de récits numériques et une exposition en collaboration avec le foyer pour femmes autochtones de Montréal

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Article abstract

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STORYTELLING AND TRAUMA: REFLECTIONS ON “NOW I SEE IT,” A DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT AND EXHIBITION IN COLLABORATION WITH THE NATIVE WOMEN’S SHELTER OF MONTREAL

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ABSTRACT. Storytelling is a way of dealing with trauma. For many of those who have experienced trauma, sharing one’s own experiences, in the form of a personal narrative, can help to develop new meaning on past events. *Now I See It* was a storytelling project that resulted in a collection of photographs taken by members of the urban Aboriginal community of Montreal. The project was run through the Native Women’s Shelter of Montreal in 2014 and exhibited in the educational department of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. *Now I See It* was a way of creating an “internal map” because trauma is so painfully hard to see and the experience is so different for each individual.

RÉCITS ET TRAUMATISMES : RÉFLECTIONS SUR « NOW I SEE IT », UN PROJET DE RÉCITS NUMÉRIQUES ET UNE EXPOSITION EN COLLABORATION AVEC LE FOYER POUR FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DE MONTRÉAL

RÉSUMÉ. Le récit numérique est un moyen de surmonter les traumatismes. Partager ses expériences traumatisantes en en faisant le récit constitue pour plusieurs personnes ayant vécu un traumatisme une façon de donner un nouveau sens aux événements passés. *Now I See It* est un projet de récits numériques avec comme résultante une collection de photographies prises par les membres de la communauté urbaine et autochtone montréalaise. Ce projet a été piloté par le Foyer pour femmes autochtones de Montréal en 2014 et présenté au département de l’éducation du Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. *Now I See It* est une manière d’élaborer la « carte interne » de traumatismes très douloureux à comprendre et dont l’expérience est différente pour chaque individu.

STORYTELLING AND TRAUMA

When I was numb, I had so much fear. I felt a great loss of all the ways that I did not participate in life. But, then I learned that fears are meaningful.

Storytelling is a way of dealing with trauma. For many of those who have experienced trauma, sharing one’s own experiences in the form of a personal narrative can help to develop new meaning on past events.

In the dominant historical narrative, Aboriginal peoples were removed from the Canadian landscape, and Canada is portrayed as an empty land with a “disappearing Indian” population (Smith, 2005). For many Aboriginal people in Canada, trauma is often transmitted intergenerationally and rooted in the residential school experience, dispossession of land and way of life, as well as in decades of abuse in the youth protection and prison systems, among many other forms of persistent colonialism (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). These diverse and multiple forms of persistent colonialism have been, and continue to be, present in the lives and stories of First Nations women. Native author Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux (2009) wrote that

for generations, First Nations women’s voices were silenced in historical narratives that sidestepped their influence and power [...] First Nations women are beginning to understand that many of the social problems they deal with everyday have roots in the extensive historical trauma that was experienced, but never properly voiced out and represented. (p. 20)

By re-telling one’s own stories — that is by using different kinds of imagery and exploring alternative ways of interpreting one’s reality — storytelling can provide a sense of hope, belonging, and meaning for people in light of traumatic experiences (White & Epston, 1990). In Rita Joe’s (1989) poem about surviving residential school and her loss of native language as a child, she wrote, “I lost my talk, the talk you took away,” and later, “let me find my talk so I can teach you about me.” The *Now I See It* project was one such effort to explore the relationship between personal narratives and trauma using storytelling and digital photography to re-tell and re-imagine individual experiences. Quotes from one of the project participants and co-authors, Carole-Lynn Byington, are woven throughout, appearing in italics.

THE “NOW I SEE IT” PROJECT

Now I See It was a storytelling project that resulted in a collection of photographs taken by members of the urban Aboriginal community of Montreal. The project, run through the Addictions Program of the Native Women’s Shelter of Montreal (NWSM) lasted from January 2014 to October 2014, and consisted of weekly photography and writing workshops. The end result was a series of photographs taken by the participants that were exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts through their *Sharing the Museum* Program. There were eight participants who all self-identified as Aboriginal women; however, one participant discontinued with the project, as she lost contact with facilitators.

The first step in the project was distributing donated digital cameras to the participants, which the participants kept throughout the entire process, though some chose to use their cellphones or tablets. The participants were encouraged to photograph the people, places, and things that were special to them in Montreal and share them during the workshops. Several initial workshops were led by Odile Boucher, a local photographer and volunteer at the NWSM,

in order to introduce the medium of digital photography, including composition, framing, lighting, and portraiture. Other workshops focused on writing, photographic critique, and different aspects of digital storytelling.

These weekly meetings also provided a space for critical discussions surrounding the photographs of the participants as they would often take pictures on their own throughout the week and then share their photos at the group meetings or one-on-one with facilitators. Often, the photos taken would be of a particular place or person in the city that was extremely meaningful to the participants. By sharing the pictures with the group, and by telling the stories related to a series of images, participants began to develop personal narratives on their lives in the city.

