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Who I (really) am: An exploration of urban Aboriginal identity through short film.

Abstract

This visual essay describes a research project investigating how urban Aboriginal youth engage in film and social media as a medium to explore their identities through the summer Native Youth Program (NYP) at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. This film series, *Who I (really) am*, is an exploration of each student's perspectives about their own identities as young urban Aboriginal youth. We aim to demonstrate how museums can provide an inspiring learning space that enables urban Aboriginal youth to explore their identities and ways of portraying themselves in relation to others.

Key words

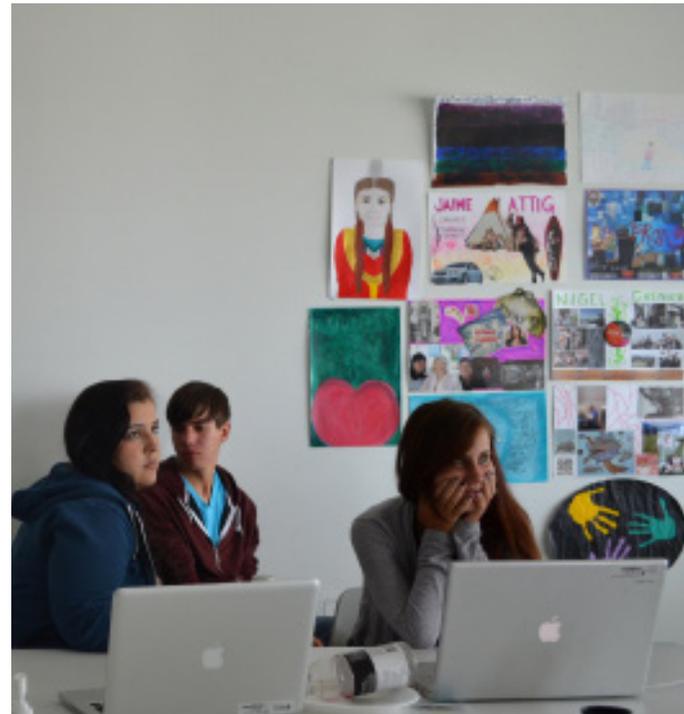
urban Aboriginal youth
exploration of identity
social media

This visual essay describes a research project investigating how urban Aboriginal youth engage in film and social media as a medium to explore their identities through the Native Youth Program (NYP) at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. In particular, we showcase youth reflection through their participation in the 2011 NYP and their learning achievement: Who I (really) am, a film series exploring each student's ideas surrounding their own identities as urban Aboriginal youth.



Figure 1: Nigel Grenier doing some final edits on his film, Effervesce of my Essence, 2011

Figure 2: The participants, Faith Sparrow-Crawford, Nigel Grenier and Diamond Point, learning about filmmaking from guest speaker and mentor Josh Hite, 2011.



In Canadian contexts, many researchers and educators have explored how community-based educational sites use various art forms and/or digital media to facilitate and enrich inquiry for underrepresented young people (Castro & Grauer, 2010; Darts, 2007; Irwin & Kindler, 1999). Scholarly evidence indicates that such digital-mediated arts teaching and learning experiences, occurring in informal learning settings, provide an effective mechanism to build individual skill sets, promote community engagement and offer broader social benefits (Levy & Weber, 2011; Poyntz, 2009). This essay illustrates how museums can provide an inspiring learning space that enables urban Aboriginal youth to explore their identities and ways of portraying themselves in relation to others. It is to inform art education about the potential of museum education in fostering youth identity through digital media implications.



THE NATIVE YOUTH PROGRAM

Who I (really) Am Film Series

During the 2011 NYP summer program one of the projects that the students participated in was the creation of a short film exploring their own ideas surrounding urban Aboriginal identity.

**Film Screening: June 13th 2:00-3:00pm
at Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, Room 182**

<p>Diamond Point</p> <hr/> <p><i>I-DEN-TI-TY</i> 3 min 35 sec</p>   <p><i>OUTSIDE THE BOX</i> 4 min 12 sec</p> <hr/> <p>Jonathan Wildman</p>	<p>Faith Sparrow-Crawford</p> <hr/> <p><i>THE SINGING SPARRON</i> 3 min 26 sec</p>   <p><i>EFFERVESCE OF MY ESSENCE</i> 1 min 30 sec</p> <hr/> <p>Nigel Grenier</p>	<p>Jaime Blankenship</p> <hr/> <p><i>TRADITIONAL ME</i> 1 min 52 sec</p>   <p><i>UNTITLED</i> 2 min 26 sec</p> <hr/> <p>Vanessa Parnell</p>
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NYP Coordinator: Francine Cunningham
NYP Assistant: Robyn Putnam
Film Production Assistant: Camille Esquivel
Produced by: Pam Brown, Curator, Pacific Northwest

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 This project would not have been possible without the membership of Josh-Hla, video artist from Vancouver, BC. Josh provided NYP students with hours of instruction on the art of creating films.



To learn more about NYP check out our blog: <http://theiveyouthprogram.wordpress.com/2011-4th-project/>



Figure 3: Poster for a screening of the short film compilation, *Who I (really) am*, made by the NYP 2011 participants.

As a research and teaching museum, MOA is renowned for its collection of Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations art. The NYP is a youth summer program that has been in place at MOA since 1979. It invites urban Aboriginal youth (Metis, Inuit and First Nations, status and non-status) between the ages of 15-18 to utilize museum resources and collections to explore their own identities and gain workforce skills. Through an arts-based curriculum, the program integrates various art forms, such as performance, poetry, visual arts, music, and folk art, to get youth motivated and then encourage them to use as a tool for expression and communication. For this article, we focus on the reflection of three participants in the 2011 NYP. They are Diamond Point and Faith Sparrow-Crawford who are from the Musqueam Nation and Nigel Grenier who is from the Cree and Gitksan Nations. Each of them created a short film based on their own life experiences.

