Beginning with concept: Deconstructing the complexity of ‘culture’ through art in design education

ABSTRACT
The notion of ‘culture’ has long been recognized as an inherent component of both art and design education. What remains uncharted territory are ways by which educators can assess a student’s understanding of the complexity behind the production of ‘culture’. Contextualizing current pedagogical approaches within anthropological and interdisciplinary theoretical paradigms sheds light on the limitations of present undertakings. Static and stereotypical interpretations of ‘culture’ fail to account for the complex, multi-dimensional, hybrid, dynamic, intertwining, and ever-changing facets of ‘culture’ that characterize border crossings and modernization processes. This paper posits that concepts, an artistic synthesis of knowledge, can be the medium through which students can unravel the myth of ‘culture’ and expose its dynamic and changing nature, the tensions and contradictions involved, as well as the multiple ways of belonging. Marking the beginning of the design process, concepts that speak of ‘culture’ can propel a new era in infusing designs with social justice.

KEYWORDS
culture
concept development
design education
interdisciplinary
INTRODUCTION

The notion of ‘culture’ has long been recognized as an inherent component of both art and design education and therefore, the need for a multicultural curriculum is by now well established (Chin 2011; Dutton 1991; Gall 2008; Millman 2010). Contextualizing current pedagogical approaches within anthropological and interdisciplinary theoretical paradigms however, sheds light on the limitations of present undertakings. A typical architectural response to ‘culture’ is one that involves replicating architectural elements, such as roofs, columns, and decorative features associated with a group of people. The exterior of the Mille Lacs Museum in Onamia, Minnesota is one such example (Figure 1). As a museum devoted to the history of the Ojibwe people, one of Minnesota’s largest Native American groups, the building’s exterior is adorned with a scrolling floral design drawn from Ojibwe beadwork. The challenge to educators who aim to prepare students for the complexities of an interconnected world is that motif applications shy away from pulling to the surface complicated questions such as: What does it mean to be Ojibwe? And, what does it mean to be a member of a marginalized ‘culture’?

As art and design educators, we are then at a crossroad, asking: how can our adopted pedagogies foster conversations on ‘culture’ that move beyond the beautiful and the safe and allow instead for notions such as inequality, power dynamics, trauma, colonization and oppression to emerge? And, how can we assess a student’s understanding of this complexity? Following A. Gupta and J. Ferguson’s call for ‘exploring the processes of production of difference’ (1992:14, original emphasis), this article posits that exposing students to Native American patterns and motifs is very different than exposing students to the processes by which a motif came to be associated with Native Americans and the implications of that association. Being a static and monolithic interpretation of ‘culture’, motifs, in their singularity fail to account for the complex, multi-dimensional, hybrid, dynamic, intertwining and ever-changing facets of ‘culture’ that characterize border crossings and

Figure 1: An Ojibwe motif adorns the Mille Lacs Indian Museum.
Beginning with concept modernization processes, perpetuating stereotypes of what belonging to a specific group entails (Bammer 1994; Chin 2011; Rosaldo 1989).

Instead, I argue that if students are to respond to ‘culture’, they must be able to convey an understanding of:

- the dynamic nature of ‘culture’, the fact that ‘cultures’ change and evolve, with people often actively choosing which elements of their way of life to change and how to change them;
- the complexity of ‘culture’, the tensions and contradictions embedded within change as well as the power differentials that dictate ‘cultural’ discourses; and
- the plurality of ‘culture’, the multiple ways by which one or a collective can belong to a ‘culture’ and the multiple lenses from which one can choose to view the world and understand life (Hall 2000; Rosaldo 1989).

Enclosing the term ‘culture’ in quotation marks speaks to our adopting the conception of ‘culture’ as a problematic category (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Wax 1993).

J. P. Lederach (1995) coined the term ‘conflict transformation’ to suggest a shift in paradigms: from trying to eliminate or control conflict to recognizing it and working with its dialectic character. Allowing students a glimpse into dialectical ‘cultural’ discourses and helping them consider the multiplicity of constraints by which ‘culture’ can play out in the global era are thereby essential steps in the process of turning confusion into enlightenment and integral parts of an education that aims for social justice. Pedagogies that account for how ‘culture’ intertwines with factors such as race, gender and class are better suited to start dialogues that problematize and complicate understandings of ‘culture’.

