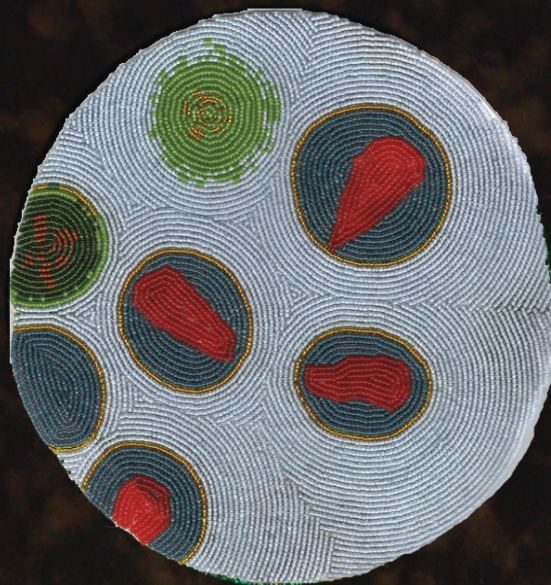


Women,

CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ISSUES,
AND RESISTANCE



Ruth Cuthand, Trading Series, H.I.V., 2009,
beads and acrylic on suedeboard

H.I.V.

*A non-fiction summary of conversations with, and
written essays from, high school and university
students, plus the general adult public.*

JOURNAL
INSIGHTS **3**



EDITOR'S NOTES:

Cover Illustration – Ruth Cuthand, *H.I.V.*

At first glance this is a beautiful traditional bead work, seemingly created for decorative purposes only. What we are looking at however, is the artist's representation of a deadly disease. The artist has captured our attention with something gorgeous and exciting in order to lead us to deeper meaning.

What follows is a non-fiction summary of conversations with, and written essays by high school and university students, plus the general adult public. The seven Journal Insights included have been re-written to suggest that they come from one source, however they come from the insights of many. To maintain anonymity there is no identification by name, age, gender, or region. The purpose is to share Insights others have had about the relationship of Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples, and most importantly to give YOU, the Reader, space for your own Insights.

INSIGHT #1

The way Aboriginal peoples were and are treated is a deliberate plan.

This is a big insight. If the culture of power reflects itself, then the purpose of the Church and residential schools was to remove any power the parents had, and also to strip away their identity, their families, and their culture. It leaves me believing that it had to be deliberate. The Church knew what it was doing. There had to be some knowledge that it would be harmful and destructive to that group of people. As unbelievable as it sounds, it doesn't make any sense otherwise. That is the most disturbing thing about this.



The Holy Quran says: “no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another,” but the problem is not only in the past, it also includes the present. So if there are sins of history, then we must erase them from our present. The statistics mentioned in Cindy Blackstock’s article were frightening: “The number of First Nations children in care outside their own homes today is three times the number of children in residential schools at the height of their operation.”*

*Blackstock, Cindy. From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools. *Reconciliation Means not Saying Sorry Twice: Lessons from Child Welfare in Canada*. research@ahf.ca; p. 165.

The article was so enlightening and informative.

We had a visit from senior Maliseet artist Shirley Bear. Viewing her artwork, it was sometimes a challenge to reconcile that a painting filled with striking colours and in some cases, disturbing images, could also be so beautiful. The painting of her with her children was one that evoked a feeling of hope, but there was also a sense of sadness. I reflected upon how many had been forced to abandon their language and culture and spirituality and that struck a chord. I felt a connection to that painting, and I believe it’s because family is such an important element in most cultures, mine for example. My family certainly didn’t endure the atrocities that First Nations peoples have, but their names were Anglicized and they were expected to abandon their mother tongue for English. It warms my heart to know that they struggled to maintain our culture and our language and our religion despite outside forces pushing towards another path.

Difficult emotions and sentiments are important to acknowledge and discuss to promote understanding amongst peoples. The Scalping Proclamation in Nova Scotia is a blemish on Nova Scotia and the government’s stagnation at removing it is shameful.



INSIGHT #2

Identify with Aboriginal peoples, don't run away.

I feel like our stories are so similar. I believe that our stories are so important and our history matters. And it's so important to incorporate that within the schools so that kids know about themselves and when children know about themselves, they feel better.

I feel that in order for young people to know where they're going, they have to know where they came from. And I find that our history, both of our histories, kind of intertwine, overlap. The Aboriginal peoples' land was taken from them. Black people were taken from our land.

