

Revisiting and Disrupting Uncritical Diversity Narratives Through Autoethnography and Cellfilming

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Abstract

As two white female teachers, we look back on our teaching experiences in Hong Kong and Northern Alberta to disrupt problematic diversity narratives from our first classrooms. Through critical autoethnographic approaches and cellfilming (cellphone + video-production), we analyze our engagement with privilege within our classrooms. We found that we both promoted uncomplicated conceptions of diversity, and each engaged in what Eve Tuck (2009) has described as damaged-centered approaches—teaching practices that established, “harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). We see these experiences as a case study in how to look back productively to change the way we teach in the present and future toward visions of justice.

Background

How do teachers learn about multiculturalism and diversity within Canadian faculties of education, and how do these experiences affect their first teaching experiences? How are diversity and multiculturalism positioned in these teacher preparation programs? As two white female settlers writing from unceded and unsurrendered Wolastoqiyik territory in Fredericton, New Brunswick, we look back on our memories of our Atlantic Canadian teacher education programs and first teaching experiences in Hong Kong (Casey) and Northern Alberta (Ashley). We do this work to disrupt the uncritical multicultural narratives that we both recognize from our teacher preparation and our early pedagogical practices. We define uncritical multiculturalism as the centering of white, cisgender (i.e., where a person’s biological sex aligns with his or her gender expression), heterosexual, middle-class settler colonial experiences, and the understanding as all that falls outside those borders as diverse (Adams, 2017; Osler, 2015). We acknowledge that in this writing about our memories and experiences—aimed to unsettle/disrupt uncritical multiculturalism practices and pedagogies—we center our own experiences, as white, settler, cisgender female teachers. We see this as a tension in our work as we look back.

We both attended predominantly white mono-cultural teacher education programs in Atlantic Canada. Casey graduated in 2008, and Ashley graduated in 2014. At both of our institutions, diversity and multicultural policies and practices were discussed by largely white faculty members. However, we also acknowledge that within these two schools we encountered white critical feminist educators who challenged students to consider white privilege through their teaching materials, experiences, critical reflections, and learning opportunities. We see our work here as a continuation of the ideas they challenged us to engage with in our Bachelor of Education experiences.

Through critical autoethnographic approaches—engaging in critical analysis through the practice of writing personal narratives (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016)—and by creating a collaborative cellphilm (mobile film production, see Dockney, Tomaselli, & Hart, 2010; MacEntee, Burkholder, & Schwab-Cartas, 2016; Mitchell & De Lange, 2013) looking back on our first teaching experiences in racially and culturally heterogenous classrooms, we analyze our engagement and entanglements in whiteness and in learning to read our uncritical diversity narratives as multiliteracy practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; New London Group, 1996)—socially and culturally located ways of seeing and representing the world in our teaching (Emmitt, Komesaroff, & Pollack, 2006). In the study, we ask:

1. How do we remember conceptualizing diversity in our early teaching practices?
2. How do we remember our own investment in whiteness in two non-white teaching contexts?
3. What might thinking through our memories of uncomplicated diversity narratives mean for our teaching practices in the present and future?

We revisit our experiences through what Giroux (2005), drawing on Freire and Macedo (2005), called a “dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on one hand, and language and transformative agency on the other” (p. 5). How did we, as beginning teachers, read the world and the world of the school, and how do we read these worlds now?

Theoretical Perspectives

Decentering Hegemonic Whiteness

We see the ways we learned to read and construct difference in relation to hegemonic whiteness within both of our teacher’s college experiences as a kind of multiliteracy practice—as socially and culturally located way of representing and responding to the world (Emmitt, Pollock, & Komesaroff, 2006). In these schooling experiences, we learned to read multiculturalism in relation to whiteness. These experiences of white privilege were extended in our first teaching practices. For example, while living and working as a teacher in Hong Kong, Casey received unearned privilege in relation to her compensated labour, being treated with undue reverence in her professional capacities, in her interactions with majority community members and institutions, and as she navigated her way through Chinese language learning. While teaching in a northern community in Alberta, Ashley often found herself apologizing for her whiteness as if it were simply a skin colour and not fully understanding the privileges and “passes” she was privy to. She draws from Jennifer Holladay’s (2000) book, *White Anti-Racist Activism: A Personal Roadmap* that was highlighted on the *Teaching Tolerance* website, which explains that white privilege

provides white people with “perks” that we do not earn and that people of color do not enjoy...white privilege shapes the world in which we live — the way that we navigate and interact with one another and with the world. (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, para. 4)