This article contributes to efforts to infuse a complicated notion of ‘culture’ into design education in two ways: first, by proposing a pedagogy that allows students to delve deeply into the question of ‘culture’ and critically think about what they learned and second, by elaborating on ways through which faculty can assess a student’s understanding of the nuances behind the construction and production of ‘culture’. The premise is that visual representations can serve as the forum for conflict transformation and push the boundaries of what the teaching of ‘culture’ can be about. Combined with words, visuals can be a medium through which students unravel the complexity of ‘culture’, exposing its dynamic, complex and plural nature.

Art and design education have always viewed visuals as means of communication – both for understanding the world as well as the self and for engaging with issues important to the community (de Eça et al. 2012; Gradle 2011; Grushka 2008; Ritók and Bodoczky 2012). In both fields, visuals are also a teaching tool that facilitates learning and critical thinking and sheds light on questions of power, inequality, colonization and oppression, serving as a medium for social justice and positioning art and design as catalysts for change (Desai 2000; Duncum 2010; Lampert 2011).

For interior design in particular, visuals in the form of artistic manifestations of a synthesis of students’ knowledge, can be employed during the conceptual design phase of a project, which marks the beginning of the design process. Concepts are not bounded by programmatic requirements – i.e., they do not have to look like a building. Instead, as Sanford Kwinter argues in Concepts: The Architecture of Hope: ‘concepts were then, and remain today, the primary walking sticks with which we navigate new space and reshape
ourselves’ (2003/2004:4). Through the power of visual representation, concepts can open, for the students themselves and the faculty, a window into understandings of what it means to be human that could otherwise remain hidden and unseen.

The paper begins with an elaboration on the structure of the interior design studio class in which concepts are used to deconstruct ‘culture’. This three-week long pedagogical technique begins with an in-depth interdisciplinary literature review on the background, history and issues faced by the diverse immigrant and minority groups on which these studios focused. Therefore, the discussion of the conceptual visuals is preceded by summaries of the displacement experiences of Hmong, Somali, Mexicans and Ojibwe as a way to inform the readers’ interpretations of the students’ artistic responses to ‘culture’. Closing the discussion are additional questions and issues that educators embarking on efforts to transform students into what P. Iyer (2002) called global souls should be considering.

**SIX STEPS FOR TEACHING ‘CULTURE’ THROUGH VISUALS**

Teaching ‘culture’ through visuals is a pedagogy that I have refined over eight years of teaching residential design studio courses. The students are in their third year in the interior design programme and classes meet twice a week for three hours at a time. The studio’s focus is culturally sensitive residential design, that is design that supports diverse ways of living. Designers are often asked to design houses that can be the home for a specific family in the city or the countryside, houses that a developer can duplicate in a suburb, or houses for families in public assistance, such as affordable housing. In many of these cases, designers are not dealing with a specific client who will relate that family’s needs and priorities to them. Instead, they often have to respond to market trends or their own assumptions of what a house should look like. This approach can be problematic when the residents come from diverse cultural backgrounds and may have needs that are not supported by mainstream residential designs (Hadjiyanni 2007; Hadjiyanni and Helle 2010).

In the past few decades, the demographic landscape of Minnesota has changed and many new immigrant groups have joined long-standing minority groups in calling Minnesota home. In this studio, students explore the implications of diverse ways of eating, cooking, sleeping, socializing, praying, dressing, grooming, etc. on domestic interiors through the experience of one of four local new immigrant or minority groups: Hmong, Somali, Mexicans and Native Americans. Most of the students in the class are Americans of European descent and have limited exposure to ‘differences’. In parallel, for many of them, this studio course is the first time in their education that they have to tackle questions around how ‘culture’ is constructed and produced. As a result, in addition to teaching residential design, this studio incorporates the teaching of ‘culture’. Out of the typical fifteen-week semester, approximately three weeks can be devoted to concept development and questions of ‘culture’; the rest of the time is spent on the design of the actual house, including the preparation of the programmatic guidelines the design must meet. Below, I elaborate on the six steps through which ‘culture’ is infused in the concept development phase.

