

# 11 Decolonizing Art, Education, and Research in the VIVA Project

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## The VIVA Project

'Viva!' is a call to memory and to action. Rooted in Latin American struggles, the cry often recalls past leaders and movements while inspiring future collective action. 'Viva!' is understood in both Spanish and English, reflecting the cross-fertilization of activists in the south and the north. It connotes the fullness of life that cultural action and creative artistic practices nurture in communities. It signals critical hope.

In this spirit, we adopted VIVA as the name for our transnational collaborative research project that began in 2003, and is currently completing its first phase with the forthcoming publication of a book and accompanying videos. VIVA consists of eight partners: four universities and four non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Central and North America, who each brought a popular education and/or community arts project to the table. The projects were shared, critically reflected upon, and used to stimulate discussion on the intersections of community arts and popular education. An initial framework, called 'Creative Tensions,' was developed at an initial meeting to spark discussion about salient issues within such work. As VIVA now comes to a close, we have identified an emergent framework from the group discussions and individual reflections, that of decolonizing.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter first introduces the VIVA Project and the framing notion of decolonizing. We rethink our understandings of art, education, and research through a decolonizing filter. Finally, we offer a decolonizing analysis of the project, each from our own perspective: Deborah considers VIVA at the macro level as project coordinator, while Laura considers

VIVA at the micro level from her experience as a summer intern with one of the local projects.

VIVA comprises a rich array of community arts and popular education practices. Here is a list of the local projects, to give you a taste (with the sponsoring organization in parentheses):

- *Pintar Obedeciendo*, participatory mural-making processes with a practice originating in Chiapas, Mexico, and spreading north and south (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana);
- *ArtsBridge*, post-secondary arts education training, based in Los Angeles inner-city schools (University of California Los Angeles);
- *Telling Our Stories*, 'train-the-trainer'-style popular education workshops for artists interested in working with marginalized youth in Toronto (The Catalyst Centre);
- *The Kuna Children's Art Project*, children's art workshops aimed at recovering Indigenous culture and ecology in Kuna Yala, Panama (Panamanian Social Education and Action Centre);
- *Tianguis Cultural*, an independent, youth-run, cultural marketplace allied with a popular education centre in Guadalajara, Mexico (Mexican Institute for Community Development);
- *The Legacy Work*, the development of a performance methodology by theatre artist Diane Roberts, drawing on ancestral and embodied memory (independent artistic practice);
- *Jumblies Theatre*, elaborate and aesthetically driven community plays in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods of Toronto (York University); and
- *BilwiVision*, a community television station in Bilwi, Nicaragua, with the motto 'Less Hollywood, More Local Content!' (URACCAN University).

Several of us began to dream up this transnational project in 2003, when Panamanian, Nicaraguan, and Mexican popular educators came to York for two weeks to mount a bilingual workshop, 'Making Art, Making Change.' This hands-on experience with the diasporic community of Toronto revealed our common ground: a commitment to social justice through a practice of Freirean-based popular education and a belief in the power of community arts. We created a proposal for cross-border exploration of the 'creative tensions of community arts and popular education in the Americas,' and were funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

When we gathered again in 2004 for our first official meeting, we crafted two key objectives for this three-year project, based on our common ground:

- 1 Using participatory action research, to recover, promote, and create diverse cultural and artistic practices integrated into processes of popular education and community organization, and aimed at both personal and social transformation that respects diversity.
- 2 Through gatherings, workshops, videos, and books, to organize exchanges of practices and theories, promoting a critical and self-critical perspective, and strengthening multicultural and transnational solidarity.

While the partners took responsibility for the first local objective, with each researching and documenting one community arts project in its own particular context, we shared the process of organizing our annual gatherings, meeting in Toronto in 2004, in Panama in 2005, and in Mexico in 2006. These week-long encounters allowed us to experience local practices through a conference on popular education at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto, a popular theatre workshop in Achioté, Panama, and engagement with Unitierra, an Indigenous university in Chiapas, Mexico. As important, these annual meetings gave us solid time to reflect on our eight projects and to analyse the key things we learned from their diverse practices and contexts.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: From Creative Tensions to Decolonization**

