

# INDIGENOUS DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN VIDEO: WITNESSING WITH ALMA

DESJARLAIS<sup>1</sup>

Judy Iseke\*  
*Lakehead University*

## ABSTRACT

Indigenous digital storytelling in video are ways of witnessing the stories of Indigenous communities and Elders, including what has happened and is happening in the lives and work of Indigenous peoples. Witnessing includes acts of remembrance in which we look back to reinterpret and recreate our relationship to the past in order to understand the present. Pedagogical witnessing allows my reading, viewing, or listening to be an event in which I allow the understanding of someone else's life to interrupt my own life. This article begins with a discussion of a digital storytelling video project in which an Indigenous Elder, Alma Desjarlais – a Cree/Métis grandmother, shares stories to witness and help us understand the histories of trauma and the resilience and strength of Indigenous peoples. Her stories are interspersed from the film, *Grandmothers of the Métis Nation* (Iseke, 2010a; [www.ourelderstories.com](http://www.ourelderstories.com)) that is part of the digital storytelling project and provides supplementary background information to support the social, political, cultural, and economic context of the stories. Alma's stories are followed by a discussion of witnessing and the ways that Indigenous digital storytelling, through the digital storytelling project with Alma Desjarlais, involve pedagogic witness

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\* Address correspondence to: Judy Iseke, Lakehead University, Faculty of Education, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Education, 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, ON, P7B 5E1, Canada. Email: [jisekeba@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jisekeba@lakeheadu.ca)

Indigenous digital storytelling (Hopkins, 2006) in video are ways of witnessing the stories of Indigenous communities and Elders, including what has happened and is currently happening in the lives and work of Indigenous peoples (Verran & Christie, 2007). Stories emphasize cultural knowledges that thrive on relations among peoples and worlds (Castellano, 2000; Ermine, 1995; Little Bear, 2000) and provide one way to honour traditions and ancestors (Thomas, 2005). Witnessing may also include acts of remembrance in which a survivor of trauma and colonization looks back to reinterpret and recreate a relationship to the past in order to understand the present (Dion, 2009; Felman & Laub, 1992; Simon, Eppert, Cloamen, & Beres, 2001; Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000). Laub (in Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 75) identifies three levels of witnessing. A first level of witnessing is when a person is a witness to oneself in his/her own recollections of an experience or event. A second level of witnessing is being a witness within the process of sharing testimony about an experience or event. Finally, one can be a witness in the process of witnessing the testimonies of others. Each of these levels of witnessing is expressed in the stories examined in this article.

The process of witnessing another person's testimony is a part of the process of pedagogical witnessing that allows my reading, viewing, or listening to be an event in which I allow the understanding of someone else's life to interrupt my own life. Simon et al. (2001) articulate pedagogical witness as a historical consciousness that inter-links a series of performances and acts in community to pass on knowledge through revisiting the past. Knowing here is not a solitary act but occurs in relation and within the process of "a communicative act" that they call "pedagogical witnessing" (p. 294).

Indigenous digital storytelling ~~are~~is a ways of witnessing by Indigenous peoples the stories of Indigenous communities (Dowell, 2006; Miller, 2006; Roth, 2005; Singer, 2001) ~~are~~ that is “reflective of our [Indigenous] ways of knowing, being and doing,” (Leclair & Warren, 2007, p. 10) and defines cultural knowledges that thrive on relations amongst peoples and worlds (Castellano, 2000; Ermine, 1995; Little Bear, 2000). Indigenous digital storytelling is one way to honour Indigenous traditions and ancestors (Thomas, 2005). The discussions of the Indigenous digital storytelling project with Alma Desjarlais is an example of this Indigenous digital storytelling (Bishop, 1996) and, reflects the storytelling processes of the ancestors in a modern world (Archibald, 2008; King, 2003; Lanigan, 1998).

My discussion of witnessing begins with a digital storytelling video project in which an Indigenous Elder, Alma Desjarlais – a Cree/Métis grandmother, shares stories as acts of witness to help us understand the histories of trauma and the resilience and strength of Indigenous peoples who continue to sustain and practice traditional knowledge and healing practices that have been under threat from colonization and its legacy. Her stories illuminate witnessing and the ways that witnessing can be a powerful form of recovery from a colonial past.

Remembering the ways that traditions were passed on in Indigenous communities is important to the next generation and to seven generations in the future. “In Blackfoot the English word ‘story’ literally translates as involvement in an event. If a Blackfoot asks another Blackfoot to tell a story, he is literally asking the storyteller to tell about his ‘involvement’ in an event” (Little Bear, cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 94). Alma, in telling her life story, is fully involved in the events she is sharing. She references her grandparents and Elders as well as her brother, to honour their memory and the knowledge shared by them. Her stories show the strong link

between the teller and the story and demonstrate how the story told through oral history builds generationally (Métis Centre, 2008).

I begin with an introduction of the researcher, the research program, and the research approach from which this article is drawn. Next, Alma Desjarlais is introduced and her narrative stories shared, interspersed with narrations from the film and supplementary background information that support understanding the social, political, cultural, and economic context of the stories. This is followed by a discussion of witnessing and the ways that Alma's stories told through Indigenous digital storytelling illuminate pedagogic witness. The paper draws two conclusions: that Alma's stories give testimony about the past and engage readers to reconceptualise their stereotypic understanding of the role of healers in communities; and that media, such as Indigenous digital storytelling, can be used for healing practices through the communicative act of pedagogic witnessing.

#### INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR AND HER RESEARCH PROGRAM

I am a Métis woman, researcher, educator, and filmmaker of Métis and N'hiawuk heritage along with European ancestry. I am from St. Albert, Alberta, Canada and a descendent of the Bellerose and Beaudry Métis families that are said to have founded this community although this community is located on lands that have been travelled and inhabited by Indigenous ancestors for millennia.

My research program involves working with Métis Elders from various communities in Canada focusing on Indigenous storytelling. Elders share their stories and expertise through collaborative dialogues. The Elders have given me the responsibility to edit their words and ideas and to share the edited texts back with them, working in a collaborative dialogue towards a series of films, papers, chapters, and books that can be shared with the community and more broadly.

The film project on which this article is based was developed first to help my own children understand their heritage as Métis people. I know that there are many young people who need to know the stories of their ancestors and communities, and film is one way to reach them through home, community, and school viewing of stories. These stories also counter the silencing of Métis history that has occurred in mainstream society and in educational practices (Iseke, 2009) and provide access to Métis stories and histories that will help our children and members of our Nation be proud of who we are. “The state of our nation[s] thus depends on how we rectify the injustices to our children of the past and how we ensure the well-being of the children of the present and future” (Lawrence & Anderson, 2005, p. 6).

One of my five films entitled *Grandmothers of the Métis Nation* (Iseke, 2010a) explores three Métis grandmothers and their respective roles in their communities as historians, leaders, educators, and healers. The intention is not simply to tell the stories of their work as mothers and grandmothers but to explore the larger public roles and responsibilities that they have undertaken. Each grandmother has a particular set of skills and gifts that she shares in the world. Alma Desjarlais is one of these grandmothers who shares her life story as a healer and educator to her community as well as a recognized Elder in Indigenous communities nationally and internationally.

#### EPISTEMOLOGY INFORMING THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Kovach (2005), a Nèhiyaw and Saulteaux researcher, cautions that conceptions of research are “so entangled with haughty theories of what is truth” (p. 32) that we may forget that research is truly “about learning and so is a way of finding out things” (Hampton, 1995, p. 48). Smith (1999) suggests “researching back,” like “talking back” as a form of “recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (p. 7). Research that engages in

this resistance, recovery, and renewal is central to Indigenous peoples as it supports our lives and work in communities and in academic settings. Elders are important in this process and have systematically gathered wisdom, histories, skills, and expertise in cultural knowledge (Smith, 1999). The research methodology in working with Elders must be based on respectful relations. Lassiter (2000) explains the importance of dialogic and collaborative texts produced within Indigenous communities that are based on human relationships that "produce deeper dialogues about culture" and "engender moral and ethical commitments" (p. 610) between collaborative research participants.

"Research, like life, is about relationships" (Kovach, 2005, p. 30). The cultural context positions the participants in research. Research in such a context becomes a collaborative venture whose effect is the shared development of new storylines (Bishop, 1998). Both Stevenson (2000) and Wilson (2008) explain the complexity of putting oral stories into written texts, explaining that a narrative style of experiences and more analytical style of discourse assist in understanding the stories and expressing relationships. Tupuola (1994) suggests from her Samoan perspective that Indigenous "peoples' experiences need to be expressed and written within a context that complements the oral and dialogic nature of our communication style" (p. 183). For this reason, the research is presented in a narrative format and draws on the stories of Elders who tell stories.

#### *An Indigenous Research Approach*

Five Elders from Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia consented to come to Thunder Bay, in Northern Ontario, in May, 2007 to share stories with each other and, ~~in~~ as part of the research process, to be video- and audio-recorded. Four of the five attended. Each was informed of the research intention to explore storytelling when they were asked to attend on the telephone. The research process reflects the need to respect Elders' knowledge and to give Elders

a chance to decline participation if they feel their participation is not to the benefit of the research (Archibald, 2008; Cardinal, 2001; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Pidgeon & Hardy Cox, 2002; Steinhauer, 2001; Weber-Pillwax, 2001).

The Elders were invited to a welcome ceremony in which a local Elder from Thunder Bay welcomed them onto this territory (Wilson, 2001, 2008). Gifts of tobacco and cloth were given by me and the Elders were formally invited to participate in the discussions. The Elders accepting the tobacco acknowledged that they consented to be involved in the research. These gifts acknowledged that the Elders' words would be treated with utmost respect and would become part of the social and historical understandings of Métis peoples who would be honoured in this process. Further, the tobacco acknowledged that speaking untruths would upset the relational balance and so truth would be spoken in the research process (Kovach, 2009). For both the Elders and I, the tobacco also signified the relationship and responsibility of the researcher to respect that relationship with the Elders and the knowledge that they shared. It also was a commitment to continue to work with the Elders in representing their stories.

~~The Elders were given tobacco and asked to hold a pipe ceremony which established the research would be conducted in a good way. A closing ceremony was held in the research space and a community feast was held at the home of local Métis community members to celebrate the completion of this phase of the ongoing research process. The closing ceremony provided by the Elders gave thanks for this opportunity together and with the feast allowed us all to be a part of a complete cycle of ceremony over these nine days.~~

Prior to this research, these Elders had worked with organizations that conducted research, including the Métis Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) in Ottawa, and as a result, they were familiar with and expected information about the purpose of

the research and consent letters. In addition to the tobacco and ceremony, Elders were given an information letter about the research and were asked to sign a consent form in keeping with established procedures with which these Elders were familiar.