The first step of the process is an Interdisciplinary Literature Review. Instrumental to the success of this pedagogy is the grounding of students’ understanding of ‘culture’ in interdisciplinary knowledge. Curricula that set
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in motion an interdisciplinary approach to multicultural education create a unique learning environment for design students (Sabol 2000). In her book, *The Creative Mind*, Margaret Boden declares that:

> What makes the difference between an outstandingly creative person and a less creative one is not any special power, but greater knowledge (in the form of practiced expertise) and the motivation to acquire and use it. (1990: 24)

Pushing creative boundaries must thereby be grounded in an in-depth exploration and comprehension of the issues surrounding the project on hand. Each student is assigned books or journal articles from a list of readings I had assembled to familiarize himself or herself with the group’s history, religion, way of life and issues faced in the present. After a week, the summaries of the findings and lessons are shared with everyone in a class discussion.

Readings are supplemented by visits to cultural institutions and venues associated with the group students are studying. This form of ‘cultural’ immersion gets students outside the university and into the community, giving them a chance to recognize that one does not need to embark on an international trip to learn about diverse ways of living. Finding themselves in areas of the city that they would not ordinarily venture into, students begin to question how the city is constructed and what constitutes a sense of belonging. While at the Somali mall for example, students’ senses are re-activated through unfamiliar sounds, smells, colours, light levels and textures. The calls of the imam for prayer, the sight of veiled women tending small, tiny shops overflowing with silks and wool rugs, and the smell of *unsi*, an incense Somalis favour to refresh the spaces they inhabit and make them their own, bring to life all that the students have been reading about.

Armed with the knowledge that comes from studying and seeing, the third step finds students partnering with a classmate and embarking on determining how to visualize their findings. Collaborating with a partner and having someone to bounce off ideas, students’ awareness and level of understanding sharpens (Fink 2003). As the research brings to light a multitude of issues that could inspire the students’ search for meaning, decoding the findings down to this level is probably the most difficult and overwhelming step in the process. To overcome this hurdle, we hold a charette day. On that day, students are asked to brainstorm answers to questions that relate to the project they are dealing with, such as: What does it mean to be Ojibwe? What does it mean to be a member of a marginalized group? And, what about the research findings you found intriguing and was touched by? Together with their partner, they pinpoint words and sketch drawings that capture their feelings and ideas about the issues they wish to bring to the foreground. At the end of the class session, we share these preliminary concepts and debate their effectiveness in conveying what the students intended as well as whether they express the dynamic, complex, and plural nature of ‘culture’. We wrap up the session by sharing examples of concepts from previous years.

For the following couple of class sessions, we engage in team desk critiques of the multiple concept proposals students have developed. In this fourth step, our goal is to select the one proposal that is the most powerful and best relates a complicated notion of ‘cultural’ discourses. After narrowing down to one idea, in the fifth step, students come to class with one concept proposal. Each team is asked to review everyone else’s work and give each other feedback on
two questions: What did you learn? And, what would you have done differently and how? Class sharing is a very effective way to mobilize and inspire students – the energy levels in the room are high on this day and students take classmates’ comments very seriously. With the written feedback on hand, teams refine their concept proposals. The last step comes when they submit their final concept proposal for an evaluation.

TRANSLATING KNOWLEDGE INTO A VISUAL

As a way for the readers to familiarize themselves with the experiences of the four cultural groups on which the studios focused (Hmong, Somali, Mexicans and Ojibwe), this section begins with a summary of the literature review findings. Following are conceptual visuals that relate the students’ interpretations of those findings, which are discussed based on their relevance to the three characteristics of a complicated notion of ‘culture’: dynamic, complex and plural.

HMONG

The Hmong are a mountain tribe that predominantly lived in the isolated mountain regions of Laos in villages of twenty or 30 related families. Mostly farmers, they raised corn and rice as well as animals. The name ‘Hmong’ means ‘free’ (Chan 1994), which is a tragic irony given the persecution of these people throughout their history. During the Vietnam war in the 1970s, the Hmong worked alongside the Americans, but after the withdrawal of the American forces from the region they found themselves persecuted by the Laotian communist government. Thousands were killed or drowned in the Mekong river while trying to reach the refugee camps in Thailand during one of the most traumatic exodus experiences of world’s history. There, they lived under terrible conditions until some managed to relocate to the United States in the 1980’s, with the city of Saint Paul in Minnesota hosting one of the largest concentrations of the Hmong people (Pfaff 1995).

