

Rethinking Authenticity, Legitimacy, and Agency in the Context of the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak Project

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Abstract

This discussion, stemming from our keynote address at 2022 ACLAR Biennial Conference, brings together researchers and emerging scholars from the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project, a community-driven research project that shares knowledge about Rocky Cree culture in northern Manitoba, Canada, through historical picture books, picture book apps, and teachers’ guides. Using this project as a case study, we reflect on the three themes of the 14th Biennial ACLAR Conference: legitimacy, authenticity, and agency. In particular, we trouble the concept of authenticity and question its usefulness for the kind of cross-cultural research that we are undertaking in the project. We document our processes for working with oral stories and translating these into written texts. We outline the community and scholarly research that grounds the textual, pictorial, and auditory representations of the picture books and apps we produce, and propose that the aspiration to historical, cultural, geographical, and linguistic accuracy at the centre of our project is a more enabling objective than a search for authenticity is. We also discuss how the curriculum materials we develop seek to connect young readers with Rocky Cree culture and use the concepts of agency and entanglement to think through these connections. The final part of this discussion considers a gathering on Rocky Cree culture that academic researchers and Rocky Cree community researchers and knowledge keepers organized collaboratively. Not only was our project initiated by Rocky Cree community members, but, as this gathering demonstrates, it also assumes an ongoing relationship with these communities.

Keywords: authenticity, legitimacy, agency, Asiniskaw Īthiniwak, Rocky Cree, Indigenous literature

The publications in the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak (Rocky Cree) series aspire to support the ongoing language revitalization and cultural resurgence of the Rocky Cree in northern Manitoba, Canada. In this article, which arises from the keynote address we presented for the 14th Biennial ACLAR Conference on ‘Owning Our Voices’ held in July 2022, we focus on the ways in which the Six Seasons project rethinks authenticity, legitimacy, and agency, arguing that the cultural specificity of the project and the various positionalities of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators and intended audience require that researchers frame these concepts carefully and explicitly.

The Six Seasons research project is creating a series of texts: a cycle of historical picture books about the life of the asiniskaw Īthiniwak (Rocky Cree) during the proto-contact period of the mid-seventeenth century; teacher’s guides aimed at grades four to six for each book; and digital picture book apps. These apps, available for free in the Apple Store and the Google Play store, allow users to listen to the stories in either Cree or English and to engage with various interactive elements, such as a game about packing a canoe.² The texts are organized according to the six seasons of the asiniskaw Īthiniwak calendar, telling stories in relation to seasonal activities on the land. The first books in the series are *Pīsim Finds Her Miskanaw* (2013, revised edition 2020) and *Amō’s Sapotawan* (2022). Both stories describe the life of a Rocky Cree community by focusing on a child protagonist who is searching for their path in life. The stories and the knowledge that they convey speak to children, teenagers, and adults. The main narrative of these text-heavy picture books and apps is historical fiction, but they also include sidebars with additional story notes, which, among other things, describe Cree vocabulary, cultural objects, cultural practices, geographical details and maps, and reproduce community stories. The stories as well as the story notes are outcomes of the project’s research activities, which bring together Knowledge Keepers, archaeologists, historians, storytellers, and literary scholars who strive toward historical and cultural accuracy.³

We are four researchers who have been involved in the creation of the Six Seasons stories, the accompanying picture book app AMO, the accompanying teacher’s guide, and the organisation of a gathering of Rocky Cree Knowledge Keepers, academic researchers, and community members. In the essay that follows, Melanie Braith demonstrates how Six Seasons stories emerge through the collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and explores why these stories nevertheless can be considered authentic Rocky Cree stories. Benjamin Roloff, in thinking through his research on creating a soundscape for the Six Seasons app AMO, proposes that the concept of truth is a helpful alternative to the concept of authenticity. Grace Braniff proposes that the concepts of entanglement and *nīhithaw* allow the curriculum developers to think beyond the limitations of established categories in conceptualising agency. Amanda Laverdure demonstrates how authenticity, agency, and legitimacy become interwoven when planning a community-based gathering of Knowledge Keepers and academic researchers. Although each section of the paper was authored individually, we worked together closely throughout the writing and editing processes to encourage and challenge each other’s understandings of our key concepts and their relationship to our work. Within a collaborative project, individual authorship is a problematic concept. Numerous voices, not only those involved in the keynote and this article, stand behind our own throughout our work.