While the VIVA project was initially framed around the creative tensions of community arts, other grounded theory soon emerged out of our exchange. Thus, in the Panama meeting in 2005, we crafted a spiral model that focused on three interrelated processes: historical and cultural recovery, transformative processes of ethical representation, and artistic creation, all contributing to popular art and education for social change. The notion of decolonizing, and its potential as a theoretical framework, was only collectively named in our third and final meeting.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the initial common ground that VIVA partners identified in 2004 – community arts and popular education – a third shared feature began to appear: the context of living in the colonized Americas. Although each partner has experienced and continues to experience colonialism in different ways, it remains a shared context for us all. Our

cross-border exchange speaks to an increasingly integrated hemispheric economy, as well as the globalizing of civil society and a growing movement of Indigenous peoples and communities of colour challenging the Eurocentric values driving corporate globalization. All VIVA projects are located in complex multicultural contexts, with Indigenous and diasporic populations being clear protagonists in diverse processes of community-based art-making. However each project or partner chooses to acknowledge it, all of this is taking place in a hemisphere with over 500 years of colonial history.

While such a revelation might seem quite obvious, naming this element of our common ground has led us to collectively consider how we are and could be decolonizing our work. How do the distinct artistic and educational practices address our contexts of colonialism and post-colonialism? How can the VIVA team, engaged in an international research project, decolonize our collective and transnational practices? How does each of us contribute to decolonization processes on personal, institutional, community, and governmental levels?

Like most any term, the word 'decolonizing' signifies a complex notion whose meanings are shifting and evolving. It can, at once, be understood as: a process of *acknowledging* the history of colonialism; working to *undo* the effects of colonialism; striving to *unlearn* habits, attitudes, and behaviours that continue to perpetuate colonialism; and *challenging* and *transforming* institutional manifestations of colonialism.

While acknowledging and addressing the context and enduring effects of colonialism are positive steps towards healing and renewal, using terms like 'decolonizing' or 'postcolonial' runs the risk of re-centring colonialism. If we are seeking to transcend the colonial mentality and re-envision relationships, then what does a term like 'decolonizing' do to the struggle? Does it place colonialism as our only frame of reference? What other phenomena and forces might the term overshadow? On the other hand, failing to recognize the impacts of 500 years of colonial oppression can leave our analyses shallow and misleading.

As the term 'decolonizing' gains more and more currency, particularly in academic contexts, there is also the risk that we will lose sight of whose struggles this term addresses. Its ambiguity, especially in its verb form, offers rich possibilities for imagining what this process could look like. At the same time, however, its vagueness might result in its dilution. Therefore, it is important to remember how some are more negatively affected than others in the struggles that the term addresses.

Margaret Kovach (2005) emphasizes the importance of maintaining the perspective of those people most implicated in her work: 'Indigenous researchers ... can only get so far before we see a face – our Elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver, our brother hunting elk for the feast, our little ones in foster care – and hear a voice whispering, "Are you helping us?" ... As Indigenous research enters the academy, this principle needs to stay up close and personal' (31).

While the concepts that 'decolonizing' contains are not exclusive to academia, it should be noted that the term resonates quite vividly within academic discussions: located within postcolonial theory, written about in academic journals, and debated in classrooms. This presents its own set of contradictions. In a graduate-level course on the topic, cross-listed in the Faculties of Education and Women's Studies at York University in Toronto, Celia Haig-Brown (2006) uses the term as such: '(de)Colonizing Methodologies.' The parentheses exist purposefully and politically in order to 'call into question the (im)possibility of non-Indigenous people and people in a university doing this work in light of the histories of research and universities' on-going contributions to colonization.' Questioning the possibility of this notion is a challenge to our faith in emancipatory work: *who* can achieve decolonizing and *where* can it be achieved? Such questions might not seem fruitful if they convince us to lose hope in our efforts; rather, their strength lies in the critical reflexivity that they demand. They ask us to consider our institutional locations and cultural identities as related to the work that we do. In the VIVA project, for example, partners are working in varying institutional locations and from complex cultural identities; the distinctions between Indigenous/non-Indigenous and academic/non-academic are not always so clear. The questions that Haig-Brown poses remain relevant and constructive because they keep researchers on their toes, alert to the contradictions and complexities of such work.

