



“It’s Me Trying My Best to Bring Awareness to the Issues”: Narrative Assemblage and Visual Text-Making as Sociopolitical Inquiry in Canadian History

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ABSTRACT In this collaborative inquiry, we – Felix, a Grade 11 student; Tim, a high school social studies teacher; and Michelle, a literacy education professor – explore civic engagement and the politics of literacy in the classroom as developing practices for engaging in sociopolitical issues. We consider the “means and mechanisms” by which students in a Grade 11 Canadian History class were invited to “scrutinize the values and priorities” of Indigenous peoples and European explorers in Nouvelle-France, and to come to a deeper understanding of exploration and settlement in relationship to exploitation and colonization. We share how it happened that negotiating a written assignment to produce a piece of visual art allowed Felix to create a personal and political expression of the important concepts of the unit, demonstrating that a wider range of civic engagement and literacy practices have an important place in the classroom. In the process, we highlight tensions in multiliteracies pedagogies and wonder at the assemblage created by Felix’s literacy artifact. Together, we are inspired to consider the kinds of critical and creative expressions that an art piece and its entangled practices, connecting texts, inspirations, and ideas produce, and the engaged sociocultural, political and historical inquiry that can emerge when the curriculum is learned in relation to becoming an artist, student and activist.

KEYWORDS participatory politics; civic education; assessment; political expression; multimodality; multiliteracies; New Literacy Studies; inquiry; Social Studies

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In this collaborative inquiry, we explore civic engagement and multiliteracies in the visual text and art-making of a student in a Grade 11 history class. Our inquiry begins from the belief that our classrooms hold great potential to be spaces where young people are actively engaged in learning about significant social, cultural, and political issues, and provided with opportunities to develop the literacy practices that will enable them to participate fully as citizens (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, & Borgmann, 2010; Biesta, 2011). We consider visual and multimodal text-making to be a valued form of socio-political inquiry and knowledge production in secondary classrooms, with the capacity to deepen students' conceptual understandings, expand their perspectives, develop empathy, support and develop writing and literacy practices, and explore their subjectivities as citizens (Albers & Sanders, 2010; Alvermann & Hinchmann, 2012; Beach, Johnston, & Thein, 2015; Miller & McVee, 2012). In our experience, invitations to produce visual and multimodal artifacts in the classroom open up possibilities for learning that are "necessarily... unsettling, generative of new readings and writings of the words and the worlds of youth" (Vasudevan & Reilly, 2013, p. 456).

In this article we explore one piece of visual art produced by Felix as an extended response to the issues studied in unit, "First Peoples and Nouvelle-France (to 1763)" in the provincial Grade 11 Canadian History course. We respond to the call to involve "adolescent students in naming their own practices and knowledge" (Bomer, 2012, p. x), aware that "studies of learners' visual texts as culturally situated visual representations of their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences are scarce" (Albers, 2010, p. 160). Our approach was to consider Felix's text and discussion of the text as "narrative assemblage," a dynamic and fluid engagement in "communicating and coming-to-know" (Miller & McVee, 2012, p. 3) history differently. Through collaborative inquiry, we follow the "intimate relationship" of the artist to his visual text as well as to the other texts that inspired and informed his art-making (Albers, 2010, p. 157). Our approach was rhizomatic, rooted in affective forces – the flow of feelings, sensations, connections and happenings that the piece and our conversations evoked for us (Collier, Moffat, & Perry, 2015; Honan, 2004). To help create a sense of coherence for readers, we have organized our discussion and analysis using Jocson's (2018) framework of youth media texts as *pedagogy*, as *assemblage*, as *place-making*, and as *critical solidarity*. While a linear structure belies the fluid, iterative, spontaneous, and ongoing nature of the teaching/learning/living/inquiring/becoming that characterized this work, we found these conceptual lenses to be very generative in thinking with Felix and his art, and while presented sequentially, we might suggest they be imagined as prismatic – subtle turns that highlight the colour, texture, affect, influence, unpredictability and nuance of Felix's practices as storyteller, artist, student, citizen, and knowledge producer.

A Collaborative Inquiry into Student Writing and Text Making

We approach this inquiry from multiple social locations. Michelle is a white, cisgender woman born and raised in Canada in a close-knit multigenerational immigrant family, who lived, taught, and studied for many years in the U.S. before coming to Manitoba as a language and literacy professor and teacher educator. Tim is a white male, born in the U.S. and raised in Canada in a third-generation family of mixed European ancestry, a graduate student and educator who teaches Canadian history and global studies at an urban high school with a student population of approximately 790 students in grades nine to 12. Felix identifies as a white transgender male who has interests related to art, politics, activism, and an interest in tetrapod animals and amphibians. At the time of writing this article, Felix had successfully passed Tim's Grade 11 History of Canada course.

