

“I Would Not Have Made That Leap”: Art as the Vehicle to Tell Your Story, Connect, and Build Relationships

Melissa-Ann Pereira Ledo and Siibii Petawabano

Abstract

Our commentary includes an introduction to, and conversation sparked by, the Cree School Board’s Mik^w Chiyâm, a secondary school program that engages in an artist-in-residence model. This is a dialogue between Melissa-Ann Pereira Ledo, settler queer educator/researcher/artist, and Siibii Petawabano, one of the first students who was part of the pilot program in the First Nation community of Mistissini in 2015. In 2021, after making “the leap” to become a professional artist-musician, Siibii returned to the program as one of the artists in residency themselves.

Mik^w Chiyâm

According to the Cree School Board website (n.d.), Mik^w Chiyâm is:

designed to increase students’ interest and attachment to school by providing an alternative space for creative learning. Students are introduced to a variety of artists and will explore themes such as storytelling, expressing personal and collective voice, and spreading personal messages on a larger scale to create effective and meaningful artistic productions.

Alongside two Quebec Cree School Board leaders, as well as Cree community members, students, and leaders, Melissa and two other non-Indigenous artist-educators were invited to co-create this program in alignment with the Québec Education Program and ensure culture relevance. As three non-Indigenous artist-educators, it was imperative that we were *invited* to do this work by the community, and that we did not seek out this work ourselves. At first, we were asked to do this work independently, but we insisted on co-creating the program with community members, staff, and the students that would be part of the program. We approached the work with the ethical framework outlined in Rachel Thorne’s (2019) article, “Teaching Through the Four Rs of Indigenous Education,” that follows the work of two renowned Indigenous scholars, Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt: “The Four Rs—Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility” (2001). This work helps educators wishing to take action to decolonize their teaching practice. Thorne (2019) further explains these as: 1) Respect First Nations cultural integrity; 2) Provide education that is relevant to First Nations perspectives and experience; 3) Foster reciprocal relationships; and 4) Demonstrate responsibility through participation.

To extend our introduction to this program, we turn to the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) brief presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports of Quebec entitled *Indigenous Education: Walking on Both Sides of the River* (2017). In Section 2 they proposed that:

Indigenous students would be better served by a more flexible education process and there are examples of innovative ideas that incorporate content and methodology more appropriate to the students' talents and interests. One such idea is an arts-based program developed in the Cree School Board In a recent evening of exhibition and performance, these talents were clearly in evidence and students' grades and perseverance in school have improved in tandem. (p. 9)

A sign of its success is that Mik^w Chiyâm is now part of all Eeyou communities in Northern Quebec. According to Francine Cunningham (2019), one of many artists who were invited to complete multi residencies over the years, students in this program claim the Mik^w Chiyâm room as their own "because as they often said, we were a family and this group was our home. During my time teaching the students, we discussed making art around issues that were important to them" (p. 50).

Something happened here. *What was it?* What circumstances were in place that allowed students to feel at home and share their stories/voices? These curiosities lead Siibii and Melissa to take a step back and get curious as to the means and impact of the program, beyond its formal objectives. The dialogue below is shaped from our longer discussion.

Dialogue

Melissa: *How did you become involved in the program?*

Siibii: I met David [Hodges, Music Producer] when he was coming through on his speaking tour that ended up being a mobile production tour and that in itself was a taste of what "organized art programming" was like. And I already knew that I liked music, but I didn't see myself as a singer until I met David and I heard myself in the recording and I was like, okay, "that's, that's like... there's something I can do." That following year my teacher created a Glee club prior to even finding out about Mik^w Chiyâm. And I was its only member for most of the year. Then we got wind that you guys were coming and you were looking for a school to put up for the pilot year. So at that point Cassandra said, "We should put on a show to showcase the talent that is in Mistissini so that when the organizers get here, they will know that we want this program and that there are plenty of people that want to participate and support it." It was so cute because we spent weeks prior inviting people to come [and participate in the showcase]. And I'm blown away that this actually happened, but we got shy kids to come and sing a song. And not only sing a song, but do a little tiny choreography with the song and, now when I think about, I'm like, I can't believe we got, without even Mik^w Chiyâm being there and the years and reputation of Mik^w Chiyâm, we got kids to do that, you know?