Many of the themes that have arisen in the VIVA project pertain to the complexities of postcolonial identity. Our discussions of decolonizing may have started from the dualism of Indigenous/non-Indigenous identities, but they quickly erupted to make sense in our local contexts. Within BilwiVision, the community television station of URACCAN in Nicaragua, for example, Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities are explicitly complex and overlapping. A person's identity is defined not necessarily by blood or lineage but by self-identification, a right which is enshrined in the autonomy law of the region. Most coastal peoples are actually of mixed heritage, but may choose to identify more strongly as

Miskitu, for example, rather than Creole, Sumu-Mayagna, or Mestizo. One of the goals of BilwiVision is to affirm all ethnic identities and languages, and to challenge the hierarchy reflected in which languages dominate the media. In our bilingual cross-cultural dialogues, we have discussed the different uses of terms like ‘pluri-ethnicity,’ ‘interculturalism,’ ‘diaspora,’ and ‘multiculturalism.’ Each one frames cultural identity in ways that have distinct meanings in the diverse contexts of the VIVA projects. It is a challenge to find a common language, and perhaps the richest part of our exchange has been to acknowledge the ‘untranslatability’ of certain concepts, which in effect reflect different cosmovisions (ways of viewing the world).

VIVA partner Diane Roberts<sup>3</sup> reminds us that colonialism is inscribed on our bodies, and that ‘colonial products can be instruments, like our projects and how we interact with the cultures we are working with. At the centre are colonial products that are <sup>3</sup> *people*, who are continually not considered part of the story. It’s an ugly part of the story so we don’t talk about it. And when we’re talking about interculturality, and it continually gets buried deeper and deeper into the earth, we never get past the idea of interculturality as this happy utopian place if we don’t recognize the idea of colonial products as people.’

The VIVA project, with its many diverse local contexts, offers an opportunity to rethink ‘decolonizing’ in relation to the nuances of cultural identity and survival through colonialism (in its past and present forms).

### **Decolonizing Art, Education, and Research**

The fact that we have chosen to focus on alternative practices – that is, *community* art and *popular* education using *participatory action* research – reflects the potential for decolonizing throughout the entire process of the VIVA project. In this section, we highlight how the interrelated processes of art-making and research can be challenged through the lens of decolonization.

#### *Art*

To decolonize art is to first unpack the forms and content of colonial art processes and products. ‘Our concepts of art come from Europe; the term “art” itself is colonized,’ says Checo Valdez, VIVA partner and Mexican graphic artist who, at a VIVA annual gathering in December 2006, critiqued his own training in European art as egoistic. Through

the Painting by Listening Project, he has been training Indigenous groups in Chiapas, Mexico, in community mural production processes in which people bring their own histories and aesthetics to a mural which they themselves paint.

As an Afro-Caribbean woman, Diane Roberts, speaking at the 2006 gathering, asks us to consider who is not represented in an official history of the Americas, which privileges European settlers and less often acknowledges Indigenous nations. It is impossible, she says, to ignore slavery or the slave trade, 'and this river of blood that feeds the land, makes the land grow, and mixes with the blood of all of the ancestors in this room. But there is a devaluing of the contribution of the African culture, a deracination, a removing of race, a removing of culture of race. And we can see it in the music, the dance, the literature.' The Personal Legacy work is a response to her own theatre training in Canada, where all students were expected to perform Shakespeare; her project grounds theatre practitioners in their own bodies and ancestral heritage.

The community arts projects reflected through the VIVA exchange challenge conventional notions of art as elitist, individual, market-driven, or focused only on form, and promote the integration of art in its infinite cultural forms into daily rituals and movements for social change. They offer other stories and other ways of telling stories, to counter the official stories fed us by mass media and dominant culture.

### *Education*

The VIVA Project grew out of long-term relationships of solidarity and exchange between popular educators in Canada and North America. 'Popular education' is not a term that is commonly understood in the north, but among activists it has come to represent an approach to education that starts with the experiences of groups and communities who have been marginalized by a dominant culture, moves them through a collective process of reflecting on their own history and social situation, and develops critical consciousness and the collective capacity to act more strategically to change the oppressive conditions of their lives. While it is best known internationally through the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) and his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, popular education has actually been shaped in the cauldron of social struggles of the global south, as integral to social movements.

Because it advocates a critical naming and transforming of historical power relations, popular education could be seen as a decolonizing

process. But it is also limited by its Eurocentric origins, as it was very influenced by European Marxist thought and structural analysis, and by a conflict view of history. In the last 10 to 15 years there have been challenges to this analysis: it has been critiqued for elements of positivist thought, which keep the dichotomies of object-subject in place, and it is often seen as a very linear process, a very rational and logical process.