The Six Seasons project has its roots in the 1993 discovery of the burial site of a young woman from the 1600s at Nagami Bay on Southern Indian Lake near the Rocky Cree community of O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation in northern Manitoba.⁴ After the remains were studied and reburied in a ceremony, archaeologists Kevin Brownlee and E. Leigh Syms published their study *Kayasochi Kikawenow: Our Mother from Long Ago*, in which they recorded that ‘the Elders believe that the Nagami Bay mother allowed herself to be recovered so that her knowledge could be passed on, particularly to the young Cree’ (1999, p. 58). Rocky

Cree storyteller William Dumas recognised the importance of the study but did not think that it addressed the young people at the centre of the Elders’ concern. In 2006, Dumas’s idea to create a picture book about the life of Kayasochi Kikawenow brought him to Mavis Reimer, founding director of the Centre for Research in Young People’s Texts and Cultures at the University of Winnipeg. While Reimer agreed that a picture book was a good medium for telling the story of the Nagami Bay woman to young people, the format that such a picture book should take was not clear. The book had to engage readers as a story but also to provide the detailed contexts needed to understand the story. They arrived at a solution—to create a hybrid, fictional and informational, picture book. But there were no models for creating such a book, which, they recognised, would require the collaboration of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, traditional land users, and fluent language speakers with academic researchers in archaeology, history, and children’s texts. Over several years, Dumas and Reimer worked to find the right collaborators and partners to support the development of a historically, culturally, geographically, and linguistically accurate children’s book about Rocky Cree culture in the 1600s.

The fact that community members invited academic researchers to work on this project provides the ground for the legitimacy of the project. In contemporary Canada, it is generally understood that research on Indigenous topics should only be undertaken with the participation and informed consent of Indigenous individuals and communities.⁵ From the beginning, this project was shaped by cross-cultural collaborations and lived relationships that shaped the research process. Reimer reflects on the way that the many questions about how to proceed ‘sometimes stop[ped] our work for weeks and months while we searched for or put together understandings that would allow us to move forward again’ (Reimer 2014, pp. 3-4). As this quotation demonstrates, the collaborators on the project were working toward a common goal, but without a clear roadmap. They moved forward by finding their way together. Today, the Six Seasons project involves Rocky Cree community researchers and Knowledge Keepers,

academic researchers from different parts of Canada, and partner institutions in Manitoba.⁶ The idea of finding common purpose is not only an underlying theme in the Six Seasons stories but also one that characterises the work that the collaborators of the Six Seasons project have been doing over the years. Articulating appropriate understandings to move forward is a theme that also underpins the argument of this article, namely that concepts need to be adapted to fit specific contexts.

Telling Stories Together: Collaboration and Authenticity in the Six Seasons Story Team

My name is Melanie Braith, and I am a non-Indigenous scholar from Germany who works in the field of Indigenous literatures in Canada. The question of how to engage ethically with these stories has been central to all of my work. As a member of the Six Seasons Story Team, I reflect on how diverse collaborations impact the authenticity of the Six Seasons stories, and I ask what it means for the authenticity of these stories that the project involves non-*asiniskaw* *īthinīwak*, and even non-Indigenous people. Building on teachings from *asiniskaw* *īthinīwak* storyteller William Dumas, I argue that authenticity is generated through cultural competency.

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers an astute analysis of how the discourse of authenticity can either challenge the colonial status quo or undergird it, depending on who employs it to what purpose. In the context of Western academia and mainstream media, authenticity is often used ‘to determine who really is indigenous, who is worth saving, who is still innocent and free from Western contamination’ (Smith 2012, p. 76). Here, authenticity becomes a tool to create division and to silence voices of Indigenous people who do not fit the coloniser’s idea of an authentic Indigenous identity (Smith 2012, p. 76). Smith’s work has made me critical of the concept of authenticity because of the way the West uses it to determine Indigeneity—and thereby attempts to undermine Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Smith, however, points out that authenticity can become a powerful tool for

Indigenous people in anti-colonial struggles. It has, for example, been used ‘as a form of articulating what it meant to be dehumanized by colonization and it has also been used ‘for reorganizing “national consciousness” in the struggles for decolonization’ (Smith 2012, p. 77). In this context, authenticity refers to ‘our strengths in surviving thus far, [...] to our authentic selves as people’ (Smith 2012, p. 77).

For asiniskaw ᐢthiniwak storyteller William Dumas, the land is central for his own and the Six Seasons project’s reclamation of Rocky Cree history, language, and culture. When he speaks about the process of storytelling, Dumas acknowledges the land as collaborator by emphasising that stories come from the land because the land ‘tells us stories’ (Cariou 2020, p. 1). Focusing on the theme of collaboration in my discussion of the work of the Six Seasons Story Team allows me to highlight the way in which the Six Seasons stories emerge from a web of relationships in which the land is central. The Six Seasons Story Team brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, and its work is therefore steeped in intercultural collaboration. Producing authentic asiniskaw ᐢthiniwak stories requires the Story Team to be attentive to the different layers of collaboration that shape these stories, beginning with the process of listening to the stories of the land. One such way of listening is facilitated by archaeological research. For example, pottery sherds from the 1600s found on the land by William’s brother Louis inspired the book *Amō’s Sapotawan*. This picture book tells the story of Amō, an asiniskaw ᐢthiniwak girl who decides to become a pottery maker. The interpretation of archaeological findings tells us how asiniskaw ᐢthiniwak lived in the past, and they complement the oral history related by asiniskaw ᐢthiniwak Knowledge Keepers and land users. For Indigenous members of the team, however, the connection between land and stories goes beyond archaeology. The land is central to the narratives and lives of Cree people and, according to Cree scholar Neal McLeod, ‘it is the sense of place that anchors our stories; it is the sense of place that links us together as communities’ (2007, p. 6). Based on his work with