Michelle and Tim share an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) focused on the complexity of teaching *better* (Lytle, 2008). As a full-time teacher and part-time graduate student, Tim weaves his teaching and research through practitioner inquiry, interested in identity spaces for teaching and learning and education for human rights and social justice. For two years, Tim and Michelle have been involved in a practitioner inquiry group focused on becoming better writers and teachers of writing. Inspired by Carini's (2001) descriptive review of student writing, the group has developed a practice of collaborative inquiry (Simon, 2013), coming together regularly to engage in close reading, writing, and discussion of students' multimodal writing.¹ The process reflects our belief that our "positions in classrooms [are] sites from which... rich theories of literacy learning can not only be applied, but also developed" (Simon, 2011, p. 365). As educators from a range of grade levels (K-16), content areas, and school divisions, our teaching and thinking has benefited from our diverse perspectives. We notice more about our students' writing and have a deeper appreciation for our students as writers, and we lean more towards creative and personal forms of writing, multiliteracies, and choice in our pedagogies (Honeyford & Capina, 2017).

Thus, when Felix was struggling academically in the first unit of the history class and Tim discovered in a parent-teacher conference with Felix's

¹ The process we followed included these steps: The teacher who volunteered to be the presenter that evening would set the context for the piece, describe the teaching/learning situation, share any ancillary materials (e.g., writing prompt/invitation details, handouts), explain why they chose that particular sample of student work, and pose one or two inquiry questions about the piece and what they wished the group to think about. After a round of clarifying questions, the group would read/view the piece and engage in individual writing for 15-20 minutes. A discussion would then follow, structured by three rounds: first, each person would describe what they noticed about the text; then another round for further description and analysis, then a final round to address with presenter's questions and offer any additional questions or thoughts about the writer, piece, or pedagogy. The presenter (who would take notes, but not comment during the rounds) would then have a chance to respond. (The process developed organically as we adapted it to our interests from Easton, 2009.)

mother that Felix found academic writing to be a challenge – but that he often doodled and drew – Tim invited Felix to respond to the extended written response assignment at the end of the unit with a visual text. The prompt asked students to “explain how life changed for First Peoples and/or Europeans in this period of exploitation and settlement colonization. Discuss the good, bad, and challenging from multiple perspectives” (see Figure 1 for Felix’s response).



Figure 1. Felix’s extended response as visual text (Image by Felix Sylvester Hardman, 2018; pencil, ink, pencil crayon, and highlighter marker on paper).

Through Felix's drawing and their discussion of the visual text, Tim determined Felix's understandings in relation to the essential questions of the unit. Over the semester, Felix was encouraged to pull out his sketchbook and use his drawings in conversations with Tim to develop stronger, more detailed writing. With Felix's permission, Tim shared the drawing with Michelle in the context of their collaborative inquiry. With more questions generated by rounds of appreciative, descriptive review, Tim and Michelle invited Felix and his parents to be part of a fuller descriptive inquiry. A conversation with Felix and Felix's mom was scheduled and recorded with permission. With the transcript and drawing, Tim and Michelle engaged in iterative cycles of rhizomatic analysis (Clarke & Parsons, 2013; Honan, 2004; Honan & Sellars, 2007; Sellers, 2015), which generated new questions to think with (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). In this paper, we focus on two of these:

1. What questions and possibilities are produced in thinking through Felix's text as pedagogy, assemblage, place-making and critical solidarity?
2. What does Felix's discussion of his visual text and art-making suggest about engaging young people in social studies classrooms as artists, knowledge-producers, and citizens?

Text as Pedagogy

In exploring Felix's text as pedagogy, we consider the ways that the curriculum and pedagogy of the history class, as well as Felix's own inquiries, are diffracted in his visual text.² The provincial curriculum is framed around the question: "How has Canada's history shaped the Canada of today?" (Manitoba Education & Training, 2014). In this class, as well as others, Tim's teaching is informed by concepts of citizenship that recognize that throughout much of history, citizenship has been legitimated by forces of democracy, human rights, and public debate, while also limited by forms of exclusion based upon classism, racism, and gender. Tim aims for students to come to understand the idealist view of Canada as a bilingual and multicultural country that values prosperity, peace, and democracy, yet in reality struggles with issues of social justice, privilege, power, and inequity. He strives to create dialogic spaces for students to explore the distinct nature of Canadian society, government, and institutions, but also the contradictions of citizenship in historic and contemporary contexts.

² By using the word diffracted, we are signaling a non-representational stance by which we are more interested in difference, becoming, and possibility than in accuracy about what the text means. In other words, we ask, "what did this produce, or make happen/possible?" rather than "what did this mean?" (see Barad, 2007; Davies, 2014; Mazzei, 2014).

In this first unit of the course, two essential questions are posed by the curriculum: (1) Who were the First Peoples, and how did they structure their world?, and (2) Why did the French and other Europeans come to North America, and how did they interact with First Peoples? Within the school, many students have limited knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. Tim knows that some students hold beliefs buttressed by unfair and inappropriate myths and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and communities, and that education has been to blame. As Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, has stated, it is

...the way that we have all been educated in this country...[that] has brought us to where we are today – to a point where the psychological and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children has been harmed, and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people has been seriously damaged. (Sinclair, 2014, p. 7)

Tim teaches about colonization and assimilation policies in Canada and their impact, with the goal that students will begin to make connections between the past and the present, and to see how they have all been “influenced by the myth of ‘civilizing’ the Other” (Saada, 2014, p. 107). Through critical and decolonial lenses, Tim works with his students to deconstruct discourses of Othering in history, as well as in the media, popular culture, literature, and politics so that students become more critical thinkers, more engaged in justice-oriented citizenship, more aware of historical and political injustices, and more attuned to listening and responding with compassion to stories and experiences different from their own (Saada, 2014).