We also draw on Eve Tuck's (2009) notion of "damage-centred" (p. 415) narratives—those "that operate[], even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 413)—as we describe Ashley's memories of her work in an Indigenous-majority elementary school. The privileges Ashley received through her whiteness allowed for her to pursue a Bachelor of Education degree. During her studies, she cultivated strong relationships with critical feminist educators who continually challenged her to recognize that she must be ethically responsive in her practices as a white settler educator.

Multiliteracies

Our study builds on the New London Group's (1996) suggestion that a reframing and opening up of traditional autonomous understandings of literacy—simply reading and writing—is needed to situate researchers, activists, and teachers engaging in social action as a multiliteracy practice. Multiliteracies are understood as ways in which language and expression are represented in multiple ways and through different modes. Other scholars working within a multiliteracies framework (see for example, Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Dyer & Choksi, 2001; Gee, 2012; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Rowsell & Pahl, 2015) explore the ways in which literacy practices might be employed in both research and pedagogical projects with an aim toward researching and teaching for social change. The ways we read the world, through different texts and experiences, shape the ways in which we understand ourselves in relation to others. Sheridan-Rabideau (2008) argues that, "this expanded view of literacy is rooted both in traditional literacy scholarship and in contemporary technological possibilities" (p. 4). We frame our practice of looking back on our experiences as early career teachers through cellphilmimg (cellphone + film production) as a multiliteracy practice; a way of revisiting our memories through do-it-yourself (DIY) media-making. We do this work in an effort to decenter our own teaching practices in order to look back productively and make sense of the ways in which we have moved forward as teachers.

Methodology

Revisiting our teaching pasts as a multiliteracy practice. We engage our memories of teaching in the past in order to understand our role as teachers and activists in the present (Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Morrison, Radford, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2014). We see the practice of reflexively revisiting (Burawoy, 2003) our memories of the classroom through a theoretical framing of this work as "productive remembering" (Strong-Wilson et al., 2014, p. 442). We frame learning to read the past in this way as a multiliteracy practice. Drawing on Madison (2012), and Boylorn and Orbe (2016), we argue that researchers have an ethical responsibility to describe and unsettle injustice that we encounter in our practice and in our lives. We wonder: what does it mean to look back on our past experiences, that we thought were justice-informed, and acknowledge the harm we may have done? We wonder, how did we learn about multiculturalism and individual differences in a way that privileged whiteness, and how systemic injustices were obscured in our teacher education programs, and in our first classrooms? What might that mean for our justice-informed teaching and research in the present? Critical autoethnography

provides a method to address injustice as the practice demands that a researcher's positionality and privilege is acknowledged alongside "marginalization and to take responsibilities for our subjective lenses through reflexivity" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 15). By accounting for our positions through the process of writing and reflecting on theoretical lenses that help anchor our thinking, critical autoethnography provides us a way to revisit our past pedagogical practices (Hanson, 2004). At the same time, we wonder, how might we look back in the future on our practices today?

Revisiting my first classroom: Casey. My first job after teacher's college was at a public secondary school in Hong Kong. When I arrived at the school, I assumed that I would be teaching a mainly monocultural group of Chinese students. However, my students were not Chinese; they were ethnic minorities, some of whom had been born in Hong Kong, and others who had moved to the territory to be with family members who were living and working in the city. I taught the students in English, and aside from a Chinese language learning class, they spent their days learning in English. Within the school, there were Chinese students who were taught in Chinese, and who rarely had opportunities to mix with the ethnic minority students, even at lunch or during extracurricular activities. My time in the school inspired me to go on to graduate school, to explore the ways in which the act of systemic discrimination affected my former students' sense of self, belonging, and understanding their political activism and ways they resisted the structures placed on them in school and society (Burkholder, 2013, 2018). But before I examined the school structures in an academic way, I failed these learners in my work as a justice-oriented teacher.