William Dumas and other storytellers, Métis scholar Warren Cariou conceptualises land and story as ‘terristory,’ a unity that provides ‘the ground of culture; the living, nurturing, relational medium in which Indigenous communities flourish’ (2020, p. 4). Terristory is ‘a relation or rather a plural and ongoing set of relations’ (Cariou 2020, p. 2), and while non-Indigenous members on the Six Seasons team do not participate in this set of relations that is asiniskaw īthiniwak terristory, team leader William Dumas has made sure that all members of the Story Team have spent time on the land in asiniskaw īthiniwak territory.

The work of the Six Seasons Story Team follows asiniskaw īthiniwak pedagogy according to which learning happens in four steps: (1) be still, (2) listen, (3) visualise, and (4) articulate. The first time William Dumas tells the team a Six Seasons story, the team members are still and listen. The thoughts that they share after the telling provide a basis for Dumas’s further work on the story. When the story is ready to be recorded after several of these storytelling sessions, the team creates a transcription. In the next step of visualisation, the team members think about additions and changes. When working on the story for the third book in the series, for example, the team created a storyboard to visualise the various strands of the narrative. In the final step of articulation, the oral story is transmediated into a written text. Unpacking the idea of authenticity in the context of Indigenous stories and studies allows me to consider the ways in which this written text might be said to be authentic.

In Indigenous literary studies in North America, questions of cultural authenticity dominated conversations in the second half of the twentieth century. These conversations have more recently shifted to concepts of Indigenous nationhood and community (Cox and Justice 2014, p. 3). Indigenous literary nationalism is a productive path for thinking about the work of Six Seasons project members. This literary movement calls for approaches to texts that are nation-specific, that take into consideration cultural context and history, and that apply nation-specific concepts to the interpretation of stories. Scholars who are part of this movement argue

that this approach supports Indigenous sovereignty.⁷ The Six Seasons project is a nation-specific project in its focus on the asiniskaw īthiniwak: we tell stories about asiniskaw īthiniwak history on asiniskaw īthiniwak land.

To come back to my initial question: what does it mean for the authenticity of these stories that the project involves non-asiniskaw īthiniwak, and even non-Indigenous, people? An answer can be found in the work of Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, who promotes Indigenous literary nationalism while at the same time being a critic of colonial concepts such as the nation-state. His articulation of the movement resonates with the work of the Six Seasons project. Justice emphasises that ‘a nationalist approach doesn’t presume that one must be Indigenous or, if Indigenous, affiliated with the community under discussion’ (2016, p. 26). A nationalist approach does entail, however, that scholars ‘know something about the meaningful contexts from which those literatures emerge and with which those literatures are engaged’ (Justice 2016, p. 24). Justice’s words capture our work on the Six Seasons project as we strive toward learning about the history and culture of the asiniskaw īthiniwak as we engage with their stories.

The key for creating authentic stories lies in what William Dumas refers to as cultural competency among all those involved. As Dumas points out in a recording we created for the ACLAR 2022 conference, we are all human beings, but ‘we come from different languages, we come from different cultures. So, we have to negotiate that’ (Dumas 2022). Respectful communication becomes an important part of this collaboration and, in the end, as Dumas points out, cultural competency is about communicating a future together—a process in which everyone can contribute a piece to the puzzle (Dumas 2022). For these pieces to fit, however, they need to be shaped by historical and cultural accuracy, as Benjamin Roloff reflects below.

Aural Truth(s): Troubling the Authenticity of Sound

My name is Benjamin Roloff, and I approach my position with the Six Seasons Production Team as a Métis research assistant raised in Treaty 2 territory and now living and learning on Treaty 1 land. In this section, I further trouble the terminology and concept of authenticity, here as it pertains to audio in the multimodal format that is the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project’s picture book app for *Amō’s Sapotawan*, officially titled AMO. As cross-cultural children’s literature expands into multimodal digital media formats, the notion of Indigenous authenticity becomes increasingly difficult to define, research, and implement. Not only, as Melanie Braith discusses above, is authenticity problematic in defining ‘who really is Indigenous,’ in the context of cross-cultural multimodal digital media, it potentially becomes an authority over what really is Indigenous. To apply labels of authenticity to multimodal elements, such as visuals and audio, of a story is to authoritatively define the complex and multifaceted experience that story is attempting to convey. Instead, I propose that the terminology of truth is better suited to such cross-cultural digital literature, particularly when considering the development and transmission of natural soundscapes in conjunction with storytelling. In recent years, truth has risen to prominence in the context of conversations surrounding Indigenous history and healing through the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2008 and the ongoing implementation of its 94 Calls to Action. I argue that approaching cross-cultural picture book app audio with consideration for personal truth, or one’s own lived experience and understanding, not only creates a more accurate experience for app users, but also helps guide researchers towards developing and conveying such stories and histories in ways that are respectful and meaningful.