Being a nomadic, mountain people, Hmong refugees were unprepared to deal with the challenges of their new life in America. Obtaining language and work skills was difficult and therefore many have low-paying jobs (Hein 1994). The Hmong religion of Shamanism, instrumental to the establishment of the Hmong collective identity and strong family and community ties, was also demoted in the United States. The youth for example, often found Christianity appealing as they felt uncomfortable with some of the tenets of the Shamanist religion, such as animal sacrifices (Taillez 1993). Furthermore, differences in assimilation patterns among generations were found to be behind the breaking-up of families and communities. While the youth are assimilating into the American culture fast, the elders remain passionate guards of the past (Donnelly 1994). The loss of Hmong traditions and the severed ties to their community have been blamed for the depression, mental health problems, and even unexplained deaths among male adults (Adler 1995).

Relating, by Ann Ertelt and Lara Weisman, refers to the adaptability associated with strong relationships that can aid in the often turbulent adjustment process that follows displacement. The sculptural piece expresses change and dynamic energy by taking the form of a twister. Emanated through the vibrations of the twisting branches and colour ribbons are representations of facets of ‘culture’ and identity that change and evolve in response to forces around them (Figure 2). Under conditions of displacement, ‘cultural’ facets
such as food and religion have been positioned as stabilizing elements, some of the most easily transplanted and preserved across geographical divides (Shryock and Abraham 2000). In the model, the Hmong experience of ‘cultural’ change is expressed by metal that is twisted close to the core and changes very little, such as community connections. ‘Cultural’ facets that are more fluid and amenable to change, such as the Hmong language and food habits, which can oscillate between traditional and mainstream, were presented as twigs and colour ribbons that change in hue and texture. The ability of the twister model to be positioned at any angle speaks to the many forms that change can take – from moving forward and adjusting to life in displacement to the detrimental effects that depression and loss of connections can effect on families.

In Common Threads, Rachel Miller and Sarah Morrissette stitched together an American quilt and fragments of Hmong story cloths (Figure 3), embroideries Hmong refugees created to finance their exodus from the Thailand refugee camps and into the United States (McCall 1999). Through that, they crafted a commentary on the linkages between assimilation and differentiation – a person or a community can go from ‘fitting into’ the new place (top left story cloth, which aligns with the grid of the American quilt and is tightly sewn onto it) to feeling disconnected (bottom right story cloth, which is hovering above the American quilt and is barely touching) and vice versa. The blue ribbon that holds the pieces together is a representation of the journey of ‘fitting-in’, a journey that is infused with both challenges and opportunities and is yet to be finalized, as shown by the loose end of the blue ribbon.

Lastly, Krista Bogestad and Angela Hunt devised a new word to communicate their findings and relate the meaning behind their concept. *Disruptemorphosis* pertains to the change that happens after a disruption in one’s life course, such
as due to the forceful displacement that accompanies a war (Figure 4). The thumbprint, a sign of a person’s identity, is disrupted and blurred due to the displacement, signalling a sense of self that is always in a state of production. A part of the thumbprint retains its holisticness and is identifiable as a thumbprint. The other part shows the tension that can result and the internal as well as external struggles a person or a collective can undergo as a result of change. The visual can be read from left to right and from the right to the left, highlighting a different experience of construction/deconstruction with each reading, shedding light on the multiple ways of being Hmong, American, and human.

**SOMALIS**

Following colonial rule, clashes between Somali clans led to a devastating civil war that destroyed the small nation in the Horn of Africa, forcing many Somalis to join the millions of refugees around the world who move in search of safety and economic opportunity. Thousands of Somalis came to the American Midwest and Minnesota in the early 1990s. The Twin Cities area currently has the largest concentration of Somalis in the country and with over 30,000 Somalis it earns the title *SomaliLand*.