With my current learner group, we have just begun exploring abuse, its definition, its many faces, and the impact it has had on everyone. I've found myself compelled to share some of the Aboriginal stories I have heard. My learners have been telling their own stories, some disclosing their personal experiences of abuse, others reacting. It is an emotional experience for all, and for many, a difficult conversation to have, but it is critical that we tell and listen to these stories for healing to occur.

We are not responsible for what happened in the past, but we are responsible for what happens now. I recently had a discussion with a friend about acknowledging the disadvantage of someone while recognizing one's own advantage in social work. I am beginning to understand that knowing is not enough. What's important is what I do with that knowledge.

When I read Dorothy Christian's article, which cited Prime Minister



Harper's assertion that "we ...have no history of colonialism,"* I was speechless. I could not believe that a doctoral student had had the audacity to publish such a distortion. I checked approximately five different websites and news agencies before I could convince myself that my prime minister, our prime minister, could really be so blatantly wrong. I am confused and ashamed and looking for some loophole that would alleviate the disgrace that I feel. Now I am turning inward, reflecting on my initial reaction: why did I doubt the integrity of an Aboriginal writer? Why was my first reaction suspicion and not support? Am I as bad as my government?

*Christian, Dorothy. *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation Through the Lens of Cultural Diversity. Reconciling The People and the Land?* research@ahf.ca. p. 71.

INSIGHT #3

Aboriginal women may have it hard, but women are getting very strong.

Are the crimes against Aboriginal women motivated by their race and gender (hate crime)? Or are they chosen as victims because their race and gender will mean it is easier to get away with the crime?

Now I understand feelings of shame about being Aboriginal. History is at arm's length if you view the history and culture as an outsider looking in and without taking it on personally. I realize now that I want it both ways: to own my heritage as a First Nations person, but I also want to own my privilege.

I used to believe that improving the graduation rates of Aboriginal students would involve individual programming and alternative



teaching styles. I had the preconceived notion that Aboriginal students would need completely different curriculum and assessment from mainstream students. Contrary to my beliefs, what I have come to understand from the guest lecturers is that students of Aboriginal descent do not necessarily need different curriculum; trying to group all First Nations students together, believing that they are all kinaesthetic learners or that they all need oral instruction, does not take into account the unique learning style that each and every student, native or non-native, possesses.

Regrettably, the cultural influences that helped the guest lecturers to be successful in life are non-existent in the education system. In fact, from classroom set-up to punitive measures, mainstream education often works in contradiction to many basic Aboriginal beliefs.

As I reflect on how this new knowledge will influence or change my teaching, I first think about myself. It has changed me. I believe that the change had to begin with me. I have already been sharing with my colleagues many of the insights we've had. There have been situations where colleagues have felt uncomfortable when broaching some of the topics that we have explored in class. I believe that being uncomfortable makes you think on a different level and it forces you to feel. When you feel, the topic has a deeper connection to you and therefore, it holds deeper meaning.



INSIGHT #4

Aboriginal peoples already had civilizations prior to European immigration.

Dr. Joan Glode, founder of Mi'kmaq Family and Children's Services, visited our class. She told us how the Mi'kmaq people governed themselves from time immemorial with honesty, trust, and love of the land and sea. Therefore, when Europeans and religious missionaries came with ulterior motives of exploitation and control, this form of domination would not have registered with Aboriginal people. They had settled issues with consultation, negotiation and compromise. My earlier text books on Canadian history did not emphasize these attributes of Aboriginal people. They were portrayed as savages, not to be trusted. But in the meantime our history books did mention that the "Indians" did save a lot of settlers from starvation over the winter months, by showing the newcomers how to live from the land.

We can't be held accountable for what we don't know. But now we know.

Acknowledging concerns and difficulties is important to enable learning. Frank, difficult conversations are needed and negative sentiments have to be addressed because they are common.

When we believe only the Aboriginal peoples can know and understand Aboriginal issues, it will impede our belief that we can be part of the solution. Learners often comment that First Nations people were "stupid" to sign certain treaties, and "bad parents" to allow their children to be taken to Residential Schools. It was repeatedly pointed out by students I teach that First Nations people deserved the bad things that happened to them because they were not as smart or powerful as the European colonizers.

Antiracist education needs to be explained and taught. Our racist beliefs and the beliefs of students and ourselves need to be spoken in discussions about race and privilege. In the future, rather than appearing to be the omniscient, authoritative teacher, trying to explain away each racist belief, I will have my learners research complex, historical topics on their own. This way, they will be forced to separate belief from fact, and they would be guided by the contextual evidence they research.