Fig. 1: Talent showcase

Melissa: *What did you find compelling about this opportunity?*

Siibii: I just really wanted to be able to access art programming that was comprehensive, that was challenging or at least, that actually built my skills.

Melissa: *When you say skills, you mean technical art skills?*

Siibii: Yeah, exactly! Anything that allowed me to be able to express myself creatively, because otherwise it's just like, outside of this math class, you just have French, English, science, whatever. And you know,

I liked those courses too, but you have no real space for creativity. So I wanted that. So when the art program was accepting applications, not only was I encouraged to apply but I really wanted to [apply] on my own because I just wanted access to art materials, art spaces, and actually be taught technical skills that I could take with me.

Melissa: *What do you feel like you learned from the program, beyond the technical skills piece?*

Siibii: I definitely think for me the biggest thing was seeing that people could make a life for themselves on their art—choosing the path of an artist or choosing the path of a career artist—that I don't think that I fully believed in for myself right away. It showed me that there are people that can do it, that it is possible to live on your art, that it is possible to pursue your life work as an artist and that could be your career. That is what I walked away with. And I'm really grateful for that because if I didn't have that belief, I would not have made the leap when I did, even though it was years after. Yeah. I would not have made that leap.

Melissa: *How have you grown from your experience?*

Siibii: It's really cool because then I went on to do a residency a few years after graduating... I went on to do my own residencies, and I was using the same skills that I was taught in Mik^w Chiyâm to teach in my residencies. Those were full circle moments to be like, "Melanie [Garcia, Collage Artist] taught me transfers" [packing tape transfers are a technique where toner based or laser print images or text are transferred from printed paper onto clear packing tape for use in various art projects] and that was my favorite activity to do with the kids, even, just the little printer transfers, the little packing tape transfers, and collage, that was also something that we did. Do you know when I went on residency *with* Melanie?! My biggest real-world application in a professional setting is in the contract work that I do now with youth. [So it taught me] not only observing the artists and learning the technical skills, it developed my facilitation skills, it developed my, I'd say speech, public speaking, and my comfort connecting with youth. That was my biggest takeaway of real-world applications that I use now, because I'm [now] an independent contractor for [youth] facilitation.



Fig. 2: Melanie Garcia's residency, with Siibii as a student

Melissa: *How do you feel art functioned as a means for developing relationships in the program?*

Siibii: I think that was the best. Okay, I can speak to this as a student, and as an artist in residence: Your freedom is the content that you bring to that medium. It gives you the opportunity to not only tell something about yourself to the residency artist and connect with them in that way, but it gives the residency artist an opportunity to connect with you and learn about who you are as a person using their medium. So that is beautiful, actually. Like, I remember when I did my story-telling residency in Mistissini: I would never have had the opportunity to just sit with a room full of kids and have every single one of them tell me a story that they experienced in their life, and I wouldn't have had the opportunity to share with them as well, you know? Yeah, that was really cool. I already know my

experience as a rez kid, but it was so cool to hear their experiences and be like, I know what you're talking about, like, you're talking about spooky stuff that you experience in the bush, you know? That's really cool. Some of them were my relatives, you know? And again, I probably would never even have connected with them because they're just distant relatives, for whatever reason. But in that classroom, I was there, I was their teacher, and it was a space for them to share what it is that they chose to share. That was really cool.

Melissa: I love that. Art became a conduit for relationship building!