For Tim, exploring the history of Canada by studying the land, and the people whose lives were closely tied to the land, offers affordances for students to experience learning in relationship to colonial structures and discourses, policies and systemic practices of inequity. Tim knows it can create anxiety to disturb students’ normative patterns of thought and consciousness and to “reflect critically on their own cultures and the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind their actions,” to acknowledge “how they are positioned, and how they position others, and to realize the complex relationships between power and knowledge at historical, social, and international levels” (Saada, 2014, p. 111). To support students in thinking conceptually and relationally with new (and often disruptive) ideas, Tim often incorporates visual and conceptual models. For example, early on in this unit, Tim introduced students to a framework (see Figure 2) for thinking about the relationships between the people and the land upon which they live, the reality they experience, and culture and institutions they create as a result of their social, economic, and political interactions with the environment, landscape, and resources.

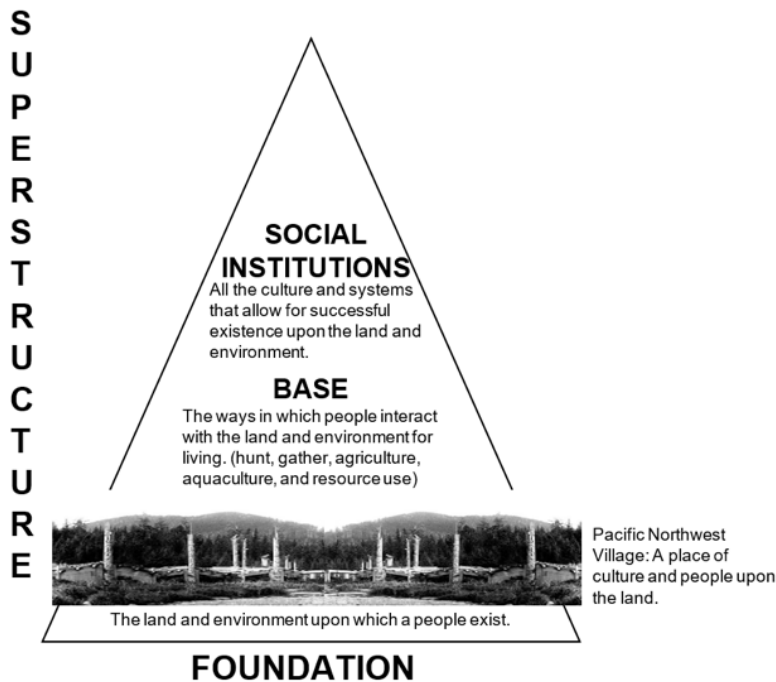


Figure 2. The matrix model: landscape and culture (Image adapted from Mills, Kalman, & Filice, 2016).

Across a range of texts, Tim and his students applied the “triangle diagram” (e.g., see Figure 3) to appreciate how the structure of First Nations were directly and powerfully changed with the arrival of European explorers, the dynamic nature and integrity of culture, the self-determination of nations of people, and the sheer strength of will that ensured the survival of Indigenous peoples in the face of devastating adversity.

By applying heuristics (like the triangle diagram) to think about big ideas, engage in recursive meaning-making, and recognize the complex, contentious, and challenging aspects of questioning their own knowledge and assumptions, students develop practices of historical thinking (Seixas & Morton, 2012) that are embedded in, and expected outcomes of, the social studies curriculum: (1) establishing historical significance; (2) using primary source evidence; (3) identifying continuity and change; (4) analyzing cause and consequence; (5) taking historical perspectives, and (6) understanding ethical dimensions of history (Manitoba Education & Training, 2014, pp. 1-23). In Tim’s classes, these practices become more meaningful and nuanced in the layering of multimodal texts from diverse periods, places, and perspectives (e.g., videos, archival photos, articles, biographies, primary sources, artifacts, guest speakers).

In this unit, for example, which prominently featured Samuel de Champlain (aka the “Father of New France”), Tim juxtaposed the narrative of de Champlain in the official textbook with another authoritative text, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Trudel, 2014), as well as with primary sources, including the translated journals of de Champlain and his own drawings, and a series of PBS documentaries (animated mini films featuring excerpts from the English translation of de Champlain’s work as well as historian interpretation). Across discussions of these texts, various contested and contradictory portrayals emerge, and Tim encourages his students to explore how and why a single story (Adichie, 2009) of de Champlain has persisted over time, and who wins and loses from the unchallenged power of dominant narratives in the history of Canada.