Shelley Niro, "Are You My Sister?" (detail), 1994, photographs on drilled mat board. Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston. Purchase, Canada Council Acquisition Assistance Program, 1996 (40-005) photo credit: Paul Litherland



INSIGHT #5

Transform Guilt into Positive Action.

White guilt is a reaction that stems from the realization of racism and its effects, and it usually manifests in one of two ways, remorse or anger. These latter feelings are most prevalent when we learn about Residential Schools, a nationwide disgrace that we cannot easily dismiss. While mistakenly condemning parents who “allowed” their children to be taken to these institutions, we are horrified at the accounts of the abuse endured by children. I do not believe we know how to deal with our feelings, and the overwhelming emotions and confusion dampen the personal growth and transformation that white guilt can sometimes stimulate. In the future, I think we should keep thought-journals like this one.

White guilt is real. It is important to acknowledge the unpleasant feelings that may arise. Realize that horrific things happened, and despite any racist beliefs of learners, they may still be affected by the tragic accounts shared with them. It is important to discuss and support the feelings that such accounts evoke.

I attended some Truth and Reconciliation Commission events in October or November. We can't forget what happened in the past because the past influences us so greatly today. We can't know where to go unless we know where we've come from, and that's a part of the traditional teachings of our Elders. It's really important to know where we've been in order to know where we're going. Teaching about residential schools is really important. Many people don't know that it happened, especially our youth today if they don't have that connection with their grandparents. Their grandparents often don't want to talk about it. It was so shameful. It was too difficult to talk about that trauma, and that pain from the past.



INSIGHT #6

Hear the Women, Listen to the Elders.

If women are positioned as subservient and passive then how can female students regain their voices? This echoes back to what Shirley Bear mentioned: If there is going to be one group of people who will change the world, it will be the women.

I know that she probably gets a lot of backlash. But it's great to be angry about it. It really felt freeing and liberating. And you can feel it in yourself, some level of healing happening. But yeah, there are a lot of stereotypes about angry women, and anger in general. How do you imagine an angry woman, an angry Aboriginal woman?

There's so many dynamics and politics in identity and in self-identification. I mean it's almost like you're saying just move on, get over it. Yeah, we can move on and get over it, but lots of our people have been hurt and raped and killed. How do we get over that?

The lessons and the teachings don't lie in the depth of the tragedy. The meaning is in how we can move forward. I was reading the Native Women's Association of Canada website, about so many women missing or murdered, over 600 Sisters of Spirit. And the lessons and teachings don't lie in the tragedies of their lives, they lie in remembering them and their lives and understanding and trying to build awareness about why our women are being targeted, why we're invisible. It's because there hasn't been enough response from the Canadian government, from the authorities. And that's one of the reasons why we need to communicate and reconcile too so that we can build awareness about that and try and reduce it, reduce those numbers.



So it's not just forgetting and placing blame and getting over it. It's about moving forward and reclaiming, reconciling our identities, and our communities. And learning from the past. We can't forget all those survivors.

INSIGHT #7

Claim who you are!

Obviously the Aboriginal students have non-Aboriginal friends. And I think if they can get by without having to identify their Aboriginal selves they will because it's easier. It's safe not to.

You go through different identity crises at those ages. For me, I was 21. A professor showed a video of my culture, a positive display of my culture, and I knew I should be proud of this because she provided a safe place, a safe space.

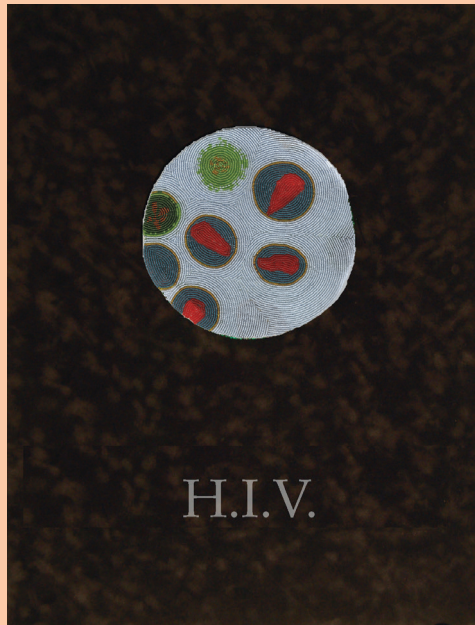
It is truly hard to deal with the knowledge that people wanted you to die. But understanding that the Black community, the Aboriginal community, in spite of all of the degrading things and inequitable things, the times when people would have hoped that our communities would die, we have survived. Appreciate the strength in our communities that came out of that.