When I realized that my learners were being segregated in their school lives (separate lunch room, separate sports teams, separate extracurricular activities, separate classrooms and curricula), I worked to create a safe space within my classroom. I saw that safe space as a place where learners could be themselves and feel their identities were valued and supported. I did this work while ignoring the ways in which I was provided undue privilege in the school, to do this work, as well as in society, outside of the school. Looking back now, I wonder why it took me so long to see the ways that whiteness operated in this space, and the ways that I benefitted (and continue to benefit today) from whiteness.

Revisiting my first classroom: Ashley. My first classroom was in a small Dene First Nations school in the northernmost part of Alberta. Our school served roughly 70 students who are either Dene or Cree from grades K4 through 9. My first formal classroom served six full-time kindergarten students, and three part-time K4 students. I took this job fresh out of teacher's college when I was full of hope and believed I could, would, and had the responsibility to change the world. I did not consider what that really meant outside of the romanticized westernized idea of teachers such as Erin Gruwell, Mr. Feenie, and *Matilda's* Miss Honey. When I arrived in August, I quickly recognized the binaries of "them" the First Nations, and "us" the more sophisticated, harder working settler. All but one of the formal educators were settlers, and all of the educational support staff were First Nations, who were largely from the community within which I was working. I, however, chose to live in a neighboring town as I did not want to be further isolated, nor did I want to live where there was no immediate access to stores or a hospital.

It did not take long for me to see the inequalities being experienced by the community and the members who live there. I was quickly exposed to how prevalent food insecurity is in this particular First Nations, which aligned with Alison Blay-Palmer (2016), who states, “food insecurity levels in the Canadian North can be as high as 69% in Aboriginal communities” (p. 6). I learned how much poverty in First Nations communities is either unrecognized, hidden, or when brought up used as a way to blame First Nations people for their own shortcomings. This called me to action and to, as Marie Battiste (2013) demands, “[c]onsider that for more than a century, Indigenous students have been part of a forced assimilation plan—their heritage and knowledge rejected and suppressed, and ignored by the education system” (p. 23). Through this experience it became evident that I had much to learn about Canadian policies and how to use my voice as an ally in Canada’s commitment to Truth and Reconciliation.

Cellphilm

Cellphilm is an emerging participatory visual research methodology that employs an everyday accessible technology—the cellphone—to address individual and community-specific issues to stimulate dialogue and social change (Dockney & Tomaselli, 2009; Dockney et al., 2010; MacEntee et al., 2016; Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2016). Cellphones exist as social objects, and their ubiquity in our culture plays a clear social function in relation to media consumption and dissemination (Stald, 2008). We have employed cellphones as filmmaking tools because we use cellphone filmmaking in our own lives. Casey has used cellphilm in her teaching and research practices, and Ashley has been a part of a cellphilm-making workshop that Casey put on in a graduate-level research methods class. Together, we engaged in the process of cellphilm in order to illuminate some commonalities and tensions between our work as white women teachers working in a multiethnic (Casey) and Indigenous-majority (Ashley) school. We describe the processes that we engaged in below. By creating and analyzing a collaborative cellphilm addressing our understanding of whiteness, positionality, and diversity narratives, we engage in “productive remembering” (Strong-Wilson et al., 2014, p. 442) to disrupt our previous assumptions.

Data Collection

In December 2017, Ashley and Casey began a series of conversations about the commonalities and tensions between their early teaching experiences. Though they attended different teacher’s colleges in Atlantic Canada at different periods in time, Casey remembers learning about diversity and difference in uncomplicated ways in almost completely monocultural educational settings. Casey’s experiences of surface-level theorizing of difference in teacher’s college were challenged in her first teaching experiences in a multiethnic classroom in Hong Kong. Ashley recalled that she learned about difference and had her ideas challenged by critically informed white educators in her education program. She suggested that her white privilege and lack of deep historical knowledge were challenged (and continue to be challenged) in her work as an educator.

Despite framing and reflecting their experiences in teacher education programs differently within their teacher education programs and in their first classrooms, both Casey and Ashley recalled being provided undue privilege in relation to their whiteness. From these conversations, we decided to come together

and talk about the ways that we remembered learning about difference and how we came to have more complex understandings of difference, and how systems and structures—including schools—work to maintain unequal systems of privilege that support white hegemonies.