Melissa: *Why do you think youth working directly with artists is important?*

Siibii: I think what's really cool is a lot of artists have their own personal—and you know, of course it's important to have the vetting process—but a lot of artists have their own personal beliefs around politics, around social justice and just, those kinds of topics. And what I think is really nice, or what I really appreciated about the residency artists that I had, was that they encouraged me to speak on my beliefs and opinions, and through art. Voicing those thoughts, and not only for myself but other folks. I remember for the first-ever residency with Chris [Robertson], who was a printmaker, and Jamie [Bradbury, a painter], we had a project making print posters. And there was someone who made up made a poster [about] being silenced around sexual assault, and then there was somebody else who used a quote that talked about the harm that is done by extraction resource extraction. And, like, you ask a 13-year-old or 14-year-old, if they give a F**k about resource extraction, you just assume the answer is no. But we were encouraged to voice those messages. Yeah, I think that that is a really great thing.

Because here's another thing, too: When you're a teacher in school, you're told not to share those things and not to push your personal opinions, or whatever. But as an artist, you have more freedom around it, I'd say, or what I experienced, at least. So, there was a little more freedom around it. I don't know if you're going to use this or not but, [to put it] in context, [in] the history of our government agreements within my nation, there is a history of silencing youth voices, because youth, though they were used as the justification for why we were signing these agreements, a lot of youth opposed them. So in things like AGA [Annual General Assembly of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and/or Annual General Assembly of the Cree Nation Government], they would be asked, when youth would try to go and speak up for their beliefs, they would be purposefully silenced or ignored. So you have that history in your community, in your nation, so why should you, as a youth, care if no one's going to listen to you, right? So in these spaces [Mik^w Chiyâm], we were not only encouraged to share those opinions, but that was the whole point was for us, to be able to share the things that we felt or the stories that we needed to tell. And I really think that we weren't going to get that kind of encouragement in the school [outside the program] especially.



Fig. 3: Poster project during Chris Robertson and Jamie Bradbury's residency

Melissa: *What kind of role do you think this program played in the lives of those involved?*

Siibii: Even if art wasn't your thing, it's still a good exercise to practice things that are outside of your comfort zone and learn. Because that was ultimately what it was, each residency is different. In the whole three years that I was in these classes, I never had the same medium, and that forced me to learn new things all the time. It forced me to be comfortable with change, which is a skill that you absolutely need to teach people. I think it also played a part in the [lives of people who] didn't pursue art because, again, it opened the door of being uncomfortable and then learning to go through it. I also think it was a safe space for people who weren't even in the program.

Melissa: *How did the program shape your wellbeing?*

Siibii: I think it really was my safe space in high school. I was going through a lot. I was going through my queer identity stuff; I was dealing with surviving assault within my family. I was dealing with intergenerational trauma. My family was dealing with substance issues. I was dealing with substance issues, and I was also dealing with homelessness. So it was just like I was in a really hard place. And I think, just like a lot of kids in the rez are just going through a lot. So to have this space, to have the space that valued my voice, that gave me all the tools that I needed to express whatever it was that I wanted to express, I think it was incredibly invaluable. There was nothing that I could think about during that period of time that compared, because, I don't think there was any other space like that for me, at least I didn't feel that I had any other space other than Mik^w Chiyâm. Which is why even though my attendance was so low [at school], I barely ever missed Mik^w Chiyâm. I think art, inherently, and art spaces, inherently can empower us. I don't know if I would have had the motivation to continue going to school. Especially because the [Mik^w Chiyâm] requirement was a certain percentage of attendance, right. And I know that I didn't meet that attendance. If Mik^w Chiyâm would have been taken away from me because I wasn't meeting that requirement, I would have lost motivation to do it at all and what ended up happening was, I went and I graduated! That's why it's incredibly important to be flexible on policy, especially when you're working with human beings.



Fig. 4: Residency Two, Year One

Melissa: *What role does art play in your wellbeing now?*

Siibii: I definitely use art as a means to connect with myself now. I use art as a means of living, because it's a career. Not only as a professional singer-songwriter, but also as somebody who teaches art. I think that it allows me to connect with myself, because it allows me to connect with the skills that I was taught as a young person and the skills that I'm learning now. It has a role to play in my mental health now, because when I am in a place of being stuck or a place of burnout, or I'm going to say ADHD burnout, I have art to hold me and hold space for whatever it is I'm going through. Especially in music, I use art as a way to tell my stories that I otherwise would not be sharing publicly like this. In my new upcoming album, I'm talking about the grief I experience from the loss of some of the people that I loved. I also talk about witnessing my parents and the struggles that they went through and that they kind of put on each other. I never would tell these stories publicly without art. It's important for me to let other people know [my story] because otherwise, I'm keeping it inside. There's no real other situation for me to be explaining these pieces. I think it's important for other people to hear it. Not only to understand what you're going through as an artist and as a person, but also to give other people the opportunity to connect to your story or the messages that you're putting out there, I think that's what art is beautiful for—being able to do that. You can connect with people across the world over issues that touch so many sands through art.