This is what we need to hear at the moment. Give ourselves a place and a right to be angry. Often, you know, when we see angry people, elders and survivors, we don't understand. For me anger causes a lot of fear because growing up I did experience violence like many of us have. So anger is a very scary emotion for me to express and feel and own, so I try to suppress that. But here we're allowed to feel it. And it felt really healing to do that.



When Dorothy Christian spoke she was the most personal, she shared a lot of her personal experiences. It was very evocative, very emotional. Because she was very, you know, outward and outspoken about the 60s scoop when so many Aboriginal children were put in foster or adoptive homes. Just knowing that you're not alone does a lot. Dorothy Christian was just so validating. She talked about how losing your sense of belonging to your family, your community, and your culture is really how colonization works, separating yourself from yourself. And that's why it's important to talk about it now so that we can reconcile our identities, our communities, our families, and start to forgive ourselves.

Obviously it's not about placing blame. I guess it's about forgiveness, including yourself. All of those things that our communities have been through are not the places to get stuck. You understand it but you have to not focus on it. If you only focus on the negative, that's all you'll ever see in life. You have to understand the negative, but also look at what positive things do we have, where are we going, and what do we do to provide a better tomorrow for ourselves and our kids?



This is where our Insights end and YOURS begin. Please feel free to add pages. This is your Journal.



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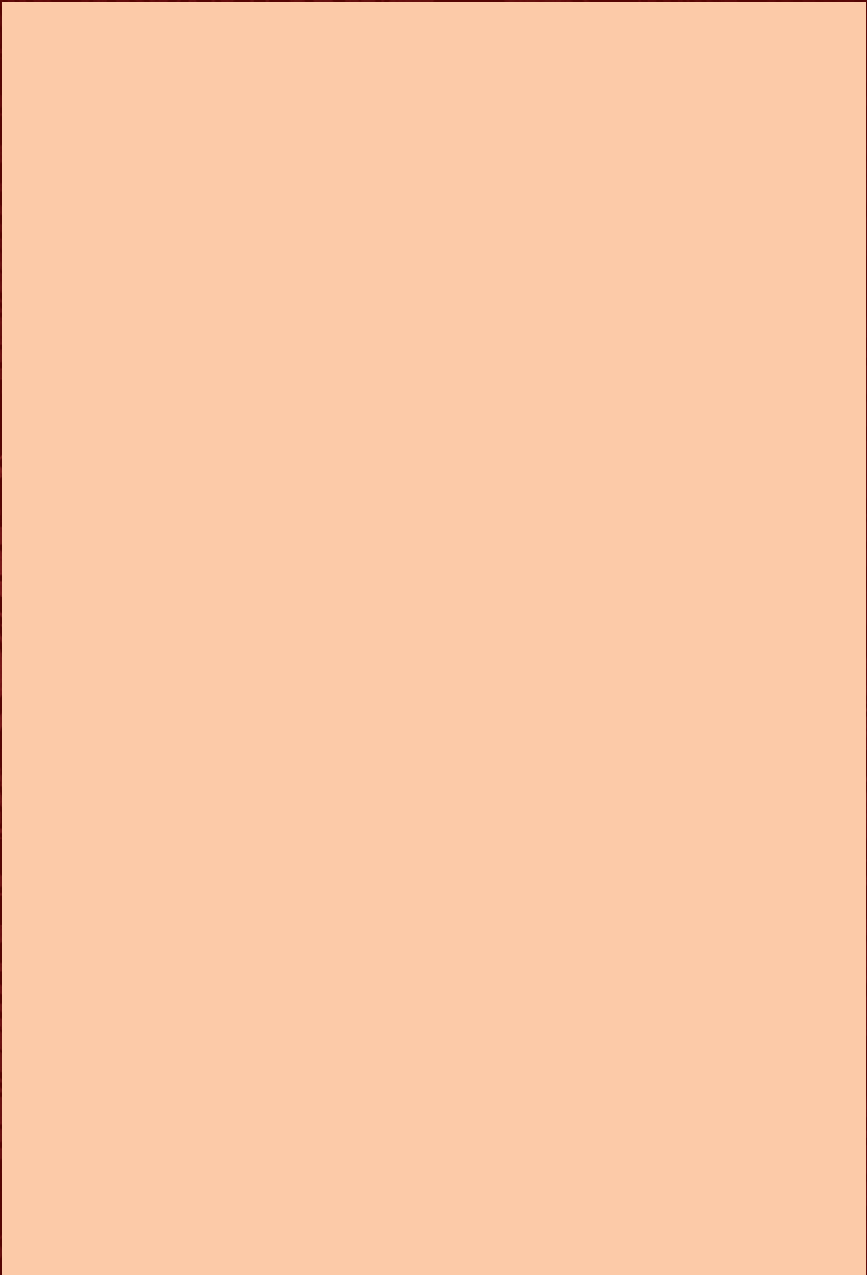