### *Research*

'The word itself, "research," is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary,' writes Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999:1). Whether the research is academic, corporate, arts-based, scientific, community-based, and so on, there remains a dire need to reassess common practices and to enact decolonizing methodologies.

Efforts to decolonize research involve both practices (epistemology, methodology, and methods) and people (researchers and participants). These might include: challenging conventional institutions to include more participatory means of knowledge production; voicing multiple languages (including Indigenous languages) in research; questioning the objectives, ethics, and methods of the research; creating funding opportunities for marginalized people to take ownership of research about their communities; and encouraging a diversity of frameworks (ways of viewing the work) and cosmovisions (ways of viewing the world).

### **Decolonizing VIVA: From the Macro to the Micro**

To further explore the possibilities of decolonizing through the VIVA Project, each of us will reflect on particular aspects of the project and our own roles within it. As coordinator of the VIVA project, Deborah provides an overview of the process by examining particular aspects of the project's organization. As research assistant and international intern, Laura explores her position through the intricacies of researching one VIVA project.

#### *Decolonizing the VIVA Project: An Ongoing Process (Deborah)*

Since we have begun to reframe our work as a decolonizing process, I have found myself revisiting the four years of our transnational collaboration through this lens. In what ways have we perpetuated colonizing practices, and how have we tried to address them with decolonizing

alternatives? I focus on five aspects of the project: participants and representation, project funding, evolving frameworks, products, and leadership.

#### 1. PARTICIPANTS AND REPRESENTATION.

As the project initiator, I invited partner organizations to take part based on our common history of work in popular education in the Americas. Only as the project evolved did other criteria become as important. As it turned out, for example, all southern projects had Indigenous participation, and in a couple of instances they were the key leaders, while none of the projects in North America had strong Indigenous participation. Was it because popular education in the north remains primarily a white, middle-class, Eurocentric practice? Or was it because we often reproduce ourselves by choosing to work with people like us?

How are we redressing this issue of representation? Since Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal alliances have become important to VIVA, we are making links with Aboriginal community artists and educators in Canada, and connecting them with our Indigenous partners in the south. Questions of representation are complex, and we realize there is no simple answer, but naming the ways we have excluded certain groups helps us clarify our deeper goals and consider how the project itself can be more inclusive.

#### 2. PROJECT FUNDING.

When VIVA partners first met in 2003, we decided that each of us (whether in NGOs or universities) should seek whatever resources were available to us in our respective contexts. When I was able to secure funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada in 2004, however, the responsibility of administering the project became centred in a northern academic context, laden with implications of historical colonial practices (in terms of whose knowledge counts and who has access to funds, for example). SSHRC funding limited the possibility of supporting southern partners directly: we could provide travel to meetings, for example, but could not pay southern NGO staff for their work on local projects, which was often a greater need. We also had access to student research assistant and internship monies, which reproduced the privilege of northern students funded for rich intercultural opportunities, while southern youth had no such resources.

Margarita Antonio, a Miskitu partner from Nicaragua speaking at the VIVA meeting in Chiapas, Mexico, in December 2006, questioned

this pattern: 'When I hear the Canadian students speak about the time they have to participate deeply in this project, they're talking about a VIVA that is in the north. I want a VIVA which all of us feel part of. And it is difficult because the initiative and the resources come from the north. I think it also has to do with the material conditions and political situation we live in.'

How do we break the pattern of north-south donor relationships in a context where we do have greater privilege and access to funds? How do we use our privilege strategically? Could we have pushed for more shared responsibility for finding other funding sources? Or perhaps have de-emphasized the monetary element, and proposed ways to continue our exchange that wasn't totally dependent on outside funding?

Decolonizing in the context of funding exchanges, then, engages a historical dynamic of north-south, donor-recipient relationships that are laden with contradictions and not easy to redefine.

### 3. EVOLVING FRAMEWORKS.

The initial partners developed a framework of creative tensions that are common in popular education and community arts: tensions between process and product, aesthetics/ethics, cultural reclamation/cultural reinvention, the spiritual/political, and body/earth. While we brought a Gramscian framework to these tensions, seeing them more as dialectics dependent on historical moments and places rather than dichotomies, they perhaps belied a deeper epistemology of Cartesian dualisms dominant in Eurocentric thought (body/mind, nature/culture, human/non-human, male/female, emotion/reason).