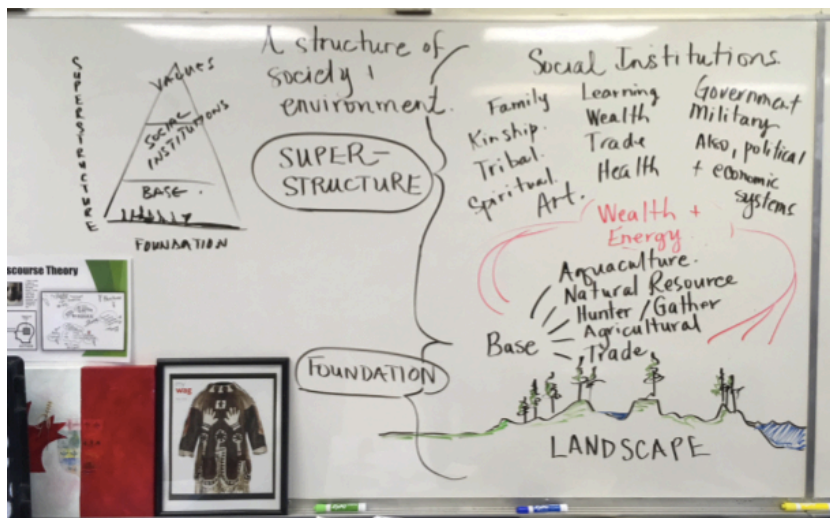


Figure 3. Whiteboard drawing and discussion notes.

In fact, Felix began talking about his drawing by saying he was inspired by what he has – and has *not* – learned in school. He acknowledged he has been unknowingly implicated in an education that has perpetuated racism and discrimination. His anger was the impetus for his art-making:

It’s basically like me just getting really mad about how things were taught in school and how stuff like this has been glossed over. Like you see colonizers coming to North America, and it’s always like, ‘Look at these brave white men. They’re so brave for crossing the sea and killing some Indigenous people.’ You know, it’s like, ‘Nah, not really. Not really at all.’

Samuel de Champlain is featured but not easily recognized in Felix’s drawing (Figure 1). When Felix pointed to the figure coloured in fluorescent

highlighter yellow on the left side of the black and white striped structure (a moving “ship-slash-fort”), Felix said he wanted to portray de Champlain and another explorer – facetiously referred to by Felix as simply “the other guy” – not as gloried founders and explorers, but “like demons.” Felix turned the dominant explorer narrative on its head: the white European men are portrayed as wild and inhuman. The young Indigenous women who have come to trade are confronted with what appears to be both hideous and insidious. There is a strong sense of impending doom for them and for the land; already, the landscape has been damaged and the men’s eyes seem full of uncontrolled greed and desire.

As Felix talked, he moved his finger above and between the explorers contained in the “ship-slash-fort,” and traced the shape of the red-tiled roof: “I don’t know if it’s easy to see but there’s almost a triangle here... I made the top – kind of sharp because it’s going down over her head and then across.” Tim’s “triangle diagram” is referenced in the visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) of Felix’s piece, cutting across the landscape, inclusive of the ship-slash-fort. Above it are the fiery sky and circling crows; below, in the green grass, in the path of the moving ship-slash-fort, are the three Indigenous women. The triangular shape encompasses Felix’s exploration of how social, cultural, economic, and political life would be forever changed for the Indigenous peoples and for the land.

Felix chose the colours of the image to demand attention to the issues.

I used bright colours so that no matter what you thought about this kind of thing you can’t look away. If you think, ‘Well like it’s not that big of a deal,’ you’re forced to look and like, ‘Oh shit, it was that big of a deal.’

The array of contrasting colours is certainly eye-catching; the composition achieves the goal of holding viewers’ attention. If presented in class with an open-ended question like, “what do you notice?,” the piece would spark a generative dialogue. Even Tim, who had viewed and discussed the image many times with Felix, was still noticing new things. But for Felix, the drawing was intended to prompt acknowledgement of the legacy of colonization and to inspire action:

That’s kind of what I want it to be. You have to acknowledge this at some time. You can’t ignore it forever. And that’s kind of what we’ve been doing. Yeah, like the Prime Minister in 2004 said I’m sorry about the colonization, but has he actually done anything to reverse the effects of it? No, no.

Felix articulated connections between the concepts of the unit and contemporary politics and Indigenous issues. In following political events and news online, Felix is an avid reader of blogs, explaining that online “you don’t have to ask” people about politics, that it’s easy to “scroll through their page and... you’ll know about” where they stand politically. In fact, Felix stated that his online networks contributed to changing his own thinking

about race and racism: “I was kind of turning into a horrible little racist kid in like 8th grade and then I was online a lot and I would be scrolling through people’s blogs and if I came across an Indigenous person who was an activist, I would be like, ‘Oh I’m curious about this; I’m going to read this.’” Felix noted that reading about the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous writers was transformative: “I was like, ‘Oh, maybe someone who is not exactly like me is not the ‘other’ after all.’”

Considering Felix’s text as pedagogy illuminates how curricular concepts and practices came to (in)form and in turn, be shaped by Felix’s art and ways of thinking. Felix’s visual text and his talk about his work exemplify the personal and political significance and complexity with which he was beginning to re-learn *the* (singular) history of the explorers and First Peoples, as well as his own positioning and relationships as a student, artist, and citizen.