Life after displacement has not been easy for the Somalis, and particularly the women (Hadjiyanni 2007). Being primarily Muslim, many Somali women opt to wear the *hijab* – the veil used to cover their hair when in the presence of unrelated males (exceptions include their sons, father, brothers, father-in-law and husband). Often construed by westerners as a sign of oppression, to many Muslim women the veil is a signifier of modesty and womanhood; an affirmation of cultural identity; a strident feminist statement; and a tool of resistance from colonial legacies (El Guindi 1999).
Their strong community connections along with their faith have helped the Somali community adjust to life in displacement. Somalis in Minnesota enjoy amenities such as the Somali mall, a cluster of shops that provide the Somali population with goods ranging from food, to clothing, jewellery and rugs and opportunities to gather and visit with other Somalis. Determined to succeed in their new life, many Somalis take advantage of the local organizations that have sprung up to facilitate the Somali community’s transition; register in English classes offered to newcomers; and send their children to higher institutions (Robillos 2001). Their ‘difference’ however, in terms of race, religion, dress and cultural traditions, creates strain among the different generations and feelings of discrimination (Mattessich 2000).

De-constructing ‘culture’ could be accomplished by employing a singular image or a series of them. In SciensInterFieri (Figure 5), Ryan Ellena and Victoria Finke used five frames to unfold the narrative of ‘cultural’ interaction, the uneven weaving of ideas and values that are the result of ‘cultures’ coexisting. Inspired by the veiling of Somali women, the students chose yarns transforming into a textile to illustrate the narrative of the Somali story. As the images unfold, one becomes witness to the ways by which displacement can tear the familiar fabric people knew as their life. Ryan took pride in his knowledge of Latin and crafted a title that is evocative in conveying To Know To Become To Be, the dynamic formation of the Somali identity, both among individuals as well as the group. Keeping the visual black and white and in a sketch form essentializes the unevenness of the Somali journey and adds a level of humanity to a people whose turbulent history is often perceived by westerners as one of only poverty, hunger, anarchy and war.

![Figure 5: SciensInterFieri uses five frames to unfold the narrative of ‘cultural’ interaction and displacement.](image-url)
Interconnectedness also employs multiple images to express human interactions. Rachel Bickel and Cheri Sundal took snapshots of hands coming together and moving apart to talk about togetherness as well as tension and distance. Using digital photography instead of hand-drawing, they were able to relate to the Somali aesthetic through their colour palette. The light brown earth colour is reminiscent of Somalia’s arid landscape and the nomadic past of the Somali people, who used to scrape the countryside in search of green pastures for their animals. Juxtaposing tradition (in the form of the colour palette) and modernity (the use of digital photography), this conceptual visual captures the multiple ways of belonging in a group of people as well as the attempts of Somalis of the diaspora to navigate their close ties to their homeland and those of the host country. With the hand, an element of the human body, serving as the medium through which to start conversations around human relationships, the concept draws energy from our similarities as much as our differences. Celebrating our common humanity, it relates that stories similar to the Somalis could also be told by others, no matter their race, gender, age or ability.

MEXICANS
Minnesota’s Mexican population has more than tripled since the 1990 census to just over 175,000, and as the fastest-growing minority population in the state, these numbers are expected to continue to grow. Apart from numbers,
Beginning with evidence of the Mexican community establishing itself in Minnesota is the Mexican consulate and multiple churches offering services in Spanish, Spanish-language newspapers, tortilla makers, shops, restaurants and bakeries, as well as Mexican soccer leagues. Additionally, dozens of organizations have been formed in Minnesota to serve the Latino community and provide services related to the arts, culture, community, education, environment, human services, legal, medical health, mental health and recreation.

Despite this foothold, Mexican immigrants still face a host of challenges in making new lives in Minnesota. This is particularly the case for the undocumented. Answering the call of American demand for a steady stream of low-wage labour and spurred by hopes for a better future for themselves and their families, millions of Mexicans cross the border illegally every year (De Genova 2005). Many suffer kidnapping, extortion or rape in the attempt while one to two Mexicans per day never reach the United States side, falling victims to murder or accidental death. Forced to live ‘in the shadows’, they experience additional exclusionary borders that affect their access to other important quality of life supports, such as higher education, preventive health care and quality housing. Racial discrimination contributes to emotional distress and hinders their chances of societal and economic advancement while acute homesickness and feelings of loss and isolation can lead to debilitating mental health problems (Boler et al. 2001). Coupled with their abject working conditions, the undocumented immigrants’ experience has prompted writers bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Bains to describe them as ‘the new slaves’ (2006: 71).