While able to identify with the notion of 'creative' tensions, partners in the 2005 meeting in Panama expressed concern about reproducing dualist thought, so we crafted another framework based on a spiral model more congruent with Indigenous and non-linear world views. Growing out of a systematization of our diverse projects, we identified three key points in the spiral process: historical and cultural recovery, transformative processes of art-making, and ethic representation, all feeding social change and movement-building (see Figure 11.1).

The emphasis on cultural reclamation resonates with Indigenous groups: Tuhiwai Smith (1999:34) suggests that 'coming to know the past is central to a critical pedagogy of decolonization' (34), especially for communities whose ways of knowing have been driven underground or destroyed by institutions such as the residential schools in Canada.

We also used the spiral to describe three key elements of our methodology: its integrated approach (mind, body, and spirit), its intergenerational

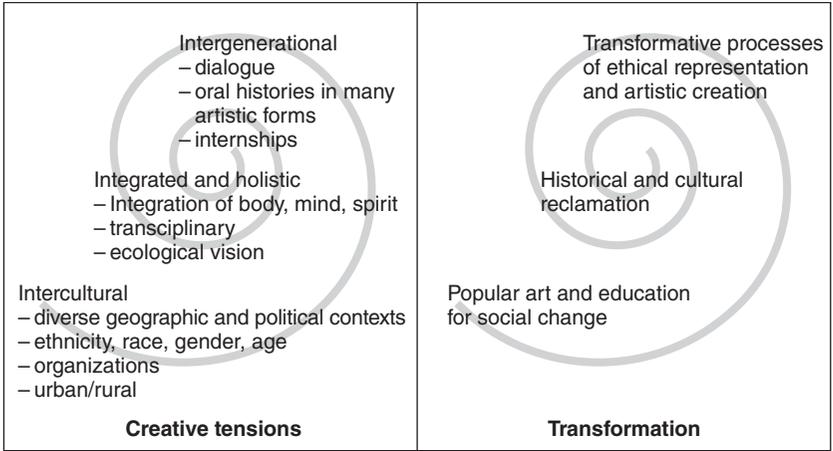


Figure 11.1 Caption to come.

dynamic, and its intercultural thrust. These are central characteristics of many Indigenous educational practices, are also increasingly adopted by progressive popular educators and participatory researchers. For example, Central American popular educators have developed the concept of *integralidad*, or holism, to emphasize a pedagogical practice which embraces embodied and analytical knowing, theory, and practice, and affirms the interconnectedness of all living entities.

4. PRODUCTS.

The SSHRC funding of the VIVA project perhaps influenced our decision early on to produce a bilingual collective book. As popular educators we were interested in finding ways to promote the integration of the arts into popular education and social movement-building, and we envisioned a popular book filled with stories and images that would engage grassroots educators, activists, and artists. But the pressures to produce also impacted the dynamics of our exchange, especially in the third year of the project. In a positive sense, it pushed partners to reflect more critically on the work and to articulate the possibilities and tensions of community arts more clearly for themselves and others. Negatively, it demanded time that busy activists didn't have, and focused our exchange on the details of getting a manuscript ready for publishers rather than the evolution of intercultural dialogue following

other rhythms. At a deeper level, we run the danger of seeing the culmination of our exchange as a book, which is not only limited in terms of audience, but also reinforces dominant ways of knowing and communicating while the projects themselves draw on embodied practices and knowledges.

Performance theorist Diana Taylor (2003) distinguishes between two distinct though often overlapping ways of knowing: the *repertoire*, our store of embodied knowing and expression that was negated, demonized, repressed, and even outlawed by America's colonizers; and the *archive*, referring to text-based learning, which 'separates the source of knowledge from the knower.' (19). The centuries-old privileging of written texts over embodied ways of knowing still dominates contemporary academic practice, and we may be reproducing this colonizing tendency in our book. The embodied practices themselves may offer a greater integration of thought and feeling, challenging the Cartesian split and reflecting what Central American popular educators have tagged *sentipensando*, or thinking/feeling (Nunez, 1998: 165).