As participants became more confident in their work, they took turns leading the group in walking tours of the city. Having spent time living on the street and in shelters, many of the participants had an intimate sense of the geography of the city, and were excited to share meaningful places with other participants and facilitators. Many participants were very interested in construction sites as signs of changing landscapes and gentrification throughout the city. When showing a particular place or building, some participants connected this change to a longer history of colonization and their personal relationship to land ownership and development.

At the beginning, when I began writing about other peoples' photographs, I couldn't feel what they were feeling. I thought I had to put myself in their spot to see what they saw. But then I saw everything. I saw beams, a crane, and I watched the buildings grow in the photographs.

In the final stages of the project, the photographs showed a variety of different thematic similarities, most notably urban development and the intersections of internal and emotional, with external and physical, geographies. At the end, participants collectively decided to name the photographic series *Now I See It* as a reflection of the small moments and hard-to-notice changes they captured in the surrounding urban landscape.

THE PROJECT PHOTOGRAPHS

One participant, who came from a family of Mohawk iron-workers, took photographs of construction sites, documenting industrial machinery, and the beginnings of concrete and steel buildings. She explained:

I relate to construction and things getting built because my father was part of that and had his own construction company. When we were young we used to sit and watch them work on the family business. I know what they're doing and I can describe it in detail.

She then recounted how she learned the names of building parts, machinery, and the workings of structures growing up: “It's watching something get put

together. If you have a part missing it's not necessarily secure. It's a really strong way to communicate with people — learning how things are made.”



FIGURE 1. *Construction site*

For this participant, her fascination and intimate relationship with construction work was beautifully communicated through the photographs and the stories she shared. In showing the photographs to the group, she spoke at length about her own personal connection to construction as well as the Mohawk community. In taking the photos, this participant described her desire to challenge the viewer to be able to see the construction sites and buildings in the same way that she understood them, and in doing so, she often positioned herself in specific ways to take the photographs. At first glance, many of her pictures appear disorienting to the viewer because of the unorthodox placement of the structures within the photographic frame. It is only with closer study that one can begin to distinguish specific elements so as to see the whole picture. More

specifically, for one of her photographs, the participant described lying down on the ground to be able to capture a lamppost jutting across a space to touch another building. The overlapping of visual characters against the sky creates an unsettling dynamic within the photograph: one generating feelings of both tension and delicacy, since looking from another perspective would show how physically apart the building and the lamppost actually are.



FIGURE 2. *Lamppost and sky*

This same participant often spoke of having many loud and overlapping thoughts and of sometimes becoming lost in the city, even in familiar places. At times, her photographs also show this disjointed and chaotic mood that she described, but also a majestic order through the towering buildings, cranes, and organization of the large structures. She would walk for hours all over Montreal, looking for things and places to photograph. She stated:

The noise and the movement is what drew me to take pictures of construction. The noise level in the construction sites were the loudest in the city. It's the feeling of just beginning, the overwhelming feeling when they are just starting, closing the area, putting up signs, putting barriers so pedestrians can walk next to the site. When you go there just as they are starting, you feel overwhelming energy. There is excitement and happiness, as well as focus. It is a humongous thing they are going to do.

One afternoon, this participant's affinity for loudness brought her to walk to Montreal's Trudeau Airport. One photograph from this series shows the tail of a plane against a grey sky. Unsure if the plane is landing or taking off, the photograph captures both intense power and movement, but also stillness.

Perhaps this duality is something the participant understands as someone struggling to find a permanent home and internal peace in a busy city. When sharing these photographs with the other members of the project, she often spoke of temporality with regards to specific places: the small changes over time and the stillness that can accompany slow evolution. She said, “when you look at something, it’s not one space. There are many spaces in space. Even in a little picture the space is so big. For each person, space is different.”

Another participant took hundreds of photos of her family and friends, with a special focus on her baby, whom she adores. Having moved from Nunavut to Montreal, her photos show a tightknit and growing urban Inuit community.



FIGURE 3. *Baby*

When the photos were developed and given to her, she in turn gave them to her family members. She also proudly displayed some in the Native Friendship Center of Montreal, along with postcards advertising the project. While museum spaces have tended to impose anthropological views on Aboriginal peoples and cultures, this participant curated her own exhibition in a space that was familiar and used by the Aboriginal community. By transforming an informal community drop-in space into an ad-hoc gallery, the participant described how she had a growing sense of belonging to the space and to the city. Claiming this space as her own was a strong statement, demonstrating an assertion of her presence as a member of the urban Inuit community and also the strength of strong family bonds.

In my tradition, things are just lent to us. This means that we have to share everything. By taking pictures, you are sharing. Through each eye that sees, they see and feel different things.

Another participant who was approaching the end of her pregnancy at the time of the project took many close-up photographs of insects and flowers, noticing the tiniest details in her surroundings. This participant described how taking snapshots of everyday things in close detail, such as a grasshopper or the inside of an orange flower, helped her to focus on “new life” and the “beauty of small things.”

CREATING, DISCOVERING AND CONNECTING

In the project, I wrote poems about other people’s photography. When I started writing, I saw beauty – so much beauty – sometimes it could be haunting, because you are going into a space of imagination.