Text as Assemblage

To think through Felix’s text as assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) is to recognize how texts are always alive, moving, and open to becoming something new and different as they connect and function with “other assemblages – other writings, histories, memories, places, people, ideas, events, and so forth” (Preston, 2015, p. 39). Text as assemblage connotes the material, discursive, and artefactual in text-making (Honeyford et al., 2017; Kuby & Gutshall, 2016; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010), as text-producers create in relationship to other texts, images, discourses, objects, and places (Comber, 2016; Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon, & de Carteret, 2011). All parts of the temporary assemblage – artist, viewer, art piece; all inspirations and impulses in creating and viewing and in dialogue about the work – are entangled, “forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways” (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p. 36). Because “such activity is created and fed by an ongoing flow of affective intensities,” our efforts to follow these flows “gives rise to questions that create the possibility of more ways of seeing and valuing” (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p. 36).

Pedagogically, we believe this marks an important shift. We did not approach Felix’s text with a pre-determined framework, criteria, or rubric for evaluation (which simply determines the presence – or absence – of *a priori* qualities, reducing a complex text to a checklist of established meanings, and limiting the possibilities for generating new insights). Instead, we sought to pursue the inspirations, impulses, and intensities of Felix’s work in order to “explore the ways in which ideas behind assemblage call attention to layers of meaning that come together through intertextuality, multimodality, and symbolic creativity” (Jocson, 2018, p. 19) – to be open to connections,

relationships, and ideas that we never could have guessed or imagined in advance.

One of those was the artistic inspiration for Felix's depictions of Samuel de Champlain and "the other guy," the enigmatic French explorer, Étienne Brûlé. Showing us photos from his phone, Felix said he was inspired by medieval woodcuts and the painted triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch, a style Felix reverently described as "weird surreal abstractness." In evoking a Dutch painter from the 15th century, most famous for his fantastical illustrations of hell (see *The Last Judgement*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*), Felix layered into his drawing the religious overtones of exploration as well as the suffering of Indigenous peoples through colonization. For, "perhaps more than any other artist of his time... Bosch's inferno has become ingrained not only in pop culture, but also in the broader Western conception of hell as a place of torture, monstrous creatures, and never-ending suffering" (Dunne, 2016, n.p.). Felix explained that his style was also influenced by Jonathan "Bogleech" Wojcik, "a self-professed 'life-long monster fanatic, insect lover, and creator of the pointless website, bogleech.com, where he publishes articles on creepy creatures, a weekly webcomic and other stuff" (Chilling Entertainment, n.d.). A quick scan of Bogleech's website and social media channels highlights elements of his style in Felix's drawing. Thus, we see a clear example of how

...assemblages by youth place them in a cultural-historical continuum alongside artists whose works have been legitimized and popularized by culture industries, as well as those whose works have yet to be seen or recognized by the masses. Assemblages can position young people as producers of knowledge to expand larger discourses of history, culture, and politics. (Jocson, 2018, p. 20)

Another example of the rich intertextuality, multimodality, and symbolic creativity of Felix's text was generated by the significance of disease. In an assemblage of colour, science knowledge, environmental literacy, and awareness of French fashion, Felix illustrates his understandings of the relationships among exploration, colonization, and disease. Pointing to "the European" on the right, Felix noted that he is physically marked as carrying disease:

This guy's kind of like if you've seen a little petri dish, he's got bacteria growing on him like, 'Oh shit, this guy's got some bad diseases on him.' Like I don't know if you can really tell, but those are like little microbes, like bacteria... I don't know if it's like small pox or what, but he's got it real bad.

Felix described de Champlain (on the left), as "kind of yellow, like you know those biohazard suits? I'm not sure which class of biohazard suit that is, but it's toxic, brightly coloured." This, too, is a warning: "Don't touch." Felix noted that "it was fashionable to be French back then," so the irony of the hazmat suit and colours influenced by "brightly coloured things in nature like

poisonous mushrooms or brightly coloured berries” is a deliberate indictment, a warning in both natural and human terms, past and present, of deception and danger: “It’s like you don’t want to eat that because you don’t know what’s in it. It could be really bad.”

Impending death is a theme, with multiple warnings for the Indigenous women: the fire in the sky, the circling crows, and the idea that the text itself is a cautionary tale. As Felix explained, the sky is drawn to look like “when there’s a forest fire – like the sky just kind of turns orange, so it’s like there’s something wrong with the sky. There’s something wrong with the land right now and like, I think I know where it’s coming from, you know?” The birds are crows, harbingers of death, but similar in appearance to ravens:

Ravens are an important bird... in a lot of First Nations cultures, kind of like a trickster, but they also bring the sun to land, bring fire to the people, or like the [story of the] raven and the clam shell,... where the raven brought the clamshell and the people came out of it. [But] in Europe, like you think of a crow and you think, ‘Oh, that thing is going to be pecking at my corpse if I’m not careful, so I don’t like that bird’ and if you hear about the black plague like the crows must have been all over the place... with all the bodies piled up. So, if you’re European back then, it’s like, ‘I don’t like seeing those crows.’ Very different birds, but they look super similar. These are crows in the picture and they’re there to eat whatever gets left behind once the colonizers are done...that one has a little horn. They’re kind of like, you know when you have a marching band in front of someone like, here’s the important person, kind of like that.

