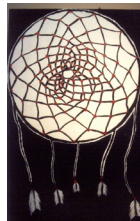




## Visual Essay

# Soaring Eagles: Indigenous Youth Speak Out!

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This visual essay captures images and text documenting a research project carried out with secondary students from the Soaring Eagles Indigenous Secondary Program located in the Niagara Region, Ontario, Canada. After exploring the Calls to Action put forward by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2012, students at Soaring Eagles engaged in art making as a method of reflection and meaning making as to how they, as Indigenous youth and their peers, understood the context and significance of these Calls, in 2017, the 150th year after Confederation, the year of the founding of the nation of Canada. The artworks included in this visual essay were featured in a public exhibition held at Rodman Hall Art Centre, Brock University, as part of the Child and Youth Engagement: Civic Literacies Digital Ecologies Symposium, held on Tuesday, October 10, 2017.

*We Are Not A Conquered People, Mixed Media (Mask Installation)*



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ISSN: 1911-4788



### Introduction

My people will sleep for 100 years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them back their spirit.

Louis Riel (St. Amant, 2014, p. 28)

### Self-Identification

As an art educator who for many years has practiced and promoted issues of social justice in my classroom, this project developed as a result of many years of participating in workshops and professional development around the topic of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) art and Peoples. I come to this research as an ally and friend of the FNMI community. I am still learning and will continue to learn, for many years to come. Following the words of Toulouse (2018, p. IX), I continually ask myself “What is truth? What is reconciliation? It is a personal look at what we know, what we don’t know, and what we need to do to move forward respectfully.” As a teacher educator working in a Faculty of Education in Ontario, Canada, I am always aware of the content of my lessons, the words that come out of my mouth and the images on the walls in my classroom. All of this makes up my notion of the word curriculum, and all of it situates myself as a settler and teacher educator teaching in 2018 Canada.

### The Setting

In the spring of 2016, the Niagara Catholic District School Board (NCDSB), Ontario, Canada, established the Aboriginal Alternative Secondary School Program which today has been re-named by its students Soaring Eagles. The program is located near the St. John Conservation Area in the Niagara Region, in a former residential dwelling, surrounded by forest and nature providing a learning environment that is both peaceful and inspirational. Serving as a school providing programming for students who self-identify as Aboriginal or for non-Aboriginal students wishing to learn through an Aboriginal focused curriculum, this is a new model of program delivery for the school board. Soaring Eagles strives to provide an alternative learning environment that focuses on the inclusiveness of Indigenous cultural knowledge, teachings and ways of knowing.

*Soaring Eagles Logo*



*Soaring Eagles Site*



### The Project

Soaring Eagles: Indigenous Youth Speak Out! was a project that developed from a coincidental meeting between myself and Kelsey Dick, the teacher at Soaring Eagles, at an FNMI lecture held at Brock University two years ago. Kelsey, a former student of mine in the Bachelor of Education program at Brock University, landed in the position as the educator developing and teaching the programming at the newly founded Aboriginal Alternative Secondary School with the NCDSB. Of Métis background herself, Kelsey had a limited background in Arts Education yet knew the important role the Arts held in teaching FNMI curriculum content. After visiting Kelsey at her school site, I planted the seed of working with her students around a project that involved using visual arts as a vehicle to explore the Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report that was released in 2012. Not a few months later, I was at Kelsey's school meeting her students and getting to know who they were and what their interests were. The following week, I was back at the school giving a presentation on how various Indigenous artists used their art to share messages about their culture. As Black, Groat and Hellinga (2014) express in *Visions and Voices*, an educational resource created for teachers:

*In the modern era, many First Nation, Métis, and Inuit artists have used art as a way to raise awareness about social and political concerns that affect the world in which we live. As many artists show us, art can be a vehicle for ideas, deep feelings, and social political activism because of its unique ability to express layers of ideas and emotions in countless forms. (p. 5)*

Following the presentation on Indigenous art and artists, I made weekly visits to Soaring Eagles and gave workshops on various art techniques. I demonstrated to the students how to use a variety of materials to explore and express their interpretations of the Calls to Action stated in the Truth and Reconciliation Report. The students quickly became engaged and began working on a number of art projects in different media. After a number of weeks of intensive artmaking, the students at Soaring Eagles created a body of powerful work which voiced their opinions on matters very close to their hearts. The images presented in this visual essay are a selection of these works.

Carving Soap Stone



Acrylic Painting



Mixed Media Collage





*Mixed Media Masks*

“The attempted cultural genocide that is the legacy of residential schools has produced debilitating intergenerational consequences. It is a dark chapter in our shared history. We cannot change any of that past, but by unearthing and truly understanding its impact, we give ourselves the power to change the future.”