A good example I can think of is when people who are oppressed . . . create to show the vibrancy of who they are, to show their resilience. I know resilience shouldn't be the word, but it is the word. To show . . . their voices, their outcries, pain that they're suffering, the oppression that they're experiencing. And to also show and identify who are their oppressors. I think that art is incredibly important for that, because it shows that you as a human are experiencing what you were experiencing. It's important for other people to hear that and connect with that and see *you* in it, and also it opens people's eyes to acknowledging that these realities exist. When you see art from and you see [for example] Palestinian art, that's them expressing their joy, their grief, their anger, their oppression, their vibrancy, their resilience, and their will. I think that that's incredibly important for us to witness as people who are not actively part of experiencing what they're experiencing. It's important for us to see and hear their stories, and listen to their music. If we didn't do that, and if they didn't create art, then we wouldn't know it was happening. You need art. You need art to share those stories.



Fig. 5: Siibii Petawabano, 2015



Fig. 6: Siibii Petawabano, 2024

Note

For a taste of Siibii's artistry and voice, check out their work at <https://siibiimusic.com>.

References

Advisory Board on English Education (March 2017). *Indigenous education: Walking on both sides of the river. Brief presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports.*

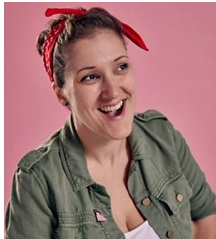
https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/autres/organismes/17-00091_CELA_Autochtones_ENG_web.pdf

Cree School Board (n.d.). *Mik^w Chiyâm Program*. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://eeyoueducation.ca/youth/students/mikw-chiyam-program>

Cunningham, F. (2019). Mik^w Chiyam Arts: Innovative highschool program strengthens connections with community, family and nature. *Alternatives Journal*, 44(1), 49+.

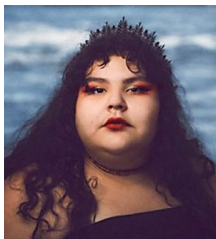
link.gale.com/apps/doc/A626504575/AONE?u=anon~653d43d2&sid=googleScholar&xid=32c05c20

Thorne, R (2019). *Teaching through the four Rs of Indigenous education*. Classroom Practice, Learning Bird. <https://learningbird.com/teaching-through-the-four-rs-of-indigenous-education/>



Melissa-Ann Pereira Ledo (she/her/they) is of Azorean settler background, is a proud queer mother, and is an educator/artist/researcher. She has held various roles, including Arts Consultant for the EMSB, co-founder of inPath, course lecturer at Concordia and McGill universities, and a consultant for Equitas. Melissa-Ann is a PhD student at McGill University and her research explores the transformative power of Queer Teaching Artists, with a focus on how to support marginalized youth.

Beyond academia, she is a visual artist, and the project manager for exChange, an initiative fostering dialogue within Montreal's English-speaking 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.



Siibii Petawabano is an award-winning Cree queer, non-binary, Indigenous pop singer/songwriter with over 300,000 streams across platforms. Their music has won top spots on various countdowns, including NCI FM Indigenous Music Countdown and Indigenous Music Countdown. Originally from the Cree community of Mistissini, Quebec, and now based in Montreal, Siibii first started making music through the formation of their early indie-folk outfit, Simple Human Tribe. Ultimately, Siibii's

goal is to be a changemaker, noting the responsibility they feel to pursue their talent to create more representation within the industry for those who look and identify as they do.