The story of perseverance of the Mexican community is expressed in the oneness exemplified through the male figure thrashing forward in Figure 7. Emboldened by the prevalence of traditional ceramic-making in Mexico, Desiree Sliwinski and Jessie Taft re-energized their ceramics skills, creating a conceptual sculpture that asks viewers to pause and contemplate.

Figure 7: Emerging sheds light on binding forces such as tradition, discrimination and marginalization.
The figure resembles the spirit of human endurance and resilience emerging in spite of binding forces such as tradition, discrimination and marginalization. As a clay sculpture, the piece is three-dimensional, offering different views and experiences with each different angle, highlighting the dynamic, complex and plural nature of ‘culture’. The command expressed by the figure on the front speaks to the determination of immigrants to succeed in their new life. This experience is juxtaposed by the pulling of the figure’s foot in the back, a pull that originates in connections to the homeland coupled with the varying obstacles faced in the United States, all of which are expressed through selected objects embedded within the clay. Half buried, the figure expends energy in trying to be free, while remaining true to its humanness.

OJIBWE

The forced displacement into reservations and boarding schools that the Ojibwe experienced in the early 1900s let to the loss of everything that has traditionally been associated with ‘culture’, be that family, community, language, religion, foods, traditions, crafts, dress, as well as a physical setting (Child 1998; Peers and Brown 1999). The use of Native references for sports mascots and product marketing (Whitt 1999) and disputes involving land rights, the repatriation of sacred artefacts, and environmental management through hunting and fishing (LaDuke 2005) continue the degradation of the Ojibwe peoples’ ‘cultural’ integrity today.

For some, the frustration, anger and grief have become internalized struggles manifesting as self-destructive behaviour. In Minnesota, Native Americans suffer premature death and violent injury at rates far exceeding those of non-Natives. Depression is pervasive and suicide rates among male youth ages 18–19 are six times higher than any demographic in the state and almost 2.5 times the national average. Disparities in infant mortality, obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease add to these alarming statistics (Minnesota Department of Health 2004).

Complicating matters are the multiplicity of ways by which one can be an Ojibwe. There is a continuum or spectrum of Native American identity, with one end being spatially defined, grounded in a specific geographic location, such as reservations, and the other being aspatial, American Indians who are essentially disconnected from any geographically identifiable place and integrated into the broader context of American society. Blood quantum is among the primary means used to decide who can call themselves Ojibwe (Peroff and Wildcat 2002).

As a people, the Ojibwe are now reigniting new sets of connections to establish a sense of belonging and define their identity. Four ‘cultural’ anchors have kept the Ojibwe ‘cultural’ logic from dissipating under the pressures of assimilation and modernization: family and kinship relations (Peers and Brown 1999), language (Peers and Brown 1999), spirituality, and the ethos of respect (Boatman 1992). Efforts to sustain these anchors through activities such as craftmaking are blooming. Trading with Europeans supplied the Ojibwe with new materials, among them colourful beads. The Ojibwe adopted the beads into their sewing, a prime example of ‘cultural’ appropriation, pushing the evolution of their unique visual language by creating the beaded scrolling floral designs that appear on the Mille Lacs Museum. Becoming symbols imbued with tradition, spirituality, and kinship, Ojibwe beadwork stands for resistance and survival (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2010).
Marit Zosel and Katie Liesener used the tepee, a representational image typically associated with Native Americans, to entice us to look deeper into the Ojibwe story (Figure 8). It should be noted that tepees are a building form that was prevalent in the American plains; instead, wigwams were the traditional building form in the upper Midwest forests that Ojibwe call home (Child 1998). As tepees are more recognizable as a part of the Native American ‘culture’, students felt that fighting stereotypes often has to be done in stereotypical ways.

Titled *Duality and Reconciliation*, their concept aims to start a dialogue around the challenges faced by the Ojibwe in reclaiming their past. To capture the tensions and contradictions in the Ojibwe story, the conceptual sculpture is made up of traditional (wood branches) and modern (plastic and metal) materials that speak to the multiple identities the Ojibwe people strive to reconcile as well as embody. The gap shows the struggle and pain many experience in the process of carving out a sense of belonging as well as the opportunities that bridging tradition and modernity affords. A copper wire winds through the tepee’s interior, demarcating the journey of Ojibwe community members as they try to reconnect a fragmented past with a promising future. The copper wire is twisted and burned at some spots to speak to the challenges of the journey while it remains whole and secure at other areas to signify the solidity that accompanies a history of resistance and resilience.