The Elders were then given tobacco and asked to hold a pipe ceremony which established the research would be conducted in a good way. The Elders were given a copy of the research questions that would guide and focus discussions. They were then free to respond in whatever way they saw fit (Bishop 1996). A talking circle methodology encouraged discussion and opportunities for full participation of each Elder. Elders were audio and video recorded while sitting in the talking circle.

A closing ceremony was held in the research space and a community feast was held at the home of local Métis community members to celebrate the completion of this phase of the ongoing research process. The closing ceremony provided by the Elders gave thanks for this opportunity together and with the feast allowed us all to be a part of a complete cycle of ceremony over these nine days.

This kind of filmmaking and research conducted through ceremony and talking circle methodology is as much about the process of community relationships as it is about the development of video products and research outcomes. The Elders wanted to see their stories on video and wanted to ensure that their ideas were shared with the next generation; these videos are welcomed as a ways to do this within Indigenous communities. Elders also understood that their ideas would be shared more broadly in academic papers. Elders commented on an earlier version of this article prior to its publication to ensure that respectful relations with Elders were sustained.



All recorded discussions with Elders were transcribed and roughly sorted into themes. From this rough sorting, a transcript was created from Alma's (one of the Elders) contributions to the discussions. Alma was contacted by telephone and arrangements were made for a two-day follow up interview with her. She was given a copy of the transcript from her original contributions as well as questions about what she had originally said, and Alma then told more stories and clarified information from the original transcripts. Again, Alma's words were transcribed and sorted and a film script was developed based on Alma's transcripts. She has also been given copies of this manuscript and asked for comment and feedback. Versions of the film have been shared with Alma and her family and this allowed for ongoing discussions and dialog about her words and their use.

### ALMA'S STORY

I begin with the words I had written for the film narrator that introduces the viewer to Alma and describes her. I hired a local First Nations woman with experience in broadcast to be the voice of the narrator.

Narration: Alma Desjarlais is a recognized Elder in Northern Alberta whose work in education and healing in her community of East Prairie [a settlement in northern Alberta, Canada] is well known.

Alma Desjarlais was born in Frog Lake, Alberta, a First Nations community in northeastern Alberta. Alma is the daughter of *N'hiawuk* (sometimes referred to as "woodlands Cree" or "the four directions people") parents. She was stripped of her First Nations status by the Indian Act upon marrying a Métis and became Métis (Laliberte et al., 2000; Lawrence & Anderson, 2005). Her son indicated that her children are not allowed by the Department of Indian Affairs to return to First Nations status. Alma's Nèhiyaw grandmother and family were

healers and helped Alma to become a healer. Alma is fluent in her *N'hiawuk* language and has become a Pipe Carrier<sup>2</sup>, works with healing medicines and is part of the healing lodge that she and her husband, Albert, have built on their land. She also oversees a cultural camp for young people to help them learn *N'hiawuk* traditions.

The film opens with a close-up shot of Alma in her home with a backdrop of Indigenous items on her table (e.g., a birch bark tepee, Eagle feather) and family photographs as well as a photo of Alma receiving an Esquao Award, a women's award in recognition of keeping the cultural traditions alive in her community.

Narration: In May 2005, Alma attended an Aboriginal Women's and Health meeting in Ottawa.

Alma: And I remember we, we, the Elders had their own little circle, instead of being mixed with the other ones. ... The Elders' declaration from the meeting included: Walk the talk.

Live the teachings Share the teachings. Practice the teachings. Keep it living. Pass it on.

The Elders in this gathering emphasized the value of the lives, teachings, and practices of Indigenous traditions and their continuation, despite the ruptures that occurred due to colonization. Indigenous Elders and scholars provide strategies to decolonize our minds, our practices, and our knowledge systems that have all been impacted by colonial discourses (Alfred, 1999; Grande, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Iseke, 2010b; Iseke-Barnes, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Smith, 1999).

Indigenous peoples around the globe have survived practices of violence in the name of so-called "progress," including genocide, assimilation policies, forced relocation, land theft, and residential schools (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). Through the Canadian Indian Act of 1876 and its revision in 1884, complete suppression or control of social, cultural, political, and artistic expression was accomplished (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007; McMaster, 1989). However,

government efforts to suppress and control Indigenous peoples and erase their presence in history have only provoked further action on the part of Indigenous peoples to sustain cultural traditions and, through the resilience of a people, to survive against the odds (McMaster, 1989; Smith, 1999). Indigenous peoples have challenged the oppression by creating “humor, poetry, music, storytelling and other common sense ways of passing both a narrative history and attitude about history” (Smith, 1999, p. 19). New uses of media extend these Indigenous practices and aid in challenging oppression and control (Bunn-Marcuse, 2005; Dowell, 2006; Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2006; 2007; Iseke-Barnes & Jimenez, 2008; Leavy, 2007; Riecken et al., 2006; Roth, 2005; Singer, 2001, 2005; Young Man, 1998).

Alma helps us understand the consequences of colonization on traditional lifestyles and for women and children that she witnessed in her life. Through discussion of the Elders’ circle, she explains the process of colonization through the suppression and negation of women and women’s power.