Amy Ku’uleialoha Stillman’s work helps me to trouble the term ‘authenticity’ when considering Indigeneity. Stillman states that the concept of authenticity originated in Western European epistemology, with its meaning expanded from ‘authority, broadly construed, through values that include essentialized notions of purity in historical origins, and/or in acknowledged

“genuineness” of identity’ (2021, p. 163). To define the genuineness of Indigenous identity through the lens of historical purity is problematic. For many people, defining Indigenous historical purity would necessitate connections to pre-contact Indigeneity while dismissing the ongoing shifts in Indigenous identity influenced by colonialism. Stillman concludes that utilising the term *authenticity* creates a binary, which ultimately leads to ‘affirmations of inclusion, or exclusion by means of identity violence’ (2021, p. 164). As such, the conceptual use of authenticity, specifically in the development of Indigenous media outputs, creates issues. Indigeneity does not exist as a strict binary determined by colonial violence and influence—as a Métis scholar of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, I and many others in Canada are living contradictions of such a binary. Similarly, the experiences conveyed by visual, aural, and interactive elements in a multimodal story should not be limited by terminology such as *authentic* when considering the potential for variance in individual perspectives and truths.

Applying the inherent authority present in the concept of authenticity to audio in the Six Seasons AMO picture book app further amplifies the problem. This app serves to deliver the experience of oral storytelling through visuals (text and illustration), interactive opportunities (games, tasks, and haptics), and audio (narration and natural soundscapes). While it presents the same narrative, illustrative, linguistic, and historical information as the physical picture book does, the app furthers immersion and engagement through the inclusion of audio and two extended interactive opportunities: a fishing game and an askihk (pottery) making game. In the multimodal format of an app, AMO initially presents as a departure from the oral storytelling tradition. What this format does, however, is deliver an experience of the truth of the story to a wider audience through the incorporation of visuals and audio which would be present with lived experience on the land but are not accessible to most users of the app. Six Seasons Production Team member Margaret Mackey highlighted this notion in an e-mail to me: ‘Sound creates space; and if you are land-based in your approach, then the space created by the sound

really matters. We’re not going to get the land into the app, but we can get some of the space of the land into the app’ (2022). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective ‘true’ as referring to ‘[l]oyalty, trustworthy, and related senses’ (‘True’ 2022). Rather than measuring user experience as authentic or inauthentic, we might say that the app seeks to create an experience that is true or loyal to asiniskaw īthiniwak storytelling.

In part, this truth is achieved through natural soundscapes. As a research assistant with the Six Seasons project, one of my roles is to consider soundscapes in the project’s picture book apps. To begin bringing ‘the space of the land into the app’ through the medium of sound, I first drew on Almo Farina’s *Soundscape Ecology* to define the three structural elements of a natural soundscape: biophonies, or ‘the results of animal vocalizations’; geophonies, or ‘the result of sonic energy produced by nonbiological natural agents’; and anthrophonies, or ‘the result of all the sounds produced by technical devices’ (Farina 2014). Because of the proto-contact era of the narrative, technical devices are not present in the story, so I incorporated an extension of the idea of anthrophony, called anthropophony, or sounds specifically produced by humans, which may include oral sounds (speaking, laughing) or working sounds (building shelters, paddling canoes). I could then use these three structural layers to inform the rebuilding of a soundscript for the app. By considering regional and era-accurate sounds to develop each of these three layers, I constructed a soundscript to best match each spread’s text and illustrations. In the initial stages of development, I deemed this soundscript to be an authentic representation of natural soundscapes, both in process and outcome.

My reexamination of authenticity and my decision to introduce the language of truth begins with a spread from *Amō’s Sapotawan* in which the titular character encounters a black bear while walking alone down a path (Dumas 2022, p. 20). My initial authentic soundscript reflected this spread in the following way: biophony – distant bird calls and the breathing of the black bear; geophony – wind blowing the leaves of surrounding poplar trees; anthropophony –

the nervous breathing of Amō. Not only was this soundscript an accurate representation of the textual and illustrated scene present in the spread, but it also reflected regional and historical accuracy. Thus, the resulting soundscape could be deemed authentic by Stillman’s definition. To better understand the space I was conveying, I gathered field recordings in Manitoba’s Whiteshell Provincial Park, an area geographically similar to the setting in *Amō’s Sapotawan*. As I was hiking alone down a trail, I, like Amō, encountered a black bear in my path. After pausing for several seconds, the black bear withdrew into the trees, and I was able to safely continue on my way. Reflecting on this moment, however, I realized a truth: from my perspective, the encounter occurred in total silence. The wind had not ceased blowing through the surrounding poplar leaves and the birds had not stopped singing, but in the midst of the fear I felt, I had not registered any sounds from the environment. From my personal perspective, the world seemed to have momentarily stopped.

