Aboriginal Youth Identity Narratives

In contemporary society, the methods for acquiring Aboriginal cultural knowledge are being reconstructed to provide urban Aboriginal youth with a foundation which can aid identity formation. This paper will discuss the barriers to accessing cultural knowledge and to forging Aboriginal identity narratives in an urban context, experienced by Aboriginal youth who increasingly feel the pressure of living within two worlds: Aboriginal and mainstream. It will use the examples of cultural camps aimed at urban Aboriginal youth, to demonstrate how the intersection between contemporary and traditional methods of cultural learning can create a solid foundation for the formation of Aboriginal youth identity narratives. As a young Indigenous Canadian who has personally experienced the difficulties of forming an Indigenous identity narrative within an urban context, the author of this paper will argue that in contemporary society, the formation of one’s Indigeneity has become a reflexive project and can be nurtured through contemporary cultural youth programs. Finally, this essay will highlight the impact that cultural programs can have on the identity narratives of urban Aboriginal youth as they begin to conceptualise their place within Indigenous societies.

In contemporary urban environments, Aboriginal youth are increasingly facing challenges in acquiring cultural knowledge and identity. In a landscape where urban Aboriginal youth are struggling to walk within a “two world construct” - an Aboriginal world and a mainstream world; there can be surmounting difficulties for forging one’s own Indigeneity within an urban context (Bolt 2009, 174). Identities of urban Aboriginal youth are frequently being constructed about them instead of by them, placing Aboriginal youth within the context of socio-economic problems. Palmer (quoted in
White 1999, 110) argues that the categories of Aboriginality have become synonymous with representations of “Aboriginal victimhood and pauperism.” Bolt (2009, 177) suggests larger foundational issues arise for urban Aboriginal identity construction because Australian society has embraced a “‘romantic’ discourse of Aboriginality” which “continues to shape the Western perception of how an Aboriginal person is supposed to look, act and think.” These constructions of Aboriginal youth further exacerbate the difficult task of constructing one’s own idea about their identity. Foucault (quoted in Glackin 2011) notes that when authoritative sources of power impose identity constructs on a group of people, they will eventually internalise these constructs and act accordingly. These points demonstrate serious obstacles for urban Aboriginal youth to be able to define themselves within Aboriginal identity narratives.

Urban Aboriginal youth also face distinct barriers to accessing cultural knowledge by traditional methods. In traditional terms, Aboriginal cultural knowledge has largely been oratory and passed down to youth through the communal experience of growing up alongside Elders and members of their kinship groups (Klapproth 1962, 17). The loss of culture is predicated on the idea that “people have become dislocated from their land and no longer practise many of their traditions” (Tunbridge 1988, xxxii). The dislocation of Aboriginal peoples from their traditional lands is a direct result of Australia’s legacy of colonisation of Aboriginal peoples through legislated acts such as the Aborigines Act 1934-1939 (Francis 1996, 91-95). Under these policies, Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents and communities, and forced to assimilate into Australian mainstream society (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). Binda (quoted in Embury 2009, 102) notes that “forced migration”
of Aboriginal people to urban centres as a result of the assimilation process, has resulted in a lack of “education which reflects the... cultural values or identity” for Aboriginal youth.

In addition to the geographical barriers to accessing cultural education in a traditional context, urban Aboriginal youth also experience obstacles to traditional learning due to lack of resources. White and Wyn (2008, 14-29) discuss the difficulties youth face in navigating their way through society where a lack of resources equates to social exclusion. Urban Aboriginal youth face a unique challenge in accessing cultural knowledge when they do not have the resources to do so. Without a vehicle, one cannot travel back to country to participate in cultural activities located in a remote community setting. Without being provided with connection to community and ‘country’ in the first instance, the ongoing impact of the “continuing legacy and present realities of colonisation” may present further barriers for urban Aboriginal youth whom may not know how to access the wisdom and guidance of cultural elders (White and Wyn 2008, 66). As a result of the above factors, urban Aboriginal youth living within this contemporary context may experience feelings akin to Paradies’ (quoted in White and Wyn 2008, 74, 75) sentiment of not feeling “a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity.”

Growing up in an urban environment, the author of this paper understandings the difficulties met by Aboriginal young people in constructing an Aboriginal identity. Social and cultural pressures that arise from the “amalgamation” of “contemporary Aboriginal society... with western technologies” can pose significant challenges for how Aboriginal young people begin to understand their place within both Aboriginal and mainstream
worlds (Everett quoted in Grieves 2008, 379). However, Newhouse (quoted in Embury 2009, 103) posits that “Indigenous identity is being deliberately reconstructed” due to a resurgence in Aboriginal people returning to traditional knowledge pathways. In examining the fluidity of Indigenous identity narratives, it is useful to note Giddens’ concept of self. For Giddens (quoted in Elliot 2001, 37; 1991, 180), identity formation is a “reflexive project of self... a concept... for grasping the production of personal and social life.” Aboriginal identity is constructed, altered and reconstructed through examining and reforming “social practices... in the light of incoming information about those very practices” (Giddens 1990, 38). Newhouse (quoted in Embury 2009, 88) argues that in the last four decades, identity has “been reshaped by the reinterpretation of Aboriginality through cultural education programs” offered in a contemporary context. One of the ways Aboriginal youth have been able to access cultural knowledge are cultural camps aimed specifically at those living in urban environments.