Alma: They said back then, the woman ... was the backbone of the family.... When the men went hunting, she kept the home fires going and looking after the family. And they said in a way a woman always had more say than men. And then we got into this other society. Now the woman got left behind.

One way that Indigenous cultures were colonized was through deliberate diminishing women’s roles and responsibilities and suppression of their power in communities and larger society (Monture & McGuire, 2009; Mohawk Women of Caughnawaga, 2009). This was largely accomplished through the Indian Act of 1876, its subsequent revisions, and residential schools. The Indian Act stripped women, like Alma, of their rights to live in First Nations communities,

to be included on band lists, and to be considered members of First Nations (Iseke-Barnes, 2002). In the Indian Act of 1876,

(3) The term “Indian” means

*First.* Any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band;

*Secondly.* Any child of such person;

*Thirdly.* Any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person; ...

c) Provided that any Indian woman marrying any other than an Indian or a non-treaty Indian shall cease to be an Indian in any respect within the meaning of this Act (Excerpt from the Indian Act, 1876, in Laliberte et al., 2000, p. 498-499).

The effect was the elimination of many First Nations women from First Nations communities and their replacement by non-First Nations women, thus, impacted child rearing practices and the passing on of traditions, culture, values, and language.

Another force in the assimilation of Indigenous peoples was residential schooling that in Canada forcibly removed children from their homes and often sent them thousands of miles to be educated by members of Christian religious orders (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986). While predominantly experienced by First Nations children, Métis children also experienced the deleterious effects of residential schools (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2004). The Indigenous traditions were not valued in residential schools and were assailed by members of religious orders (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997). For example, Bishop Grandin of St. Albert (where Alma later attended residential school) wrote on Feb. 29, 1880 in the newspaper the Saskatchewan Herald

that one hundred Indian [First Nations] and halfbreed [Métis] children be brought to the mission, when they leave, they will no longer be Indians, being able to become good

citizens, earn their own living, and to be useful to their country. (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2004, p. i)

Alma describes the impact of residential schools on communities and youth—students did not learn traditions in school and some students of residential schools were so separated from families that they did not learn traditions at home either.

Alma: That goes a long way back. Some of them don't learn that at home ... They were brought up in school so when they go home, they didn't do it eh. ... And they learned that it was bad. Like it was evil, for the priests. That's what they called it. ... Cause even the ceremonies they just about died off years ago. The Sundances, even they tried to stop that but they couldn't. It's powerful I guess. They really wanted to kill the Indian in you.

In addition to complete suppression of culture, language, and traditions, violence and abuse were common in residential schools (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011; Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986). Alma testifies to the effects of residential schools that she attended at the age of 12 even though she was already too old and too knowledgeable in traditions to suffer at the hands of the priests, ministers, and nuns who abused younger and less knowledgeable students. Her testimony helps us understand and bear witness, calling us to consider how this remembrance can affect our own understanding of the educational history of Canada and the colonizing practices undertaken by the government and religious orders in Canada.

Alma shares stories of how she learned traditions at home. We hear the narrator of the film state:

Narration: We all need to know who we are and where we came from so we don't get left behind. This can also create balance. Alma tells us about growing up in balance. She tells us about learning from her grandparents.

Alma: I learned the traditional lifestyle growing up. Their livelihood is different from today. People lived off the land. Had their own gardens, grew their own food. There was also a way they preserved their food. And we learned the hunting and the fishing from them. And , and the gathering of medicines and berries and preserving them.

Growing up, in Frog Lake where my grandparents--I only had one set of grandparents that were alive as we were growing up--But they passed their knowledge to us. And also we learned from other Elders. Like the saying, when it says it takes a whole community to raise a child, was true back then .... Because everybody was able to talk to the young people. Like nobody got upset if they, if somebody else told your kids something. ...

Kinship was very important back then. In Cree it's called Wahkohtowin - kinship. And as a child, you were not allowed to call people by their name. You called them aunty or uncle. That's the way we were raised and that's how my kids are today.

Alma: We learned. ... We used to go around with our grandma picking roots, but like any other kid you're not paying attention but in a way you are. We were also playing around, but we were also helping her. She showed us how to pick them. How to put tobacco in the ground before you pick them. And how she dried them. ... So you know how to respect, to clean, and to dry them in a respectful way. Keep them clean and everything. I also knew that they could help people, heal people, the stuff that we were picking.

For quite a while when I was raising my kids, I didn't do that. And then when I was about 50, I started doing more of that. And now I'm helping Albert [Alma's husband who is a healer]. All the things we do now come back. ... I didn't do [medicines] until I started helping Albert. Now I do most of it.

Alma's story helps us understand the damage done by residential schools, the need for revitalization from the damage, and the importance of healing and health care for Indigenous peoples. Edge and McCallum (2006) document that 80% of 800 Métis participants in a 2002 study "consider the revitalization of Aboriginal culture and traditions as necessary towards improving our current health care system." (p. 86). They also note that 60% of respondents could not have access or did not know how to access traditional medicines and healing practices. Sixty percent of respondents "attribute poor health to experiences in the residential school system and to the loss of land and culture" (p. 87). The importance of Elders or healers to provide Indigenous healing practices is incorporated in the Cree language: the word *Maskikiwenow* is used to refer to an Elder or healer who is the one who deals in medicines or other healing practices and *otsapahcikewenow* is the word used for those who are trained to do ceremonies. *Ohnekanapew* are those people who sit at the front of a ceremony or is the one who smokes the pipe in the pipe ceremony (Métis Centre, 2008, [p. 21](#)). Alma works in each of these Elder practices and incorporates medicines in her healing work.