Felix compared the image to cultural myths, folktales, and oral stories, particularly stories adults might tell to children to warn them of danger (e.g., not to go into the woods for fear of a “bogeyman”). Felix gave several examples, including stories of the Qalupalik in Inuit culture, which Felix learned about through his own research, looking for visual allusions to other warning narratives. The Qalupalik inspired another drawing Felix showed us, referencing it several times in our conversation.

It was clear throughout our discussion that Felix’s art-making was inspired by and was the catalyst for further inquiry and research. In the process of drawing the women, for example, Felix explained he had researched Cree women’s clothing “so that it’s not just like a Halloween costume I’m drawing.” He admitted that he had “already started, so her [single-braided] hair, I don’t believe is entirely accurate and hers [in two braids] is in the back and normally they’d have it in the front.” Felix acknowledged he was “not proud” of that and would change it if he could. He portrayed the Cree women as young to emphasize the legacy of colonialism:

I actually had ages in my head for all of them when I was drawing them. She’s 23, she’s 25 and she’s just turned 19. I don’t know. I thought like something about being young and like they have a lot of life and this is going to take it away from them. Maybe not when they’re still young, but maybe when their kids are still young.

Felix's visual text and art-making and our dialogue created new insights about Felix as an artist, history student, and storyteller, and the potential for "everyday texts and stories produced by students" to generate conversations about the "social and cultural landscapes in students' lives relevant to the curriculum"; the possibilities created when "assemblage becomes key in teaching and learning" (Jocson, 2018, p. 19).

Text as Place-Making

Text as place-making draws attention to how place is produced in Felix's image and narrative, but also in relation to the classroom and local context. For spaces are "woven from a web of phenomena/activities/relations" and the "spatial spread of social relations can be intimately local or expansively global, or anything in between" (Massey, 1994, p. 265). We live in Treaty 1 territory, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. The city of Winnipeg sits at the confluence of two rivers, the site of Indigenous trading grounds for centuries, home to urban Indigenous and Métis peoples and immigrants from all over the world. Thus, we understand conceptions of place as "a 'meeting place' or an 'intersection' imbued with social meanings, power relations, and... politics," as sites that are historically and currently marked by "overlapping, sometimes conflicting, social realities" (Jocson, 2018, p. 74).

Place-making features prominently in Felix's visual text. Amidst the (un)natural elements of the prairie, forest, and sky, Felix drew the meeting of the Indigenous women and European explorers in the context of the ship-slash-fort. As Felix explained, the Europeans appear

...attached to their forts, because they wouldn't leave the forts that much and so if Indigenous people decided, 'Well let's get these guys out of here because like I've had enough of them, they're just horrible, like get rid of it,' they [the defenders of the fort] could just sit in their forts and be shooting at them and they [the Indigenous peoples] wouldn't have much of a fighting chance against that.

Felix indicated the tentacles under the "ship-slash-fortress" indicate movement:

The ship just moves. So, it [the legs] got longer and they kind of just walk across the sea floor like a big creepy thing and the guns are kind of like on the side. They don't look like guns though; they look like weird mouths, I guess, but they are supposed to be a mixture of a cannon and the head of a musket, but they don't shoot like guns, they just shoot that purple slime poison stuff.

The purple poison, or "acid," is in a drippy puddle under the ship-slash-fort. Felix explained that although he decided not to draw it (for fear of losing the

detail in the foreground), the ship-slash-fort has left a trail of acid in its wake: “there’s definitely a trail going through the woods and along the way the trees are dying and the path is just absolutely charred.” The continued movement of the settlers from east to west on Indigenous lands is also portrayed by the tentacle-like legs which “represent the carts and oxes and horses that they would use to move stuff around.”

The black and white stripes of the ship-slash-fort are a tribute to cartoons and stories of predators in nature:

It’s mostly because I just like that old Beetlejuice cartoon a lot and also just because I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a cuttlefish hunting, but when they hunt they start flashing black and white stripes to confuse the prey and overwhelm its senses and then it [the cuttlefish] just closes in and gets it [the prey]. And that’s kind of what I thought of this ship, this ship-slash-fortress thing. It’s a living thing and it’s not very good. ... There’s like its eye... it’s mostly just there to look a bit unsettling, but it’s also there to look... I wanted to make it look like it’s alive.

Felix acknowledged that life in the fort was not without its challenges. Describing the eyes peeking out of the slots, Felix said,

Yeah, the eyes inside the ship would be like when they’re trapped and they can’t leave because they might, it’s a new environment and there’s wolves outside and stuff, so it’s kind of like people trapped inside and there’s scurvy and all that, so it’s basically just waiting to die.

There are more overt messages about taking land from the Indigenous peoples: On the ship-slash-fort are two flags, one with the word, “Die” and the other with the message, “Go away,” because, Felix explained,

That’s what they [the white settlers] wanted. They wanted the Indigenous people to like just leave. Once they figured, ‘Oh, we can just kill our own animals and get fur, like get out of here, we don’t need you anymore; why are you still here?’”