One afternoon, we decided to get together to investigate our memories through the production of a short cellphilm. We began by brainstorming about the words “difference” and “diversity” and we came up with a title for our cellphilm, “Learning About Difference and Complicating Diversity”: <https://youtu.be/iyuekdE6CCw>. When we began planning the cellphilm, we thought that a short two-minute time limit would be useful for the film. After brainstorming the terms, we decided to create a six-shot cellphilm. We wanted to use similar phrasing to tie our two stories together.

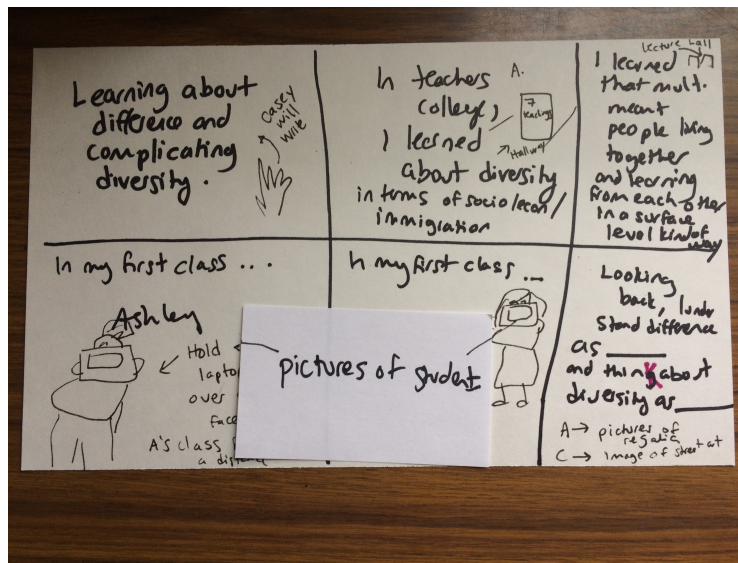


Fig. 1: Cellphilm storyboard

We created a storyboard where we decided how we might pair visuals with the narrative that we wanted to transmit. Then we expanded our scripts and began to shoot the images. Ashley wrote in a black pen on a large piece of paper, and Casey chose to use index cards. After we had planned the shoot and expanded our scripts, we began to shoot the images for the cellphilm.

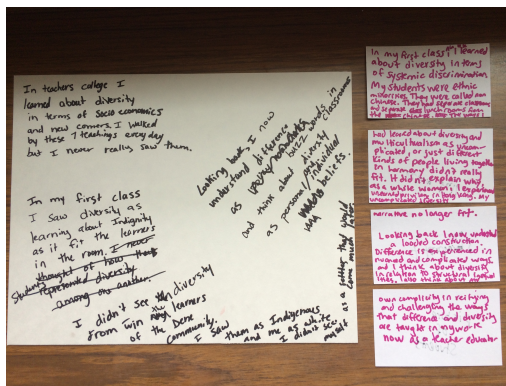


Fig. 2: Expanded narratives

First, Ashley filmed Casey as she wrote the title of the film in the time-lapse function of the cellphone. Then, together, we filmed elements of the university where Casey works and Ashley studies, including a lecture hall, a hallway that features the Seven Sacred Teachings, each of us holding a laptop computer in front of our faces, where we have each displayed an image from our first classrooms. The image is filmed from a distance so that the students could not be identified. Once we had assembled all of the imagery, we came back to Casey’s office and began to edit the cellphilm from an application housed on Casey’s phone. We sped up some images and slowed down others. We added a filter effect to make the lighting and images appear to have the same feeling. We recorded a voice-over in one take.

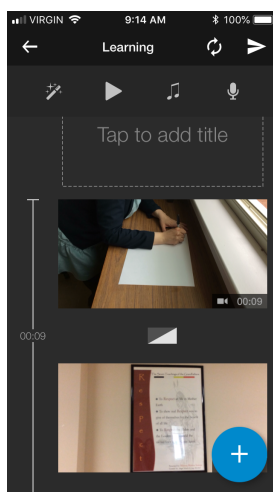


Fig. 3: Editing the cellphilm with an in-phone application

After we edited the cellphilm, Casey made some final changes. She added a background music track and added a filter to tie the colour of the individual shots together in an effort to make the cellphilm appear cohesive. She finalized the cellphilm, uploaded it to YouTube, and sent it to Ashley to receive her feedback. Once Ashley agreed that the cellphilm was ready, we worked collaboratively to analyze the cellphilm.