Alma also is an educator and teaches the cultural and healing traditions to the next generation. Her stories demonstrate a living pedagogical witnessing as a remembrance in practice. One example is ceremony in the sweat lodge.

Narration: Alma and Albert bring their grandchildren into the sweat lodge so they know how to heal.

Alma: I guess they just help us and learn as they go along eh. About the.. meaning [of]traditions, is that the culture and livelihood and whatever? ... helping with the medicines. And the sweat.

They come in there. We bring them in when they're about three months old even. And they start coming in. They learn. We don't force them. They come in when they want to. They'll do one round, two rounds or sometimes the whole four. And um. And they learn to be doorman, how to bring rocks in, you have to learn that too. And even our granddaughter, when there's no boys, she did that. She really enjoyed it. You tell them, they behave in there. And they sit and listen and learn. They know how to sing. They sing with us in there.

Eber Hampton describes a day after a sweat lodge healing ceremony being able to look with new eyes and at work he read an article by Gael High Pine entitled “The Great Spirit in the Modern World” (Iseke-Barnes, 2002, p. 181). Hampton quotes Pine, suggesting

“It is not important to preserve our traditions, it is important to allow our traditions to preserve us.” And then the final paragraph ... “My children, there is no modern world, there is no Indian world. There is only the Great Spirit's world and the same Creator who made the beautiful forests traces the cracks in the sidewalks and puts rainbows in the oil slicks on city streets.” (Hampton cited in Iseke-Barnes, 2002, p. 181)

Alma discusses the challenges of maintaining continuity and preserving knowledge in a modern context. She illuminates disjunctive continuities in regard to healing practices in Indigenous communities.

Alma: it's very hard to teach--to try and take them back to the herbal medicines when it's easier to swallow a pill. That's what we're working against.



Narration: Alma also explains the process of learning traditional knowledge within her family. She continues to pass it down in her family.

Alma: I was about 50 years old when my late brother brought me a pipe [for a woman], and he told me ... “You're old enough to have a pipe now.” I guess we didn't realize that he was getting us ready. And he gave the sweat lodge to my younger brother and his pipe. Getting us ready to go on our own. When we first started with the sweat and he used to come down to teach us the sweat with us. And then he'd be singing. All of the sudden he'd quit, and then he'd say, “Phil keep going.” ‘Cause we didn't sing very much when he first started. I knew some songs. It kind of took time to start on our own. ... Albert sings and I help him some times. At first I'd start him off, and then he'd sing the rest of the way.

Métis woman were the best Medicine women, and the men. ... They said they lost their culture but ... the culture was always there. The people were the ones that were lost along the way, being forbidden to practice it themselves ‘cause they were being taught by the priests that it wasn't right - that it was evil. And I think, the Métis people would be strong pipe carriers.

Alma's description of the many challenges to teaching and practicing traditions as well as the suppression and rejection of traditions indicate some of the ways that Métis people have been colonized and have internalized these colonial ideologies to a state that some of them have become naturalized. But Alma is clear that Métis people endure, that the traditions continue, and that Métis people, and particularly Métis women, are strong medicine people and pipe carriers.

Alma and Albert are committed to teaching within their own communities, as well as regionally, nationally, and internationally through their travels and sharing in research.

Narrator: Alma and Albert are Elders to a culture camp held on their land to help teach the traditions, language, and culture (to children in East Prairie Settlement and the region as well as parents of the children and other adult community members who want to learn). Local people who live the traditions are presenters at the camp. The kids learn to make dry meat, dried berries, smoked fish, and canned meat and fruits. They learn to skin beaver and to make moose callers, birch bark baskets, and fish scale art. The kids also learned singing, round dance, and to do give-away, which is an important part of Aboriginal traditions.

Alma: We had Cree too. Cree teacher. Teaching Cree and singing in Cree with actions. They enjoyed that. They say their name and where they're from, and they say it in Cree. And in that short time that they were here, they learned that. ... And then just talking to them.

And the sweat. We don't force them to. They want to. They just go and watch there outside. A lot of them sweat. And it's not only kids that come and learn. The adults too that come. And they have a pipe ceremony every morning. A lot of them ... don't learn that traditional way at home. So they show a few of them, they went picking berries and a bit of medicines.

Above, Alma's stories share her witnessing of gatherings, teachings, experiences, and traumatic effects, as well as to the strength of the grandparents and Elders. As readers/listeners we are called to bear witness to her stories and the events that she describes as they are contextualized socially, politically, and historically. The importance of stories for remembering and making a community's and nations history are available in Alma's stories and reflect and emphasize knowledge of community.