We collaborators in the VIVA project have to recognize as well that we are still working in two colonial languages; while there are intriguing differences between them, there are even more pronounced differences between them and the Indigenous languages represented by two of our partners, in particular, a Kuna in Panama and a Miskitu in Nicaragua. In both cases, we have to be careful not to fall prey to what Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson (2000:79) call 'the Eurocentric illusion of benign translatability,' a dominant cultural assumption that world views can be translated. Such an assumption has often gone hand in hand with benign neglect in the face of the extinction of up to half of the world's 6,000 Indigenous languages. Our experience has confirmed what the Supreme Court of Canada declared in 1990, that 'Language is more than a mere means of communication, it is part and parcel of the identity and culture of the people speaking it.'<sup>4</sup> Our discussions through translation have revealed not only different terms related to arts and education but also different frames and cosmovisions embedded in the languages we use.

##### 5. LEADERSHIP.

While there are obvious contradictions and inequities reflected in the leadership of the VIVA project, based on north-south funding relationships, gendered and racialized practices, and my own way of working (which combines a commitment to collectivizing leadership with a

need to have a clear oversight), the annual exchanges, built on very participatory processes, have generated new bilateral relationships and have shifted the power dynamics over time.

A Nicaraguan partner has offered to take on the coordination role of the project into its next publication and post-publication phase, when we hope to broaden the network; our next gathering will be on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and will be open to groups from around the hemisphere, no longer limited by an academic project. Decolonizing practices must also take into account the multiple dimensions of power, not simply north-south, but class, race, gender, and age. We understand this to be a collective responsibility and an ongoing process.

We now move from an analysis of the project as a whole to a probing of one particular project within the exchange, through the eyes of an international intern who contributed to research on and documentation of the project.

### **Tales from an Intern: The Kuna Children's Art Project (Laura)**

Situated in Kuna Yala, an autonomous Indigenous region along Panama's southeastern Caribbean coast, The Kuna Children's Art Project consisted of regular art workshops held in five communities between 1994 and 1999. The objectives of the workshops were to reclaim Kuna culture and to transmit knowledge about local ecology. The art workshops used a diversity of forms, such as puppetry, popular theatre, drawing, screen-printing, photography, music, and traditional dancing, to realize their objectives. The workshops were led by local facilitators and were well-integrated into regular community life. Once a year, one of the participating communities would host an arts festival for all workshop participants across Kuna Yala. The festivals served as a networking space for the project facilitators, artists, and participants, and as a culminating opportunity for the project's objectives to be realized through collective mural-making, parades, and celebration.

In the summer of 2005, it was my honour and privilege to interview some of the project participants – including workshop facilitators, organizers, community members, and participants – about the Kuna Children's Art Project. I say that it was an *honour* because the interviews were fascinating and the project compelling. The experiences offered in these interviews have been a rich source of inspiration for my own work, which also dwells in the space where community arts and environmental education intersect.

I also say that this experience was a *privilege*. I use this second adjective to reinforce the honour and responsibility I held. But I also intend to emphasize the one-way privilege that comes with most international development work. For example, the funding agencies that made my trip possible do not allow people from the Global South to come to Canada and learn about community arts projects here. How was my work going to affect the communities that I visited? Would my research about the Kuna Children's Art Project act like a vacuum, sucking the knowledge from an Indigenous region in the South and releasing it for academic consumption in the North? And if not, then what would an alternative look like? Much thought has gone into this from various pockets of the international development field, and yet the vacuum model is repeated time and time again through internships like mine.

I was cognizant of this privilege when I began the internship. I was sensitive to power dynamics in the workplace and careful of how my whiteness was received while living and working in Panama City. But I reached a new depth of understanding when I was whisked off to Kuna Yala for a week, asked by my Kuna supervisor to record some interviews for a participatory reflection process. It was a moment of deep discomfort and dizziness when I found myself walking through a Kuna community armed with a video camera and broken Spanish. My white skin shone more brightly than I had ever seen it before, and the video camera I held took on new meaning (as shown in photograph 11.1). It was obvious that I was from the North, and as much as I wanted to believe that I was researching in solidarity – as an ally from the fields of community arts and environmental education – I had no control over how my presence was perceived. I was treading in the treacherous wake of many researchers before me, many of whom had done more harm than good in their work. Whole histories of past researchers (tourists, explorers, scientists, and anthropologists) had already set a precedent of colonial relationships.