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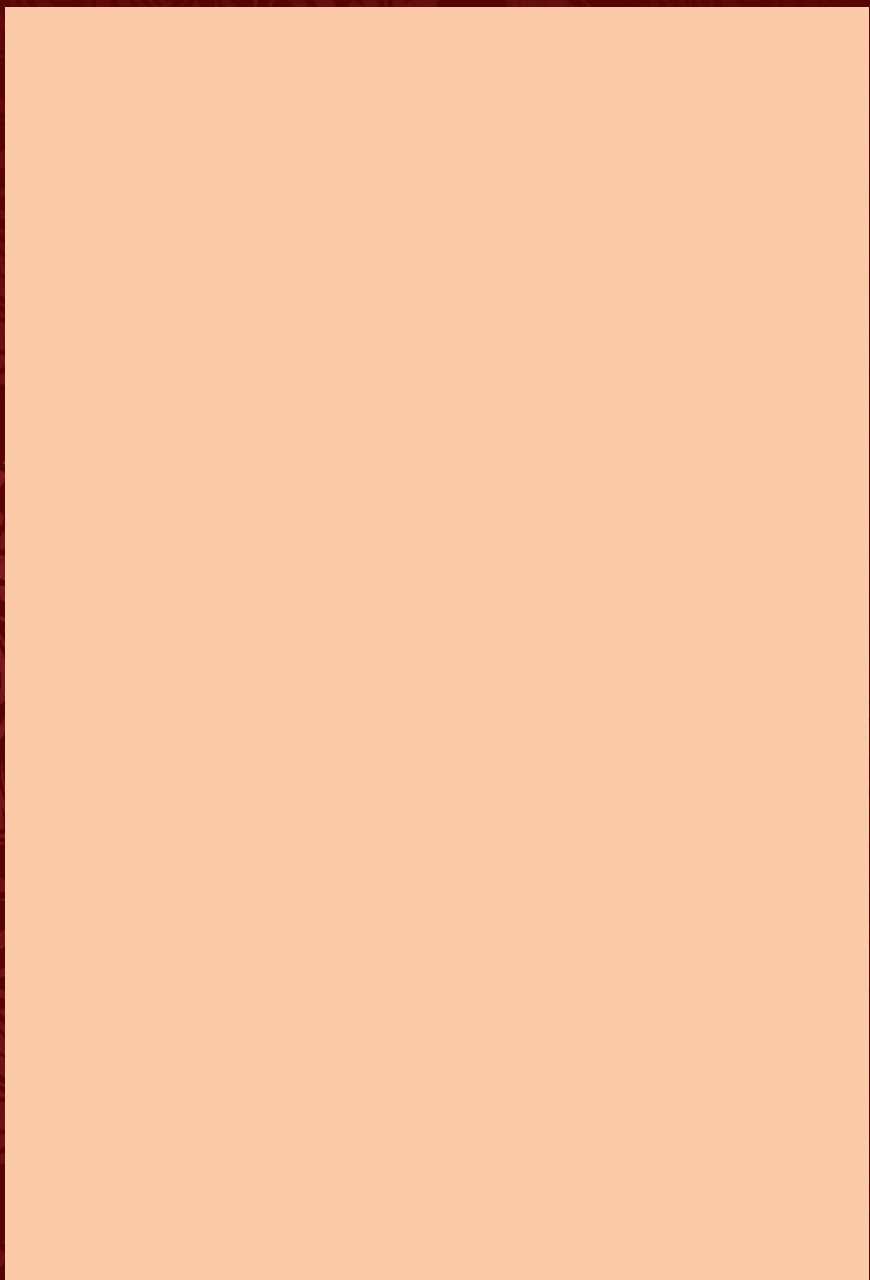






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