## REMEMBERING AND BRINGING FORWARD A COMMUNITY'S AND NATION'S STORIES

Deloria (1994) wrote, “The nation’s stories reflect what is important to a group of people as a group” (p. 100) and reflect the historical understandings of that group. History ties the past to the present and future, connecting understandings and perspectives on histories dictated by how a people see themselves, their identity in relation to the location in which they live, and expressions of uniqueness as Indigenous peoples (Canada, 1996). Cruikshank (1990) adds that “history is woven in stories and storytelling provides a customary framework for discussing the past” (p. ix). Stories have many purposes, including educating listeners, communicating culture, socializing into cultural traditions, and validating claims (Canada, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996). Events cannot be classified for all time, as the storyteller is so much a part of the story. It is the responsibility of the listener to draw conclusions from oral testimonies, taking into account the circumstances for the telling and who the storyteller is, as well as the time, place, and situation of the telling. Meaning is, therefore, an interpreted understanding gained from the vantage point of the listener. The listener bears witness and through acts of remembrance, witnessing, living on after genocide, and hopeful remembrance, engages with the story and learns to interpret.

### *Understanding Acts of Remembrance*

Dion’s (2009) project was to retell accounts of Indigenous ancestors that she and her brother found in the library. In this process of writing, the stories of Indigenous ancestors intertwined with their own stories, becoming “in the moment of (re)telling, ... both witness and testifier, bearing witness to the stories of our ancestors and giving testimony as survivors of the policy of forced assimilation” (p. 17). Dion had visited the Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford,

Ontario, Canada near the Six Nations Indigenous community. In the centre was “The First Nations Hall of Fame,” which Dion explains is a hallway lined with photographs of Indigenous peoples accompanied by a description of their accomplishments as “community leaders in community service, medicine, law, politics, and literature” (p. 17). Dion and her brother were inspired by this hall of fame and saw it as a call to action in remembering First Nations people’s contributions and acknowledging how so many of these contributions were made invisible in dominant accounts of history due to the violence of colonization. Dion and her brother were called upon to witness, listen, remember, and share their knowledge, understandings and experiences, “not just as an individual but as an individual connected with others” (p. 18).

Witnessing can occur through acts of remembrance that radically reconfigure understandings and relationships between the past and present, challenging views of ourselves, others, and our environment and making new patterns, representations and associations (Simon, 1992). Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert (2000) recognize different forms of remembrance that might reconceptualise what can be taught and learned through engagements with the past and engage people in the development of forms of historical consciousness. In one such form, “Remembrance ... endeavours to bring forth into presence specific people and events of the past in order to honour their names and to hold a place for their absent presence in one’s contemporary life” (p. 4). Alma’s acts of remembrance through stories bring her grandparents and family into presence, honouring their roles in her becoming a healer. Through a recollection of their actions, deeds, and knowledge, she brings their understandings and traditional knowledge into contemporary times. This is a powerful form of remembrance and counters the historicizing of traditions and Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999) by bringing traditions, healers,

and grandparent roles into the present. Here Indigenous people are no longer locked in the past nor behind glass in a museum.

Remembrance as a critical practice of learning opens us to our limits and aids us in understanding what we must disturb in order to learn from a radical reconfiguring of history (Iseke-Barnes, 2005). It requires consciousness about the context in which one engages with the story, the way one is invested in the retelling and remembrance, and the continuities and discontinuities that one is living in relation to the stories (Iseke-Barnes, 2003). For Alma, the reconfiguration of the roles of healer and grandmother are made salient in her stories of the past and present and effect the transformation of these roles.

Simon et al. (2000) suggest that this is an act of “remembering well,” moving us from the assumption we can master the past toward a reflexive relationship with the past that is partial, mediated by our lives, and engaged in both the continuity and discontinuity of remembering and a connection and disconnection of oneself with the past. The strategies, forms, and practices of remembering well are a process that share boundaries with acts of witnessing.

### **Witnessing**

The process of writing and witnessing history is never simple, as is the case with Alma’s story. She appears to tell a simple story of her life experience but contained within that story is a critique of the colonizing processes of residential schools, the Indian Act, cultural negotiations of changing times and circumstances and the ways educational, healing practices, and community roles have been transformed. In Alma’s accounts telling stories recovers the Indigenous knowledge of healers and grandmothers “reminding of that which has previously been known” (Simon et al., 2001, p. 287). This “telling again” brings “past lives and places into presence ... in an attempt to hold past, present and future as co-terminus,” thus, the past is eternally present (p.

287). “The pedagogy of remembrance relies on historiographic detail, reminiscence, vignette, and symbolization to remind and announce that ‘this has occurred,’ ‘this person lived.’” (p. 287). This process brings what has been forgotten or lost back so it is possible to be attached to the remembrance—bonding emotions, cultural identifications, and historical narratives to particular groups, families, or communities. This kind of teaching enables one “to live through a crisis” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 53) in the experience of hearing the testimony and this teaching strives to enable change and transformation within the one listening to the testimony.

Simon et al. (2001) challenge the conservatism of mainstream memorialization and history by “overcoming history through history” (p. 320). They suggest learning from the past in order to unsettle our understanding of ourselves and the way we conceive of the world (p. 288). They argue for “a pedagogical witness” as a way to review “one’s practices of reading, viewing and listening” so that the way one is listening may interrupt and disrupt one’s understandings (p. 289). Alma’s acts of sharing these stories are a self-conscious effort of an educator to teach about the past, about the effects of the past upon today and the affects of the circumstances of colonization and cultural genocide within the present as well as its implications for future generations. Her acts of witnessing through sharing stories in film, teaching at a culture camps, and educating locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally unsettle colonial understandings of history in which the lives and realities of Indigenous peoples are absent or erased. These acts of witnessing also challenge listeners to reconsider what they have listened to, read, viewed, and learned in their lives that they must now recognize as colonial accounts. From this relearning they must unlearn colonialism and relearn a new relationship to the past. Alma’s witnessing the history through which her own life experiences are traced disrupts the present and our understandings of how we have come to be here. It informs understandings of today’s events in

which colonial, oppressive, and dominating behaviours may still be witnessed and experienced or even prevalent in educational institutions and practices. Her testimony disrupts these too prevalent processes.