Government of Ontario (2016). *The Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples*. Toronto, Ontario. Queen's Printer. p. 46



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*Mixed Media Masks*

“Intergenerational trauma is real and alive in communities deeply affected by residential schools. You can’t attempt cultural genocide for 140 years, for seven generations – and not expect some very real fallout from that.”  
(Joseph Boyden, Ontario Métis author and advocate)

Government of Ontario (2016). *The Journey Together: Ontario’s Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples*. Toronto, Ontario. Queen’s Printer. p.4



*Studies in Social Justice, Volume 13, Issue 1, 159-170, 2019*

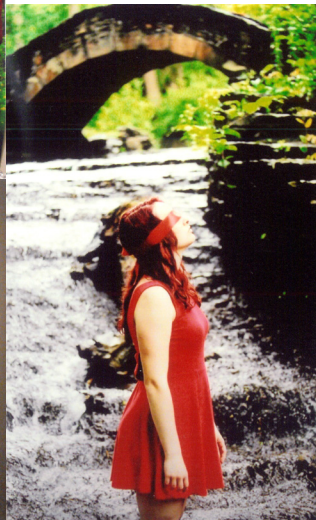
## The REDress Project



The REDress Project, inspired by Indigenous artist Jaime Black and interpreted by Soaring Eagles student Matt, was created to raise awareness about the issue of violence against Indigenous women across Canada.



It was an aesthetic response to the more than 1,000 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls that have been reported across our country.





Acrylic Painting

Mixed Media Collage

States shall take measures, in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples, to ensure that Indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.

Article 22. 2., United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)

Mixed Media Collage



*Studies in Social Justice, Volume 13, Issue 1, 159-170, 2019*



The challenge before us is to acknowledge these truths and work toward a just and respectful relationship with this land's Original Peoples. It remains to be seen how well we as a country will meet this challenge, but one thing is clear: educators have a critical role to play. Through the education system, we can ensure that the next generation of Canadians grows up with some understanding of the histories and cultures of First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples, and that FNMI students receive an equitable and culturally relevant education.

Education's Call to Action in Education Canada (Bennett, 2018)

Jennie's Creations (left & below)



## Medicine Garden Workshop: Métis Nation of Ontario

While taking part in the art project, Soaring Eagles students and staff attended a medicine garden workshop at the Métis Nation of Ontario headquarters in the Niagara Region. The workshop engaged students in learning about cultural history and its relationship to health care. Much of the knowledge gathered in the workshop was brought into many of the art works created by the students.



*Photo Installation - Environmental Conservation*



### **Exhibition/Celebration**

In order for the students to gain even more hands-on experience in the project, the class was invited to Rodman Hall Art Centre, our university art gallery, to assist in the hanging of the exhibition of their artwork. Working with the gallery preparator, professional insight and direction was given which gave the students a valuable behind-the-scenes firsthand look at the complexities involved in hanging an art exhibition (photos above). A few days later, the families and friends of the students at Soaring Eagles were invited to attend an official Opening Reception of the exhibition *Soaring Eagles: Indigenous Youth Speak Out!* To begin the celebration, all in attendance gathered in a circle and words were shared by a representative from the Niagara Native Centre, Kelsey (the classroom teacher), myself as project coordinator, and two students who spoke about their participation in the project. One of the students in the class, who had never performed in public, played his hand-made drum and sang a few traditional songs to celebrate this memorable event. Kelsey, his teacher, and his classmates, were all amazed. Here was this young gentleman, transformed by the experience and sharing his culture through a personal expression of song. Food was shared, stories of creating the art were told, and future project ideas were discussed. All who were present at this Opening Celebration knew they were part of something truly special.



*The exhibition is complete and ready for the Opening!*

I continue my relationship with Soaring Eagles Secondary School and am planning the next art project to work with these eager and gifted students. Throughout the process, we were learning together. They were teaching me while I was there to teach them. Is this not what school should be all about? As Justice Murray Sinclair (2018), Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission once shared, “Education is the key to reconciliation.”



Rodman Hall Art Centre,  
Brock University (Exhibition Venue)

Now is the time to come together and to acknowledge the hard truths of our past. Now is the time to renew our commitment to live together on this land based on principles of trust, mutual respect and shared benefits.

Government of Ontario.(2016). *The Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples*. Toronto, Ontario. Queen's Printer. p. 46

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### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the dedication of Nick Contant, Technology Specialist, in the Faculty of Education, Brock University, for his assistance in the layout and design of this visual essay. His contributions are greatly appreciated.

All artworks in this essay were created by the students from Soaring Eagles Secondary School. I would like to share my deepest gratitude for all of their efforts and hard work throughout this project.

A special thank you to Kelsey Dick, the Soaring Eagles classroom teacher, for making me feel welcome in her classroom and for embracing the inclusion of the Visual Arts as a major component of her program.

Photo Credits: Peter Vietgen