The Kuna Children's Art Project set an incredible example for anti-colonial education in Kuna Yala. While harvesting stories and reflections through interviews with past participants, artists, and facilitators, I was apprehensive that my research would not match the integrity of decolonizing practices that the workshops had established. Many of the stories I heard while conducting interviews spoke to the contrast between the colonial public school system and the community arts workshops of the Kuna Children's Art Project. Not only were the workshops decolonizing in contrast to the formal education system, but their



11.1 Caption to come.

structure fundamentally addressed many colonizing aspects of conventional education. Leanne Simpson (2002), an Anishnaabe educator in Ontario, explains the unfortunate reality of many Indigenous environmental education programs: ‘... few programs are designed to enable students to address the issues of colonization and colonialism in their communities, effect healing and decolonization at the individual, community and national levels, facilitate resistance strategies in response to current injustice, and promote the building of healthy, sustainable Aboriginal communities and Nations based on traditional cultural values and processes’ (14).

The Kuna Children’s Art Project was a superb example of how a project can be realized on deeply meaningful principles for an Indigenous community: the facilitators were Kuna; the ideas and values that were being taught were Kuna; the organizational structure was both local and lateral; the bilingual nature of the workshops and festivals reflected Kuna identity as both local and national; and the histories that were

taught reflected the community's strength in resisting colonizing forces. Throughout the five years that the Kuna Children's Art Project existed, its success shines through. To this day, it lives on in the hearts of many people, as I was told repeatedly during the interviews I conducted. It is an example of local, place-based, Indigenous education, and speaks directly to the challenge of decolonizing education.

As an intern, I worked out of a popular education centre in Panama City called CEASPA (Panamanian Centre for Social Research and Action), a centre which had contributed popular education training to the facilitators of the Kuna Children's Art Project. During my first week on the job, my Kuna supervisor handed me a manual on *sistematización*, a critical reflection methodology that has come out of popular education practice in Latin America. I had only been learning Spanish for a few weeks when I was advised to read this Spanish-language manual. Within weeks I flew to Kuna Yala to try to enact whatever I had absorbed of its methodology. Many meaningful reflections were gathered through my research, but I wonder how many unanswered questions about my role as researcher remained in my wake.

Since that experience, I have had time to learn more Spanish, to be exposed to writing on decolonizing methodologies, and to reflect upon my time in Panama. I have also had the opportunity to delve more deeply into writings about *sistematización*, and so I now understand why this methodology was chosen. The most important rule of *sistematización* is that only those who have participated in the experience are able to evaluate and reflect upon it. Therefore, the stories of the participants comprise the central elements for analysis and reflection. The process is also collaborative, as it engages the participants in all levels of the research: from gathering people's experiences to sharing their reflections; and from designing the research plan to evaluating and analysing the findings. The role of documentation is emphasized, not just for an archive but also for a deepening of critical reflection. In addition, *sistematización* is considered 'self-research,' meaning that it asserts that the responsibility of theorizing from the lived experiences rests with the participants, not with an outside institution. (Orozco, 2005; Antillon, 2002).

All of the features mentioned above combine to form a research methodology that has much potential for decolonizing. And yet, as I question the intricacies of my involvement with the Kuna Children's Art Project, I wonder if it can be considered *sistematización*. The research that I performed broke many rules: I had not participated in the initial

experience, I was not from the community, and I stayed only one week to conduct the video interviews. As Oakley (1981:244) has articulated, there was a 'lack of fit between the theory and practice.' And yet, I can defend my involvement through a number of reasons: I had been asked by members of the community to lend my skills and access to resources for this particular job; the research was approved by the local Kuna government; and the results of the research were returned to the community, not only through the videos that I sent to them but also by the VIVA project's commitment to publish a text intended for activists as well as academics. Here I have exposed the back-and-forth deliberations between 'right' and 'wrong' justifications for my presence in the research process, whereas I have been advised that such 'yes' and 'no' questions can never be satisfied with either answer.