### *Interpreting the Testimony and Process of Sharing*

Earlier in this article I discussed Laub (Felman & Laub, 1992) who identified 3 levels of witnessing including the first level of witnessing of history for oneself. Alma's witnessing of history through her stories such as being stripped of Indian status due to marriage and attending residential schooling are examples of such witnessing. Laub's second level of witnessing is to be a witness within the process of providing testimony to others. Alma's storytelling is a conscious process of educating to pass on knowledge in revisiting the past and sharing in relation with the interviewer in the film. By sharing stories as an Elder and knowledge and culture keeper, Alma testifies to the central role of grandparents as teachers of traditions in the past and keeping the culture alive. Her stories also testify to colonial interruptions and the ongoing transforming of cultural education practices to reach the children and youth of today.

### *The Power of Testimony in Film*

Alma, through her witnessing, calls listeners and film viewers to action in what Laub identifies as the third level of witnessing. Even through the medium of film, Alma tells us how to be active in sharing in the traditions, keeping them alive, being a learner of traditions, and working to retain them. She shows us that valuing the traditions and practicing them will keep them and us alive. Felman (Felman & Laub, 1992) contends that testimony is a performative speech act that is an action and has impact that can rupture and exceed the limits of making a statement. The action of sharing testimony is part of the healing process for the one sharing the testimony and because the speech act is addressed to others, it can aid them in releasing

emotions, too. Sharing testimony also impacts the listeners as they must unlearn the colonial lessons of society that they have been taught and relearn a new relationship to the past that includes taking responsibility for the new knowledge that they have acquired.

Felman further explores shifting from text to visual media in a class in which testimonies from survivors of concentration camps in Germany during the Second World War were shared through film. Even through the medium of film, the impacts on students of hearing these testimonies was profound and caused a crisis in the class as students were not able to make sense of the incredulous true stories of concentration camp survivors, nor were they able to deal with the complex emotions that arose as a result of the experience of watching these films. There was much that students needed to understand and work through. This kind of media has powerful impacts since viewers can no longer remain passive observers of history but become the living witnesses to it. They become actively implicated in understanding the history they learn, bearing witness to the horrors of the war and its direct victims, and to the ongoing implications of genocide on the victims that survived and subsequent generations

Laub (Felman & Laub, 1992), a psychiatrist, suggests that the effects of massive trauma are to disable “the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind” causing it to malfunction (p. 57). Laub further contends that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through the very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (p. 57). The listener can come to experience “bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (p. 58). The listener will also experience struggles of his/her own in the process of acting as witness to the trauma witness (storyteller). The listener is, therefore, both a witness to the trauma of the one sharing the story and a witness to his/her own experiences of the trauma of the story and reactions to it. But the



listener must be well enough informed in order to be able to hear the stories and understand the cues. ~~But~~ However, the listener cannot allow their understandings to “hinder or obstruct the listening with foregone conclusions and preconceived dismissals, should not be an obstacle or a foreclosure to new, diverging, unexpected information” (p. 61). Laub further suggests that sharing testimony and the knowledge within it is not a simple act of sharing facts but an event. This event of sharing is a part of a process of coming to know the event, to acknowledge it, and to understand it more fully. The listener to the testimony then comes to understand the event in new dimensions through the process of hearing the testimony.

The process of retelling stories of traumatic events may in themselves become traumatizing events if the process of retelling involves a reliving or re-experiencing of events of trauma. Since traumatic events often occur in a way that seems unreal or incomprehensible in the real world of living, they can come to seem timeless as though they did not happen before but are currently and somehow still real. One can become trapped in a cycle of a traumatic reality. To undo this entrapment is “a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*” which occurs when one can “*transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 69).

In telling the colonial history of our century as a life story of Alma, the film reveals turning full circle twice. The act of genocide often traps its victims in cycles of violence and victimhood (Felman & Laub, 1992). Breaking free of this captivity is made possible by sharing the stories of the past that haunt victims of violence. For Alma, first this occurs when she “escapes from thought into action, and then again when action, or rather having acted, forced him [her] back into thought” (Arendt, 1993, p. 9). So Alma escapes from thoughts of suppression

of culture and the need to sustain culture by moving into action. Holding the culture camp is a direct action of teaching culture and providing young people experiences to understand culture.

Alma then returns from action back into thought when she tells the story of the culture camp.

Alma's stories highlight the many ways that stories call us to attend to the past and reconsider our futures. Through the digital medium, Alma's stories tell us to live culture and to let it sustain us. Her stories show us how to live on after genocide and to retain and recreate healthy families and lives within the implications of genocide. They teach us how to transform our learning and teaching practices within a new era that has been profoundly impacted by genocide and to continue to practice traditions in transformed but continuing ways. Alma's stories recognize the transformations of cultural traditions and practices. Likewise, digital storytelling transforms the traditional practices of storytelling by fixing the story and distancing the teller from the listener. But the stories still have power as pedagogical witness. The stories are still helpful in educating those who choose to attend to this media version of the stories. This can include children in schools, community centers, and cultural programs where this film is being used.