Effervescence of my Essence, by Nigel Grenier, 2011.



“My identity has been formed and strengthened by overcoming obstacles, the greatest of which is the fear to be oneself. I used two aspects of my life experience to create this piece, dancing and jumping. I have been dancing since I was very young, but I still have to work hard to overcome this fear every time I perform, affirming myself each time.

The cliff jumping has defined my connection with my home and defined myself through my memories.

One aspect of the project was to incorporate social media through blogging. The students were split into two groups and asked to come up with a theme and logo for their separate blogs and then asked to blog weekly throughout the summer regarding what they were learning. They would promote their blogs during their museum tours and gained a healthy readership. We were interested in looking to see if the use of social media would help the students to express themselves.

They were all excited, as many of them had their own personal blogs and all of them had both Facebook and Twitter accounts. Social media has shaped the way that many youth experience the world and it comes very naturally to them to share openly their experiences through this type of platform. Through sound, graphics, and multimodal combinations, the use of blogging and social media enables innovative ways of representing knowledge, voice, and experiences of individuals in a digital world.



The location for this shoot, MOA, is strongly connected to my past, not only through the Native Youth Program but also through my history with the Dancers of Damelahamid. When dancing, I feel a powerful connection to every piece in the museum, this adds true meaning for me in this setting.

I am more confident from the experience. The word that comes to mind in describing what my film is about is confidence.”

(Nigel Grenier)

Figures 4-7: Images from Nigel Grenier's short film titled, Effervescence of my Essence, 2011.

The process for creating these films started with class discussion. In our sessions we would talk about stereotyping, experiences in school and life, and literature and films they had seen. What we found was that most of the students were craving a space in which to talk about these issues and were genuinely surprised by their similar experiences. Most of them had grown up off reserve and each of them felt a degree of alienation with the Aboriginal community in some way. As the weeks went by, the bond between the students grew and so did their awareness of who they were as urban Aboriginal youth.



“My video consists of photo images and text. I choose to use this process in my film because of my passion for visual arts. It was really important for me to include my language in the film. I’d like to acknowledge Larry Grant for his guidance and advice, it really helped to put my film together.

As media studies scholar Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) stated, media “are imbued with the potential for catalyzing new forms of corporeality, new embodiments, new ways of knowing and being human” (p. 126), we have witnessed the youths’ growth throughout the summer. The students learned storyboarding, script writing, and editing. While they were responsible for shooting their own films or assisting each other, the youth continued to offer tours to museum visitors from their unique perspectives.

I-den-ti-ty, by Diamond Point, 2011.



Figure 8-9 (left page and right page): Images from Diamond Point’s film, I-den-ti-ty, 2011.

I felt it was only right to use my own images as well as some from Musqueam to share my story with you. This film shows the experiences I went through in the past two years to find my identity. My artwork and experiences have made me the person I am today. ”

(Diamond Point)



Figure 10 : Diamond Point brainstorming blog themes and logos.

The students reflected that this film project helped them to gain a confidence about who they are as urban Aboriginal youth, as well as prepared them with workforce skills, such as public speaking, project planning, and collaboration. They have come to value their unique lived experience and felt the process of making a film allowed them to express their voice. Their films were shown as part of a permanent exhibition at MOA and they are available online.

The Singing Sparrow, by Faith Sparrow-Crawford, 2011.



Figure 11 & 12 (left page and right page): Images from Faith Sparrow Crawford's film, *The Singing Sparrow*, 2011.

Acknowledging “a need for youths’ informal arts practices to be recognized and celebrated across a range of creative impulses in new media” (Pepler, 2011, p. 80), the museum has played a significant role in the NYP, which provides the urban Aboriginal youth a space to share, learn and create in an environment that is safe and inspiring. It also offers an opportunity for the youth to explore identity through exposure to works of the Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations. By providing space for the NYP in the Museum they are able to bring in First Nations guest speakers and workshop leaders and pull in the expertise of the Museum staff. Through encounters with museum visitors and online users, the youth felt their stories are being heard and they are able to communicate with others about who they are and their cultural heritages.



“My film is about revealing my true identity. I have hidden my true self throughout my entire life. This summer I realized that it is time for me to show who I really am to everyone. Through this film, I hope that you will all get a better understanding of who I am. I am the singing sparrow.”

(Faith Sparrow-Crawford)



Figure 13: Faith Sparrow Crawford filming on the streets of Vancouver.

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The Native Youth Program at The Museum of Anthropology at The University of British Columbia.

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Museum participant: Pam Brown, NYP Department Head, Curator Pacific Northwest.

Student participants: Diamond Point, Nigel Grenier and Faith Sparrow Crawford (shown), Jaime Blankenship, Vanessa Parnell, and Jonathan Wildman (not shown).

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All of the student films can be found online at:
<http://moa.ubc.ca/nativeyouthprogram/>

Contributor details

Francine Cunningham is an Aboriginal writer originally from Calgary, Alberta. She is a current M.F.A candidate in the Creative Writing Program at The University of British Columbia where she also received her B.A degree in Theatre. Francine also has a Visual and Performing Arts Diploma from Keyano College in Fort Mac Murray, Alberta. She has worked with The Native Youth Program as the program coordinator from 2009-2014.

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