The message is clearly “Get out,” said Felix, but in return, the white settlers who would continue to come were not hearing what Felix imagined the Indigenous peoples were saying, “but it’s like, ‘that’s where we fuckin’ live.’”

Place is a scene of conflict and violence in Felix’s visual text. The fort is marked with “decapitated heads” inspired by a story of

...someone who was planning to rebel against Champlain, and someone [else] overheard that and said, ‘Well, we’re going to cut that guy’s head off’... And also in Old France, they would just like behead someone and put their head on a stick. It’s like, ‘Hey, don’t mess with me, look what I’ve got’... So you can imagine how jarring it would be to see someone’s head on a stick just outside the fort of someone you’re going to trade stuff with.

The Indigenous women have come in good faith to trade: They carry corn and fur and “They’re getting stuff in return” but, as Felix explained, what they got had “germs from Europe on it so it’s eventually going to kill you and whoever eats it will also get sick so it’s like not a very good deal. That’s why that hand that has the bag of gunpowder has the purple stuff on it.” The economy of place has changed with the coming of the explorers and settlers. The women are members of a society who held/hold a worldview situated upon the interconnected nature of relationships, kinship, creedal values, respect and diplomacy, and trade. They were only just to discover that the arrival of the explorers would forever change this place, from a relational place of knowingness and understanding into a place of difference, economically-based, where rules trumped relationships and were enforced by punishments, and where peace was dictated by the victors – a new world indeed.

Felix’s text warns that conflict and division will spread beyond the fort to encompass the land:

The red trees were, like I wanted something to pop out because I didn’t think brown trees were going to look that good but also like I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to get too close to places where the white people were settled. Once they started getting how they are, like shooting people and saying ‘Get out of here, this is our land now.’ I imagine those woods are like, ‘Don’t go in there. Like stay out of those woods, don’t hunt there. Cuz you don’t know what they’re going to do to you.’

Felix made a comparison to how gentrification in an urban centre can force people out of their neighborhoods, while richer citizens move in:

It’s kind of like in a poor neighbourhood and they start putting up those fancy, expensive condos and all of a sudden no one else can afford to live there, so someone who drove up to that neighborhood again or like walked through it twenty years later, they would say, ‘I lived here, I grew up here, but I don’t recognize anything. It’s not how it used to be... And not for the better, either.’

Felix acknowledges that issues of racism permeate this place, with legacies of forced removal, land-rights abuses, and racial violence. On an international scale, Felix explains, Canada has a reputation for multicultural diplomacy and peace: “Especially since like we’re seen as ‘Oh, we’re a nice country, we’re not racist up here,’” but the truth is “we have some pretty bad issues. I think [this city] has its own KKK; like, we have a big problem here.” As a historical thinker/citizen and artist, Felix is realizing the connections of racism and genocide inherent in Canada’s colonial past and acknowledging their legacy today.

Text as Critical Solidarity

Felix's text is an example of how young people create media to critique systems of inequity and power – to utilize “written, oral/aural, and visual forms of communication as a means to challenge dominant ideologies and power relationships that underlie them” (Jocson, 2018, pp. 52-53). Youth may become more personally aware and interested in issues of social justice through teachers like Tim, who embed a critical literacy and social justice stance in their classroom. Of course, youth may also have intimate experiences with these issues and their implications in their own lives (which may or may not be reflected in the curriculum or classroom). The sociopolitical nature of youth media then, may be borne out of – or become a catalyst for – personal investment in sociopolitical issues, and a desire to produce and circulate texts as a means of showing critical solidarity, of “ally[ing] [them]selves with others” (Jocson, 2018, p. 52). As Felix stated in response to a question about what his image was about: “I would say it's me trying my best to bring awareness to the issues because I've only like gone into being like activist super recently and I guess it's my way of trying to be like an ally.”

In critical solidarity, Felix is warning the women that “this is something that's a new threat. They're not familiar with it and they don't know what it is, just like, it's here now and they need to watch out for it.” Felix embeds the text with visual cues of his solidarity with the Indigenous women:

I know at first I was making the Indigenous women's eyes yellow because I just like making weird-looking eyes, but then I thought, I want to make them look like the most human ones here because the colonizers really didn't have any empathy or didn't even see the Indigenous people as people, they just saw them as, ‘Oh those things on the land that we want to get rid of eventually because they're in the way.’

Felix lamented that Indigenous women and girls continue to suffer violence today:

Like they didn't treat them like human at all, especially when you look further down along the [time] line and even today they're just like, the ‘others’ and that's why I made their eyes [colonizers] like so bright and weird.

In Felix's art-making, a new connecting thread of solidarity emerges between the Indigenous women and the young *Filles du Roi* of Nouvelle-France, sent by the King to produce colonists (or in Felix's words, to “repopulate” the land). Felix positions the body of the young *Filles du Roi* to show how they were exploited:

She's a *Filles du Roi*... and I was kind of [suggesting], by her pose, like that she was just there to repopulate the colony. That's why her legs have their own separate slot like that, and yeah, it's ew. I felt gross drawing it.