As a result of this experience, I realised there can be differing soundscapes to a single experience, and to call one authentic would rule the other as inauthentic, which is not accurate. Although my perspective is that of an Indigenous researcher, I am distant from both the time and the place of the people we are representing. By considering my own experiential differences with soundscapes as multiple truths, I create the opportunity for the selection of one which might best represent the truth of the story while not delegitimising the experiences or perspectives of others’ truths through the binary categorisation of authenticity. Additionally, whether Indigenous or settler researchers are aiding in the creation of cross-cultural multimodal media, considering truth can inform deeper connections with the work and further enable meaningful engagement with the stories being shared. These stories can then be conveyed respectfully by considering and legitimising the truths which may lie behind a single story, scene, or sound.

Agency and Entanglement: Culturally Competent Curriculum Development through Nihithaw

My name is Grace Braniff; I grew up on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg of the Three Fires Confederacy and now live in Treaty 1 territory, Winnipeg, Manitoba. I entered the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project as a research assistant for the Curriculum Team. I come to this writing acknowledging that I am of settler descent and that my positionality is inseparable from the topics I discuss here; with this acknowledgement is a commitment to persistent introspection and continuous reassessment of my complicities and privileges. As a researcher, I look to the scholarship of Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour to inform and frame my thinking. I consider how the Teacher’s Guide aspires to facilitate agency for the intended readership of the Six Season series, and their extended support systems, by creating curriculum that embodies principles of the asiniskaw Īthiniwak.

The Teacher’s Guides expand on the pedagogies embedded in Six Seasons picture books and apps through thematic modules that contain learning activities and teaching strategies with connections to Manitoba Curriculum for middle-years students. As the Teacher’s Guides engage educators and students in culturally specific learning, they also encourage the network of people who support a student to commit to a culturally competent future. For example, asiniskaw Īthiniwak vocabulary is woven into *Amō’s Sapotawan*. In the corresponding guide, teachers are asked to lead a discussion about the meaning of Rocky Cree words and their connection to the illustrations within the book (*Amō’s Sapotawan: Teacher’s Guide* 2022, p. 61).⁸ For this activity, aided by the picture book app’s asiniskaw Īthiniwak narration, educators practice pronunciations of Rocky Cree words. Their preparation for modelling the language to students is an active engagement that contributes to building cultural competency; this teaching has the potential to resonate out to their families, future students, and

colleagues. In this sense, though the teachings are specific and targeted, their affective potential is unlimited.

Through form, content, and affect, *Six Seasons Teacher’s Guides* aspire to facilitate agency for their intended readership. In this section, I use two conceptual frameworks that prioritise non-hierarchical understandings of the world and the interconnected nature of beings—entanglement and *nīhithaw*—to theorise how the *Teacher’s Guides* engage students and teachers to re-orient their understanding of the *asiniskaw īthiniwak* and their preconceived notions of learning, knowledge, and self. This process of translation, from pragmatic multi-dimensional projects to conceptually grounded writing, is my effort to give form to ideas, identify what I see as a replicable framework for curriculum writers, and make legible the intentions and thinking that have supported my understanding of and contribution to the *Teacher’s Guides*.

Theorising agency in and for young people is contingent on understanding youth as beings in their own right who, like all beings, are in a continual process of becoming. This understanding is inspired by Kristine Alexander’s article, ‘Agency and Emotion Work’, where she submits that ‘seeing them [children] as “beings” rather than “becomings”’ is essential to listening and valuing children’s voices and experiences to more effectively theorise their agency (Alexander 2015, p. 121). Critically, my framing envelops ‘becoming’ into ‘being,’ acknowledging ‘becoming’ as essential to ‘being’ and a perpetual process that should not be discounted as an immaturity. I position agency in relation to dominant social structures and suggest that social structures necessitate agency (Christensen 2021). As a living definition (Stein et al. 2020), ‘agency’ is the degree to which an individual or a collective can navigate, shape, dismantle, or recreate society according to their own or collective will. In the context of the *asiniskaw īthiniwak*, this definition foregrounds collective and community-centred forms of agency (Christensen 2021). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake

Simpson decisively states that ‘my child has the responsibility of figuring out a meaningful way to live in the world that is consistent with her most intimate realities. The job of everyone else is not to direct or control that but to support her’ (Simpson 2017, p. 120). Simpson aptly articulates the desire for and importance of facilitating and supporting agency within younger generations and the surrounding communities’ role in relation to that project.