Indigenous media, as an extension of this storytelling process, is a social practice located in the cultural politics and social actions of a community (Iseke & Moore, in press). As such, Indigenous media need to be understood on their own terms (Singer 2001) and need to be reconsidered as spaces for pedagogical witness. Today, Indigenous media are associated with proactive measures to address change and reflect Indigenous knowledge and perspectives while empowering Indigenous peoples toward a vision of a brighter future (Daly 2007; Eglash, 2007; Riecken, Conibear, Michel, Lyall, Scott, Tanaka, Stewart, Rieken, and Strong-Wilson, 2006; Robbins, 2007; Roth, 2005).

Many examples of Indigenous media exist that demonstrate Indigenous practices located in relation to Indigenous communities, expressing community viewpoints, and addressing the needs of communities (Reinhardt, 2005; Singer, 2005; Verran & Christie, 2007). In the process of hearing Alma's stories through digital storytelling, we are witness to her pedagogic process and transported back to her community in the times of her becoming a healer and the time before that when she learned about the roles of healers from her grandmother. We are transported also to her community at another time when her grandmother was a healer and fully understood the important role of healers and grandmothers in traditional communities. We witness the historic and ongoing understanding of the transformation of the roles of healer and grandmother in modern times in addressing the ongoing needs of community.

Self-representations in media challenge the taken-for-granted understandings so prevalent of Indigenous peoples in dominant society (Cullier & Ross 2007; Iseke-Barnes & Sakai 2003;). They allow us to understand the connections and challenges of political activities and locations in self-representations (Iseke-Barnes, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Viatori 2007).

Felman (Felman & Laub, 1992) further describes the importance of contemporary films that help us understand testimony and which she describes as having "become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history" (p. 5). Felman describes the witnessing by her students of films with testimonies that do not simply report facts but, instead, aid her students in encountering the unsettling and disruptive stories of Holocaust survivors. She poses the question, "Is the testimony, therefore, a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing?" (p. 9).

*Healing through Testimony*

Alma explains in her testimony that there are many factors that have disrupted the passing on of traditions of healing due to the cultural genocide that occurred in history through the residential schools, the devaluing of women and their roles, and the outlawing of ceremony. These make it difficult to share the traditions. Alma's stories through film call viewers to witness our relationship to this genocidal and colonial history and the ongoing reality of these oppressive practices. The digital storytelling still has power to aid Alma to reach an audience who can hear her call to attend to this history.

In an act of hopeful remembrance and in the act of healing through sharing testimony, Alma testifies to the need to find balance. She suggests that, in the past, there were healthy communities that aided in raising children and that the traditions were taught in these communities. Alma suggests in her stories that returning her children and grandchildren to the traditions and ceremonies and to sharing traditions in a culture camp in her community are activities to share traditions, aid in healing the wounds of colonization by reinvigorating traditions, and assist children in allowing the traditions to heal and sustain them. The culture camp is a different form of learning from that which Alma experienced growing up or that which she shared with her children and grandchildren. It is a way to aid children who want to learn about the traditions today in their community and beyond. Likewise the ways of witnessing through Indigenous digital storytelling rather than in oral histories have transformed the storytelling process. But Alma and the other Elders in this research program recognized that we live in a television and Internet age and their stories and calls to action may be lost to the younger generation, so they want to share these stories in digital formats.

## CONCLUSION

Telling and retelling stories are important in Indigenous communities, today as in the past, as ways to witness histories, share understandings from Indigenous perspectives, and connect the past as remembered in the present and with/for the future. Stories help us understand memories, make connections to families and communities, and teach us valuable lessons about respect and responsibility and teach lessons that aid in socializing young people into cultural traditions and expectations. Stories are also powerful acts of remembrance whether in film or in person. They aid in reconfiguring relationships to the past, present, and future and allow us to challenge our own limits and reconfigure our understandings. They also allow us to witness and understand the past as always present and bring that history and emotional and cultural identification together within us.

Alma is taking up this role as Grandmother in today's society and helping the children and the viewers of the film learn in whatever way she can in spite of the many challenges to the traditions. This remembrance in practice of Alma living the realities of a grandmother's traditional role in modern times calls us to reconsider the role of grandmother, which continues despite the interruptions of colonization and cultural genocide. The roles of culture camps and media in understanding the transformations of traditional practices have been emphasized. We, as listeners to the stories, are called to re-examine our own relationship to the stories, to the traditions, to the conditions that create the disturbances to passing on traditions, and to the Elders and children in communities that are so important in keeping these traditions alive.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada Research Chairs Program, and Canadian Foundation for Innovation Fund. Support for this research was also provided by Lakehead University, and Confederation College Broadcast Program.

Iseke would also like to acknowledge that another version of a section of this paper called “A Research Approach” is included in Iseke, 2010b and Iseke & Brennus, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Pipe Carriers are spiritual people in communities that use a sacred pipe to pray and ask for assistance and to seek a greater connection with the Creator. One needs to develop to a level of spiritual awareness before being gifted a pipe.