Analyzing the Cellphilm

We provide a close reading of our collaborative cellphilm, attending to Rose's (2012) site of the image (or what Fiske [1989] refers to as the primary text)—or the ways that the cellphilm communicates visually. The work of John Fiske (1989), and later Gillian Rose (2001, 2012), provide a conceptual framework for analyzing the participatory visual data emerging from the project. Drawing on cultural studies theorist Fiske's (1989) textual analysis, it is necessary to understand that visual texts comprise multiple components: the audience text (how audiences understand a text in relation to their own experiences and situate the text in relation to other texts that they have consumed), the producer text (including all steps to produce the text), and the primary text (the text itself, which in Fiske's work spoke to television programs or series). In Fiske's viewpoint, these texts speak to one another, and cannot be analyzed as though they are in silos. Fiske argues that, like texts, social experiences are also interwoven in:

a vast interlocking potential of elements that can be mobilized in an unpredictable number of ways. Any social system needs a system of meanings to underpin it, and the meanings that are made of it are determined only to an extent by the system itself. This determination allows adequate space for different people to make different meanings though they may use a shared discursive repertoire in the process. The subject is not fully subjected—the sense we make of our social relations is partly under our control—and making sense of social experience necessarily involves making sense of ourselves within that experience. (p. 58)

We draw on Fiske's (1989) notion of textuality to refer to the way that the visual text is understood and changed by the spaces in which it is viewed, as well as what the images are composed of. As Fiske suggests,

the potential of meanings that constitutes our social experience must not be seen as amoeba-like and structureless...the emphasis on the power of the viewer to achieve certain meanings from the potential offered by the text can only be understood in terms of a textual power and a textual struggle that are remarkably similar to social power and social struggle. Making sense of social experience is an almost identical process to making sense of a text. (pp. 58–59)

Fiske's textual analysis has provided helpful guidance in the analysis of participatory visual texts, including cellphilms and participatory video (MacEntee, 2016; Milne, Mitchell, & De Lange, 2012; Yang, 2013). We take Fiske's practice of looking at texts to situate our own project—the creation and analysis of a cellphilm centered on teacher reflexivity, and thinking through notions of justice.

The analysis of the cellphilm is also anchored by visual theorist Gillian Rose's (2012) discourse analysis, which describes a way of analyzing visual work by attending to three sites: (1) production—or how, why, and by whom a visual text is produced; (2) image—which attends to the way that the visual text is composed; and (3) audience—which attends to the life of the visual text in relation to its unfolding meanings and relation to other texts when it reaches new audiences. Rose (2012) argues that each of these sites of the image are influenced by technological (how the text is made), compositional (what the text comprises), and social modes (how the text is situated in relation to other texts in the social world). We now turn to a close reading of the cellphilm, drawing on Rose (2012) and Fiske (1989).

Emerging Findings: Looking Closely at a Collaborative Cellphilm

The cellphilm opens on an image of a person writing, “Learning about Difference and Complicating Diversity.” The camera begins further away and moves closer over a period of a few moments.



Fig. 4: Opening shot of the cellphilm

A voice-over reads the words that the person has written on the paper. The cellphilm fades to a medium tracking shot of the *Seven Sacred Teachings of the Grandmothers* that are hung in a hallway in a postsecondary institution in Atlantic Canada. A voice-over emerges as the camera tracks along the sacred teachings, “In teacher’s college, I learned about diversity in terms of socioeconomics and newcomers. I walked by these Seven Teachings every day, but I never really saw them.”