Gabor Maté (2008) in his book, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*, argued that effects of early trauma on the brain often influences an individual’s capacity to feel certain emotions, such as producing a reduction in some emotions, while also an increase in others, and that this can lead to substance addiction. Maté (2008) also argued that most people who have addictions and who are homeless have also experienced trauma or “great pain” in early life. While not all participants of the project had struggled with substance abuse, many of were formerly or currently homeless at the time of the project. Also, many of the participants self-identified as having experienced trauma in both childhood and adulthood. While this project was not clinical in nature, understanding how the participants made sense of their own experiences of trauma was important.

Through discussion between the project facilitators and participants, there was a general understanding of their traumatic experiences as engendering fear, emotional disassociation, and feelings of being unsafe in certain spaces. Some women described the physical sensations they felt as a result of their trauma, such as a “disconnection” from their bodies, a physical and mental distancing from their surroundings, and even panic when moving through the urban spaces around them. For those who have experienced trauma, being mindful of one’s surroundings can be very important (Maté, 2008). The hope was for this project to help cultivate the participants’ sense of belonging, connection and identification with urban surroundings, through using photograph and re-telling stories. Creating a voice through digital storytelling can help to re-envision experiences and relationships, which can be very important for survivors of trauma.

Furthermore, it was important for the project participants to address the relationship between their Aboriginal identity and the source of their trauma. As Wesley-Esquimaux (2009) wrote, “the metanarrative of the Western world

simply did not include the indigenous story of loss, impermanence, and socially debilitating marginalization.” For Aboriginal women, cultural, geographical, and personal loss were widespread, as were the silencing of their narratives and voices. Within the current Canadian context of the tragically rampant murder and erasure of Native women (Harper, 2009), the women participants assert their physical and cultural presence in Montreal through their photographs. In spite of their lived traumatic experiences and the many hardships they face, the photographs show happy family moments, the strengths of structures, the beauty of small things, and a knowledge and sense of belonging to the city.



FIGURE 4. Cranes

CONCLUSION: NOW I SEE IT

Traumatized people want security, a safe space. Every pain is a brick in a wall. We end up by closing ourselves in. We don't want people to come in and know our stories or spaces. When I was traumatized I made that wall so thick. Later, I started taking down those bricks to see some light. I had to make peace with each brick. Cameras and pictures and be a freedom for traumatized people. The camera is the eye; no one can take that away from them. It's their eyes and their views, that part belongs to them. When I was alone and lost I made myself my own little prison, an obscure space. But now my space is so big.

Lee Maracle (2010) wrote about stories and geographic knowledge creation in her work, *Stories are Internal Maps*. In this work, Maracle (2010) theorized that stories are maps of people's intimate experiences, just as land maps illustrate

the physical world. The title of *Now I See It*, chosen by the artists, fits with the theme of living with trauma and creating an “internal map” because trauma is so painfully hard to see and the experience is so different for each individual. Through digital storytelling the participants externalized their hidden internal emotional landscape, similarly to the scaffolding and beams in the construction site photographs — while scaffolding and wires will one day be covered with plaster and concrete, the same can be true with emotional pain. And, the deconstruction and rebuilding of this internalized world can be powerful, beautiful, and freeing.

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RACHEL DEUTSCH, MSW., MA., is a former Addictions Program Coordinator at the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal and facilitator of the project. She now works as the Cabot Square Project Manager for the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network on a strategy on Aboriginal homelessness in Montreal. She also does filmmaking on the side.

LEAH WOOLNER is an MSW student and former Residential Support worker at the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal and facilitator of the project. She currently is Vice-Chair of PINAY Quebec and is an independent artist.

CAROLE-LYNN BYINGTON is a project participant and spiritual guidance Elder. She spent a lot of her adult life in the Laurentians in Quebec. When she was younger, she lived in Winnipeg and Vancouver. She has provided counseling her whole adult life and has been an advisor to many.

RACHEL DEUTSCH MSW (maîtrise en travail social), MA (maîtrise ès arts) a été coordonnatrice du programme de toxicomanie au Foyer pour femmes autochtones de Montréal et animatrice pour le projet. Elle est actuellement chargée de projet pour le projet square Cabot, réalisé au sein du Réseau pour la stratégie urbaine de la communauté autochtone à Montréal et visant à développer une stratégie pour pallier au problème d'itinérance chez les autochtones de Montréal. Parallèlement, elle réalise des films.

LEAH WOOLNER étudie en travail social et a travaillé comme agente de soutien résidentiel au Foyer pour femmes autochtones de Montréal ainsi que comme animatrice pour le projet. Actuellement, elle est vice-présidente de l'Organisation des femmes philippines du Québec et artiste indépendante.

CAROLE-LYNN BYINGTON a participé au projet et est une aînée/guide spirituelle. Elle a vécu la majeure partie de sa vie adulte dans les Laurentides, au Québec. Plus jeune, elle a résidé à Winnipeg et Vancouver. Au cours de sa vie adulte, elle a prodigué des conseils et a guidé plusieurs personnes.