In Canadian curriculum, there is a distinct emphasis on separation; how we conceptualise these separations is visible in categories like ‘science,’ ‘health,’ and English Language Arts (ELA). Embodied in the curriculum is the hierarchisation of knowledge and the privileging of certain modes of articulation: writing over oral storytelling, justifiable and provable information over the unverifiable, and defining the unknown over contemplating the unresolvable. Privileging particular modes of articulation is an instrument of white supremacy and colonialism; it is coded as benign but is inextricable from the people and culture who preserve it and/or are affected by it. The entailed separation and hierarchisation perpetuates a value system that requires some beings to be lessened for others to be elevated. Scholars Taien Ng-Chan and Carmella Laganse (2020) turn to entanglement as resistance to separation, influenced by Nêhiyaw scholar Elwood Jimmy’s (2020) theorisation of horizontal ways of being and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizomatic theory (Glissant 1997). In these rhizomatic, entangled, and horizontal environments, each part is interconnected, extending laterally to provide equitable access to resources and to effectively strengthen the system as a whole. These horizontal ways of being exemplify our relationality and, in the words of Édouard Glissant, show how ‘each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the other’ (1997, p. 11). Similarly, to manifest this understanding in curriculum development, it is essential to acknowledge that each and every subject/topic is extended through its relationship with another. In effect, these subjects/topics gain meaning by a continued effort to make connections to and through one another.

Entanglement deconstructs notions of universality and asserts the validity of context-specific and being-specific learning that hinges on relationality (Stein et al. 2020). When discussing the many roles fire has on earth, *Amō’s Sapotawan’s Teacher’s Guide* positions fire as an integral part of ceremony, a place around which oral storytelling occurs, a tool for cooking and preserving food, a natural occurrence that helps with forest regeneration, and a destructive force that is evidence of human intervention (*Amō’s Sapotawan: Teacher’s Guide* 2022). By refusing to submit to a singular answer and by creating a space of learning that is not dependent on prescription or conviction, these lessons challenge assumptions, make visible under-prioritised histories, and inspire experimentation with sensitivity to individual and collective positionality to cumulatively embolden agency (Stein et al. 2020).

As entanglement foregrounds relationality and interconnectedness within social systems and structures, *nīhithaw*, an *asiniskaw īthinwak* concept, asserts a holistic understanding of beings as cumulatively body, heart, spirit, and mind (*Pīsīm Finds Her Miskanaw: Teacher’s Guide* 2021, p. 59). The characters in these historical fictions manifest the being of four through their interactions, actions, thoughts, and feelings. In turn, the Teacher’s Guides seek to engender this valuing within students. In a section of the *Amō’s Sapotawan Teacher’s Guide* that addresses ‘Gifts as Talents,’ teachers are encouraged to initiate a conversation using the following prompts: ‘What are your personal gifts? What people in your life have helped nurture your personal gifts? How do your personal gifts help better your family and your community?’ (Wyatt Anderson et al. 2021, p. 44). If viewed interdependently, these questions knit agency into students’ conceptions of self within the context of community. The questions imply that gifts are already within students and that both gifts and students are unique, disparate, and valuable. The questions assert that each individual has the agency to choose and activate their gifts while foregrounding that these individual contributions are essential to the larger community.

Entanglement and *nīhithaw* challenge the knowledge categories prioritised by western education systems: distinct, objective, provable, explicit, and justifiable knowledge. These frameworks facilitate culturally competent curriculum development by foregrounding experiential, tacit, and non-propositional knowledge that is derived from and through immersive experiences. This interrelationship works to reframe what learning is, what knowledge is, and what knowing something means. Young people play an integral role in this reframing. As binaries and boundaries are dismantled, there is increased space for youth to enact agency and collectively build a future that is reflective of ‘their most intimate realities’ (Simpson 2017, p. 120). Connections beyond the limitations of established categories can be incredibly exciting and creative, a way forward, against, and through hierarchised learning systems.

Awaniki Asiniskaw Īthiniwak: Bringing Authenticity, Legitimacy, and Agency together in a Community-Based Conference

My name is Amanda Laverdure and coming from a Métis and Ukrainian ancestry, I was born, raised, and continue to reside in the vast and rugged woodlands of Treaty 3. During my time as a research assistant with the Six Seasons Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project, I helped the team organise a community-based conference. In this section, I take a theoretical approach to the logistics of creating a community-based conference that will delve into concepts of legitimacy, agency, and authenticity through the reciprocal relationships shared by the Six Seasons Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project and the Rocky Cree communities of northern Manitoba. The conference ‘Awaniki Asiniskaw Īthiniwak? Who are the Rocky Cree?’ was a community-driven collaboration organised in partnership between the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project, an academia-based body, and the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak Mamawiwin, a grassroots research group located in northern Manitoba. This three-day gathering took place in Thompson,

Manitoba, at the end of May 2023. It strove to bring together diverse individuals—community members and Knowledge Keepers and scholars and researchers—who possess different experiences of and expertise on Rocky Cree culture, history, language, and knowledge. Asiniskaw ĩthiniwak youth from the communities were also invited to participate and share their views on the theme of identity.