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

Unraveling the complexity of ‘culture’ prepares students for the challenges of an interconnected world. Designers who know how to search for answers to questions they encounter are better poised to respond to the ‘cultural’ obscurities of the twenty-first century. Through reading about the experiences of diverse ‘cultural’ groups, students are taught to navigate a complex global reality, feeling competent and secure to identify problems and their consequences as well as being empowered to take responsibility and action.

*Figure 8: Duality and Reconciliation tells the story of the Ojibwe, a group that experienced forced assimilation and acculturation.*
Artistic translations of ‘culture’ give students the confidence that comes from having tested the logic behind their interpretation of their understandings of how ‘culture’ is produced. By employing both words and a visual, students organize and synthesize their thoughts and research findings as well as internalize the knowledge they gained, making it their own. In parallel, students’ ability to convey their idea to others increases, easing faculty’s attempts to evaluate students’ comprehension of the complexity behind the notion of ‘culture’.

Interpretations can vary – some are focused on the experience of the ‘cultural’ group students worked with and employ elements identifiable with that ‘culture’, like the tepee. Others, like the thumbprint, can be applied to anyone, speaking of our common humanity and what unifies us as a people. The media adopted can also be distinctive to the ideas students strive to represent – from paintings to photography, ceramics, multi-media, as well as digital art forms. What matters is not how students get to express their understandings of ‘culture’; instead, it is how many of those understandings are elaborated on and how much room the concepts allow to viewers to begin to ask their own questions and start to ponder on the role they can play in making this world a better place.

Challenges remain. This pedagogy has been integrated in a university setting in junior-level design studios. Students had the drawing and modeling skills necessary to begin to explore visual translations of ‘culture’. Employing this pedagogy with students with limited art and design background, adds complications that the faculty would have to overcome. It is also hard to know how beginning students would approach the problem of synthesizing knowledge into a visual. Even for some of these juniors, the process did not always move in the linear manner of the six steps presented above. There were cases where steps had to be retraced in a circular manner, with students struggling to decide how to proceed or what to focus on. Flexibility on the part of the instructor is key as students in the class might be at different stages of the process.

Additional challenges are the result of connecting the self and the other. Much of the success of this pedagogy relies on an inward as well as outward ability of students to reflect on the material they learned (Grushka 2008). Comprehending the various angles from which a problem can be approached to be solved, students embark on a process of self-discovery that often helps them uncover more about themselves and how they perceive the world in which they live. Challenged to see the bigger picture and to consider the broader impact of their work on the world at large builds students’ critical thinking skills, self-esteem and confidence. Where things might get tangled up is in scenarios where students’ understanding of the self might bring to the surface tensions and concerns. How much should faculty push a student uncomfortable with ‘difference’? And, what kind of training faculty teaching ‘culture’ need to have?

Variability in background and exposure to differences in ways of living can impact the process of relating and students can instead become more ethnocentric, particularly if the pedagogy used challenges the students’ political or religious ideas (Bennett 1993; Wasson and Jackson 2002). Preparing for this scenario enables faculty to recognize this event and plan accordingly. The ethics around teaching ‘culture’ must also be handled with caution and sensitivity (Paige and Martin 1996).

It is therefore, critical for consideration to be given to the educational background of faculty teaching ‘culture’. Teaching ‘culture’ is a long and
difficult journey as sensitivity to ‘cultural’ considerations requires effort and knowledge (Bennett 1993). Preferred characteristics include tolerance of ambiguity, cognitive and behavioural flexibility, personal and cultural self-awareness, patience, enthusiasm and commitment, interpersonal sensitivity, tolerance of differences, openness to new experiences and to people who are different, empathy, sense of humility and sense of humour (Paige 1993). Cosmopolitanism is another notion that can be used to enhance the potential of individual teachers to internationalize their personal and professional outlooks through self-reflective processes (Sanderson 2008).

There are no ends, an old saying goes, there are only beginnings. Charting new territories for how art and design education relates to ‘culture’ is a beginning that can re-instill in the disciplines’ pedagogies, scholarship and practice a passion for imagining.

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SUGGESTED CITATION


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