Felix's solidarity is expressed in the affective implications of drawing the young girl in such a position, but this discomfort is outweighed by the responsibility Felix feels as an artist to complicate the "explorer as hero" narrative. Felix also explains that while the eyes of the *Filles du Roi* show her to be human now, that might change: "her eyes [the young *Filles du Roi*] aren't like that [those of the explorers] yet because she's still so young and she doesn't really understand the gravity of the situation." Felix compared the practice of inculcating racism and hate in the young to what happens in the Westboro Baptist Church: "Like it's kind of like when you see Westboro Baptist Church and they have these signs and these kids holding one and the little kid doesn't understand what's going on yet but they're going to grow up to be like that eventually."

As an artist, Felix has been inspired by other artist-activists who use their work for political action and critical solidarity. Felix spoke admiringly of graffiti artist and gay rights activist Keith Haring (particularly his work *Silence=Death*), who used his art to draw attention to the AIDS epidemic. Felix argued that schools have an important role to play in gender rights education, teaching young people about the history of gender oppression. While the topic is approached in health class, Felix challenged Tim: "We don't have anything on LGBT History and I feel like that's really important... we haven't addressed it at all in history class and we have a lot of like really rich history that you'd only know if you were looking for it specifically." Felix argued all students should learn about the Stonewall Riots and the first Pride events in their city. However, Felix is deeply concerned about the commercialization of the LGBT movement. He showed us a photo on his phone of a placard held at a protest with the statement "Our community is not an ad campaign." Just like the anger he expressed about the colonizing narrative he was led to believe in school, Felix charged,

I'm just sick of companies just slapping the rainbow flag on their products in June. And if they sell some product with a rainbow on it none of that money goes to like, comes back to the community. We're just like basically an accessory, slap it on your product to look good.

Critical solidarity is a significant component of civic engagement and multiliteracies pedagogy. Through creative and critical literacy practices, critical solidarity is about youth "having the freedom to judge for themselves the relative merits of alternative possibilities rather than being indoctrinated into a particular worldview" (Jocson, 2018, p. 52). For Felix, that includes opportunities to engage in the issues that are important to him: "police brutality; missing Indigenous women – cases that are never fully investigated; anything involving LGBT rights; and of course, the Kinder Morgan pipeline." Felix admits that he is relatively new at being an activist:

Yeah. I haven't done that enough I don't think. Like it seems whenever there's a protest or a rally I always Google it and I'm like, 'Oh, that happened three weeks ago. Oh no.' I would have wanted to be there for support and I wasn't.

With art, Felix said he was trying to do more to "bring awareness to the issues," but he also noted that the process takes time: "I want to say like it took me two and a half weeks and a lot of that was just figuring out like where I want this to go and stuff."

Concluding Questions

Felix made it clear that after taking the piece home to show his father (who had only seen it in progress), it would come back to the classroom "where it belonged" and where Tim plans to use it in his future Grade 11 history classes. In the classroom, youth media like Felix's drawing, a bricolage of readily available school-supplies (highlighters, coloured pencils, markers, and a fine-tipped black sharpie) can "become resources for various types of cultural remix and learning opportunities" (Jocson, 2018, p. 12). Unlike most papers and assignments that serve as evidence of learning and then quickly become products of history themselves, Felix's drawing will become part of the ever-changing assemblage of the unit. It will join other texts and material objects, students, experiences, and affective forces in Tim's courses as invitations for learners to think and feel with, as catalysts to move into new journeys of learning, doing, being and becoming with. This is particularly important in social studies pedagogy, for "democracy has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist but by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the people can actually be heard" (Sen, 2009, p. xiii).

For Felix and other young people, the study of history and sociopolitical and cultural issues in education – issues that span generations, time, and local and global borders and spaces – have the potential to open up opportunities for participation, connection, movement and action. But as the poet Martín Espada argued, such work needs to be rooted in historical understandings and the capacity to imagine a different present and future:

Any progressive social change must be imagined first, and that vision must find its most eloquent possible expression to move from vision to reality. Any oppressive social condition, before it can be changed, must be named and condemned with words that persuade by stirring the emotions, awakening the senses. Thus the need for the political imagination. (Martín Espada cited in Christensen, 2017, p. xi)

In thinking with Felix's text as pedagogy, assemblage, place-making and critical solidarity, we wonder about political imagination in the context of the present and futures of our young people. Is Felix a reader of harbingers of the

present time? Is that what history helps Felix do? Does multiliteracies pedagogy cultivate the political imaginations of young people so that spaces outside the classroom become sites of critical change and transformation? How might we approach historical thinking as creative and critical literacy practices that acknowledge the truth of our broken relations in our communities and world? How would pedagogy and politics change if curriculum and civic issues were encountered as assemblages with “neither a beginning nor an end, [but] always connectible or modifiable” (Jocson, 2018, p. 19)? How might our classrooms, communities, and world change if the purpose of education was to engage in “learning as a process of sharing, reciprocity, respect, collaboration, healing and creating sustainable relationships” (Sefa Dei, in press)?

In following the flows of our inquiry, we find ourselves circling back to when Felix sat down with us to talk about his drawing. He looked at the image and asked, “Where should I begin?” Ultimately, in our individual and collective acts of pedagogy, assemblage, place-making and critical solidarity, we need to be asking that question as well.

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