As a collaboration, the gathering was built on pre-existing relationships of trust and commitment among Mamawiwin, Rocky Cree communities, and Six Seasons. Without these pre-existing conditions of reciprocity, this community-driven conference would never have come to fruition. The current relationship that exists between academic research and Indigenous peoples is one steeped in a long and complicated history that has been overshadowed by acts of colonialism, controversy, and bad memories brought about by negative past experiences with academic bodies (Johnson and Larsen 2013, p. 7). Anishinaabe academic Lorrilee McGregor of Whitefish River First Nations, via Linda Smith, reminds us that research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary (McGregor 2018, p. 130). It is not uncommon for Indigenous Peoples and communities to have been portrayed, objectified, and misrepresented through the work of a Eurocentric lens by non-Indigenous researchers (Johnson and Larsen 2013). Although contemporary academics aspire towards research practices that are collaborative, harmonious, and ethical, the hurt and mistrust are understandably slow to fade away (Johnson and Larsen 2013). It is in this context that ‘Awaniki Asiniskaw ĩthiniwak?’ shines as an instance of decolonisation by maintaining a sense of authenticity and legitimacy through the commitment and active participation of the Rocky Cree communities.

From its initial stages, the gathering was shaped by the Rocky Cree community through decisions around the theme and timing of events. The community chose the term *gathering* as opposed to *conference* to create a welcoming space for its grassroots members. The gathering was seen by them as a means to share knowledge of culture and history and foster a sense of

shared identity. The asiniskaw ĩthiniwak, or Rocky Cree, are a distinct group of Cree-speaking people living in the northern boreal forest of western Canada who traditionally maintained relationships among each other through their key travel route, the Misinipi, or Churchill River. As colonisation eroded traditional relationships and significant hydroelectric development in the area altered landscapes and travel routes, communities became more isolated from each other. Successive colonial governments also misrecognised the Rocky Cree, often calling them Woodland Cree or Woods Cree, a misnaming that continues in textbooks and on educational websites. Rocky Cree communities have begun to reclaim their traditional name, asiniskaw ĩthiniwak, and it is out of this context that community stakeholders developed the theme for the gathering. The end of May was determined to be the best time for communities to gather because of safer conditions for road travel in spring and because of participant availability. This timing also resonates with traditional Rocky Cree patterns of travel and visiting. The gathering fell in the asiniskaw ĩthiniwak season called mithoskāmin, which translates in English as ‘good travel’ and corresponds with the months of May and June in the Gregorian calendar (Wolf 2023).

The gathering aimed at achieving an open forum where the grassroots communities of Rocky Cree people could further explore their own culture and traditions and interact with each other and other researchers in a welcoming and safe environment. Over the course of three days, it brought together about 70 participants, including members of five Rocky Cree communities, Knowledge Keepers and youth, as well as academics with ties to the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw ĩthiniwak project. The intergenerational transfer of knowledge was a key objective of the gathering, which is why young adults were invited to travel to the gathering alongside the Knowledge Keepers to participate in sharing circles. This gathering aspired to discuss the cultural and historical contexts of the Rocky Cree to allow for new generations to better connect

with a culture that has been struggling due to acts of colonial violence enacted on the Rocky Cree communities.

Furthermore, the gathering provided an opportunity to explore the impact of the Six Seasons research and texts and its potential for supporting the resurgence of Rocky Cree culture. For example, Rocky Cree Knowledge Keepers and youth attended a workshop on PISIM, the first app in the series, facilitated by Six Seasons research assistants. The app appealed to both audience groups but for different reasons: the young people were interested in one of its game elements whereas the Knowledge Keepers were enthusiastic about listening to the Cree narration. One of the Knowledge Keepers was inspired to share how he held on to his language by secretly speaking Cree with his friends when he was in residential school and forced to speak English. He stressed the importance of getting the app into schools so the younger generation can start learning early and have a solid understanding of their language and culture.

This gathering showcases how community-based research can be used as a decolonising method to help rebuild the ties and trust between academic bodies and Indigenous communities. ‘Awaniki Asiniskaw Īthiniwak?’ blended traditional academia with Indigenous research paradigms, allowing for a sense of reciprocity between the two parties and for the collective voices of the Rocky Cree People to echo out clearly.