Embury’s (2009, i-170) profile of youth participation in the Ghost River Rediscovery (GRR) Camp in Alberta, Canada highlights how similar camps in Australia can also aid in constructing Aboriginal youth identities. The GRR camp provides Aboriginal youth who mainly reside in Calgary, a nearby major city located in Southern Alberta with a cultural experience that “can be (a) powerful tool for reinforcing identity” (Embury 2009, 4). For participants, the GRR camps are often their first experience of being away from an urban environment and accessing cultural knowledge (Embury 2009, 102, 107, 119). Lickers (quoted in Embury 2009, 102, 103) explains that program provides an “exploration of cultural traditions steeped in a connection to the natural world,” which:
“create a contemporary learning environment that builds relationships and encourages self-exploration through Aboriginal teachings and protocols... (and) strongly emphasizes the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual capacity of youth by rediscovering their relationship to the mountains, animals, trees and rivers in close proximity to Calgary.”

GRR camps provide outdoor education activities “taught through an Aboriginal education framework” to provide an “ethical space” for disseminating traditional culture in a contemporary context (Embury 2009, 11). Activities undertaken by participants include: learning to build a fire, “building a shelter, human-bear protocol... ecological and experiential education activities, traditional games and crafts... and cultural teachings with Elders” (Lertzman 2002, 39, 40). Traditional Elders “lead ceremonies and provide teachings for youth” about building a relationship with the land, that can in turn alter one’s worldview (Embury 2009, 15). Young people in turn, use the knowledge they have gained from the Elders to nurture their own relationship with the land. By placing Aboriginal youth at the centre of traditional knowledge transfer, youth begin to recognise their importance in this cycle of inter-generational exchange (Embury 2009, 16; MacCallum et al. 2006, 45-51).

In Australia, the Yiriman Project is a leading cultural camp located in the Kimberly region of Western Australia, which focuses on inter-generational exchange between urban Aboriginal youth and Elders, known as “bosses” (MacCallum et al. 2006, 46-51; Palmer et al. 2006, 317-337; 2007, 1-51). The Yiriman camps focus on youth participation in three areas: walking and traveling on country, “walking along behind bosses” alongside Elders, and “cleaning up country” through land management and care (Palmer et al.
A key feature of the project is the inter-generational exchange between the old people and youth through walking across vast stretches of country. Walking alongside “bosses” provides an opportunity for the preservation and continuance of storytelling, where not only are oratory traditions passed to youth participants, but also land management skills such as traditional bush burning, which assists young people to build a respectful relationship with their elders and the land (Palmer et al. 2006, 328).

While the Yiriman Project focuses on the physical aspects of walking and land care, participation in these activities can inform identity narratives. Similar to the Ghost River Rediscovery camps, the Yiriman camp “attempts to move past what Crisp (quoted in Russell 2001, 72) calls ‘wilderness therapy’ into the sphere of youth participation in country as part of their identity as Aboriginal people, “a practice that helps to re-establish themselves as ‘legitimate and sovereign stewards of their country’” (Palmer 2006, 324; quoted in Daniels 2009, 31). Lertzman (2002, 16) suggests that “the very nature of walking on the land... is an act of transformation”, which can inform one’s identity. In walking alongside “bosses”, a shared experience is created between young people and elders (Palmer et al. 2006, 325). Elders help young participants to foster a relationship with ancestors by sharing a tradition of “calling out ‘to the old people for country’, those guardians of country who had returned to their country upon dying” (Palmer et al. 2006, 325). Here, young people begin to “recognise that their place in the world is shaped by the prior existence of other beings” (Palmer et al. 2006, 325). In this way, Aboriginal youth “begin their own journey and conversation with the land” (Daniels 2009, 32).
By participating in cultural camps, urban Aboriginal youth are provided with the opportunity to construct identity narratives about their Aboriginality. The Ghost River Rediscovery and Yiriman camps “provide a contemporary means” for the dissemination of traditional culture in meaningful ways for urban youth who may not normally have access to cultural resources (Embury 2009, 131). The camps bridge the barriers to physical and material access to resources for urban Aboriginal youth, and can provide the means for urban youth to find “their cultural identities” (Embury 2009, 131). For Aboriginal youth struggling to navigate their way through living in a “two world construct” - Aboriginal and mainstream worlds, cultural camps can provide the tools to “encourage youth to think about how their cultural identities fit into these landscapes” (Bolt 2009, 174; Embury 2009, 136).

This essay has considered how the methods for acquiring Aboriginal cultural knowledge have been reconstructed to provide urban Aboriginal youth with a foundation which can aid identity formation. It has discussed the barriers to accessing cultural knowledge and to forging Aboriginal identity narratives in an urban context. By examining two examples of cultural camps targeting urban Aboriginal youth, this paper has demonstrated how the intersection between contemporary and traditional methods of cultural learning can create a solid foundation for the formation of Aboriginal youth identity narratives. This paper has argued that the formation of one’s Indigeneity has become a reflexive project and can be nurtured through contemporary cultural youth programs. Finally, by highlighting the impact of these camps on youth identity narratives, the essay has demonstrated that Aboriginal youth can access opportunities to establish their Indigeneity in a contemporary context.
References


20(50-51): 90\105. DOI: 10.1080/14443059609387281.


http://books.google.com.au/books?id=qvAERk7v_JEC&amp;pg=PR5&amp;ots=Yn7JKXoGK_&amp;dq=aboriginal%20knowledge%20%2Boral%20tradition&amp;lr&amp;pg=PR5#v=onepage&amp;q=aboriginal%20knowledge%20+oral%20tradition&amp;f=false.