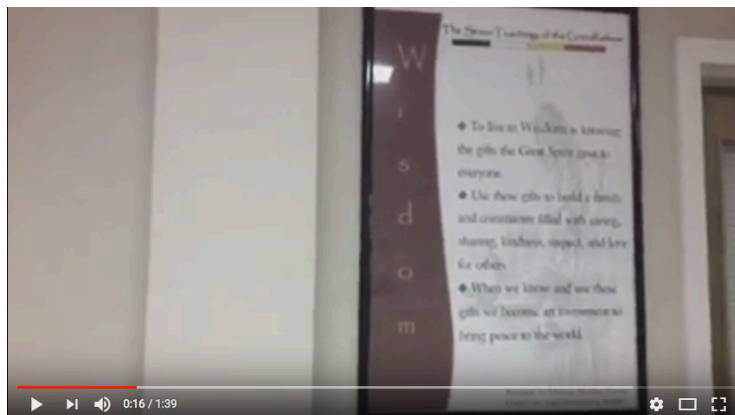


Fig. 5: Walking past, but not seeing the seven sacred teachings

The next shot, of an empty lecture hall, fades in as a new voice speaks, “In teacher’s college, I learned that multiculturalism meant people living and studying together, and learning from each other in a surface level kind of way.” The camera lingers on the empty seats in the lecture hall while a music track plays noticeably in the background. The next shot fades in: an image of a person holding a laptop computer, so that their face is obscured. The laptop is showing a picture of people gathered in two circles. A voice-over emerges,

In my first class, I saw diversity as learning about Indigeneity as it fit the learners in the room. I didn't see diversity within the learners from the Dene community. I saw them as Indigenous, and me as white. I didn't see myself as a settler.

The image fades out and fades back in on another figure that is also holding a laptop computer in front of their face. The laptop shows a posed school picture, where the figures are obscured.



Fig. 6: Recalling first teaching experiences

A voice-over begins,

In my first class, I learned about diversity in terms of systemic discrimination. In Hong Kong, my students were ethnic minorities. The ways I learned about diversity and multiculturalism as uncomplicated, or just different people living together, did not explain it.

The shot fades out and fades in on a drum and some Wolastoqiyik regalia displayed in a case. A voice-over starts, "Looking back, I now understand difference as a buzzword in the classroom. And I think about diversity as encompassing personal and individual beliefs." The shot fades into a picture of graffiti on the front of a business card. The voice-over emerges, "Looking back, I understand difference as a loaded construction. Difference is experienced in complicated and nuanced ways. And I think about diversity in relation to structural inequalities." The music and voice-over end as the screen turns black.

Moving Forward in our Teaching and Thinking

Although we have not yet screened the cellphilm to audiences, we aim to show the cellphilm in future teaching experiences. Casey plans to show the cellphilm to her preservice teachers as she engages them in issues of accountability, pervasive whiteness, and thinking critically about the damage that can be done when teachers engage in uncritical multicultural approaches. She may also use the cellphilm as an example of how to make a cellphilm in workshops and research projects that she facilitates in the future. Ashley may also use the cellphilm in her own classroom with her learners, to show the ways that *even* teachers may make mistakes, and that we change the ways in which we think over time.

We believe that the process of making our ideas visual allowed us to think about the narrative and themes that we wanted to bring out in the cellphilm (e.g., difference and diversity) through a deep inquiry. We believe that this process of turning our experiences into visual representations allowed us an opportunity to show and read whiteness and diversity as a kind of multiliteracy practice. In looking back on our work as beginning teachers, both Casey and Ashley endeavored to teach relationally, with respect, and in service of learners. At the same time, we do this work as privileged settlers on unceded and unsundered territory—a lingering tension of the work that we do. Even as we attempt to move away from damage-centered approaches (Tuck, 2009), we acknowledge that we continue to do damage by ignoring the tensions relating to land theft, the prioritization of settler colonial histories, and ways of knowing within schools and universities. In analyzing our memories, our current practices, and the cellfilms, we found that we were unprepared for what Lather (2015) has described as the “messiness of practice-in-context” (p. 768), including how dominant Eurocentric ways of knowing and teaching rendered—and continue to render—many of our educational practices problematic. In reflecting critically and visually on our experiences, we offer a case study in how to read our past understandings in order to change the way we teach in the present, and act more responsibly in the future. We acknowledge that we continue to do this work within predominantly white settler institutions, including public schools and universities, in which we are both privileged and employed.

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