Conclusion: Communicating a Future Together

In this article, we reflected on authenticity, legitimacy, and agency in relation to the collaborative research that we carry out on the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak project. Melanie Braith and Benjamin Roloff both challenge the concept of authenticity but propose different alternatives to authenticity in the concepts of cultural competence and truth: that collaboration inherently nurtures difference if there is a collective commitment to communication is one of the precepts we have learned in the project. All participants in the

project need to articulate and re-articulate guiding principles and concepts for the specific contexts that arise. This practice echoes current trends in Indigenous Studies in Canada, which focus on community-specific research concepts as opposed to pan-Indigenous approaches. In their section, Grace Braniff proposes agency as emerging through entanglement and *nīhithaw*, encouraging us to think beyond the limitations of established categories. We followed this call throughout this article and in our work for the Six Seasons project more generally. Finally, Amanda Laverdure brings together the concepts of authenticity, agency, and legitimacy in their discussion of a planned community gathering. This section demonstrates how these three concepts become strands of one strong braid that undergirds the process of planning a community-based gathering bringing together Knowledge Keepers and academic researchers.

In the end, all our work is, as William Dumas put it, about communicating a future together for the children who engage with the Six Seasons publications as they learn about *asiniskaw īthiniwak* history. In order to make this future visible, we need to think carefully about the concepts that guide our work, and we need to reframe and rearticulate those concepts when necessary.

While we have not yet conducted a citable study to investigate the impact of the Six Seasons texts on young readers, several members of the project have witnessed positive responses when teaching the texts in middle-school or post-secondary classrooms. The Six Seasons texts furthermore appear to appeal to a wider range of audiences than initially anticipated, as the positive reception and reactions by various scholars and scholarly organisations shows. In 2022, Nambé Pueblo scholar Debbie Reese included *Amō’s Sapotawan* on her end-of-year best book list on her influential blog *American Indians in Children’s Literature*. In 2023, *Amō’s Sapotawan* received the Canadian Archaeological Association’s Public Communications Award and was nominated for the First Nations Communities Read Awards.

The collaborators on the Six Seasons project are working on the third group of texts in the series, work that includes reflecting on the path we have already travelled. While past experiences can serve as resources for the future, they do not offer a detailed map for the way ahead. The path of the Six Seasons project is one that needs to be defined and redefined at every stage through collaboration and communication. We hope that our experiences, as we share them in papers like this one, can provide some waymarks for others who aspire to carry out similar projects, but we know that there can never be one model for a collaborative research project of this kind. The fact that the way is not a well-established track, however, should not stop researchers from starting down the path, knowing that they will take some wrong turns along the way. In *Amō’s Sapotawan*, Amō’s father refuses to allow her to dwell on her failure to accomplish a task she has been given, instructing her to pick herself up and try again. As the narrator tells readers, ‘It is the way of the asiniskaw īthiniwak: always move forward.’

Notes

1. We would like to thank Six Seasons Project Director Mavis Reimer and Six Seasons Curriculum Team Leader Doris Wolf for all their generous support for this article and for letting us include parts of the research they had presented in the ACLAR keynote.
2. PISIM, the app for the first book, is currently available in the Apple store and was released on Google Play in November 2023. AMO, the app for the second book, was released in the Apple store and on Google Play in the same month.
3. For information on these teams and the work they do, as well as other information on the project, please go to sixseasonsproject.ca.
4. The six Rocky Cree communities are piponapiwin (South Indian Lake); kisipikamāhk (Brochet); niscawayasihk (Nelson House); okawi mithikananihk (Granville Lake); pakitawāhk anik (Pukatawagan) and kahkitināmiw (Black Sturgeon Falls).

5. In 2018, Canada's Panel on Research Ethics added a chapter on research involving Indigenous communities, emphasising the importance of community involvement and pointing to the work of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' 'Ethical Guidelines for Research' (<https://data2.archives.ca/rcap/pdf/rcap-494.pdf>).
6. The project is funded by a partnership grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada and brings together project partners from institutions in areas such as academia, publishing, and education.
7. Indigenous literary nationalism has been criticised for a lack of space for a broad range of Indigenous identities, including urban Indigeneity, and for ignoring the impacts of residential schools and the 60s scoop. See Nisga'a writer Jordan Abel's NISHGA.
8. The asiniskaw īthiniwak language is the th-dialect.

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Biographical Note

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Grace Braniff was a research assistant with the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak’s curriculum and a Master of Arts in Cultural Studies student at the University of Winnipeg from September 2021 to August 2022. As a research assistant, she supported team members to ensure that the curriculum development was interdisciplinary and accurately drew on the knowledge presented in the historical picture books.

Amanda Laverdure is a recent graduate of the University of Winnipeg’s MA Cultural Studies program and a research assistant with the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak’s project management team. She supports the team organizing a community-based gathering of the Rocky Cree of northern Manitoba that was held in 2023. A resident of Treaty 3 territory in northwestern Ontario, Amanda is of both Indigenous and Ukrainian ancestry.

Benjamin Roloff is a research assistant with the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak’s production team and a proud member of Manitoba’s Métis Nation. Holding a BMus and BEd, his research focuses on the creation and efficacy of soundscapes in the project’s picture book apps.