As is the case with any methodology, *sistematización* outlines the *ideal* research scenario. It cannot anticipate all of the dynamics, complexities, and nuances that every *actual* research situation is sure to present. The rifts between methodological theory and its application can be alarming. Such was the case for me as I journeyed through the process of translating my research across language, culture, cosmology, and continent. In the end, much more of the work fell on my shoulders than anticipated: I led the majority of the research interviews (which comprise much of the raw material for the reflections and analysis), and created the video of the project. The video was originally intended to be used internally for deeper reflection within VIVA, but the lack of a video camera and available staff with editing skills at CEASPA resulted in my being asked to produce the final version. Along with more work came more responsibility and editorial control, all the while mediated by my modest knowledge of the Spanish language, the Kuna world view, and the Kuna Children's Art Project itself. Despite being asked by members of the community to carry out this research, I believe it is important to question these sticky situations in order to come to a better understanding of what decolonizing might be.

Inspired by Russell Bishop's framing of five concerns for Kaupapa Maori research in New Zealand (initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation, and accountability), the following questions arise: Who initiated this research? How was *sistematización* selected as the preferred methodology? How does this methodology relate to the Kuna world view and Kuna methodology? Since *sistematización* divides only along the lines of 'participant' and 'non-participant,' and does not account for identity or status, is this appropriate within an Indigenous context? Is

something more specific needed to address the context of deeply embedded colonial structures and histories?

Whether or not an explicitly Kuna methodology exists as such today, there is much potential for Kuna ways of being and knowing to influence research that occurs in Kuna Yala. In the case of researching the Kuna Children's Art Project, there were moments of confluence where Kuna research protocols met with *sistematización*. For example, the research began in *Omnaket Nega*, the congress house of the community, explaining the research to the community leaders (facilitated by Blas López, who grew up in the community and accompanied me to translate from Kuna to Spanish). Also, popular education techniques were selected to train the workshop facilitators because they were so closely aligned with the objectives of the work. Such moments reveal the potential for non-Indigenous and Indigenous methodologies to work in tandem, as allies.

### Final Words, Multiple Voices

The conversation among VIVA partners about decolonization really began seriously during our third annual meeting in Chiapas, Mexico, in December 2006. Our collective book includes some of the diverse perspectives that partners brought to this discussion, ranging from frames that are more academic, others that are more shaped by direct historical and embodied experiences, and still others that struggle to redefine the colonial and anti-colonial in our present-day relationships and practices. We offer three voices as syntheses of some of the questions, responses, and visions that feed an evolving process.

Heather Hermant of Toronto reminds us to keep a self-reflexive and critical perspective on our own internal processes: 'Even within our own group, we see the colonial story repeating itself – in little bursts – all the time, and that in itself speaks to why we need to be doing this kind of work.'

In offering an Indigenous perspective on decolonization, José Angel Colman of Kuna Yala in Panama refuses to get caught in a narrow dualistic frame: 'I believe that the Kuna Children's Art Project workshops were important because they were flexible and ran with a spirit of accepting others. We don't see ourselves shaping ourselves only as Indigenous people, in order to close ourselves within our Indigeneity. We are forming ourselves in our own traditional school as Indigenous people in order to project ourselves in the broader world.'

And Amy Shimshon-Santo of Los Angeles articulates a vision that moves beyond decolonization to a truly inclusive society: 'Decolonization is to come into that awareness of how your ancestors brought you here, and to engage in an affirming way with who you are, where you came from, and what your potential for creativity and change might be. Cultural and educational institutions should be reflective of who we are as a people. What we consider beautiful, what we consider meaningful, what we consider intelligent and knowledgeable, should be reflective of all of us.'

While we recognize that our various institutions and organizational bases each present their own limitations, we enter into this deeper dialogue with this hopeful vision and a commitment to challenge and transform the practices we engage in – both within our own distinct cultural contexts as well as in our construction of transnational solidarity.

## NOTES

- 1 This chapter was originally to be co-written by two non-Indigenous researchers from the North and two Indigenous researchers from the South. As it turns out, many factors have resulted in only the two non-Indigenous researchers being able to write the piece. While this limits the richness of the discussion, this chapter remains an opportunity to contribute to an emerging discussion about how a transnational, collaborative research project can be decolonizing at both local and international levels.
- 2 See the introduction in our collective book, *VIVA Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas*, for an elaboration of diverse understandings of colonization and decolonization by VIVA partners, publication forthcoming.
- 3 Supreme Court of Canada, Maher et al. v. The Queen in Right of Alberta (1990); cited in Battiste (2000), 79.

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