Yakama Rising

Indigenous Cultural Revitalization, Activism, and Healing

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FIRST PEOPLES
New Directions in Indigenous Studies
CHAPTER ONE

Teach Them in a Good Way
Critical Pedagogy of the Wapato Indian Club

The Body as a Site for Critical Pedagogy:
An Ethnographic Introduction

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The schoolchildren smile, giggle, and chat excitedly, filling the concrete locker rooms with a loud, happy murmur. They open their suitcases and begin dressing in their regalia, most students careful not to muss their hair, which family members or friends had carefully braided earlier in the day, before school or during the lunch period. One girl is not so careful, pulling the layers of clothes quickly over her head. She is dressed first, and is thinking about how she can perhaps race to the bus, beating all of the other children, and grab the most coveted seat, the bench in the far back. As she clicks her suitcase closed, surveys how slowly all the other girls are dressing, one of her friends suspects her plan to be first on the school bus, and tries to squash her plan. “Ha! Your braids are all fuzzy! Look!” her friend blurts out, pointing and trying to get other girls to join in teasing their quick-dressing friend. The quick dresser pauses a moment, wondering if she really did have fuzzy braids, or if her friend is just trying to slow her down in an effort to win the coveted back seat. Enough doubt fills her mind that she scampers over to the locker room mirror, sliding on the cement floor in her leather-soled moccasins. Dam! She had been too quick. Her braids are all fuzzy, and the smooth part her mother made this morning now has several loose hairs flying about in the static of the reservation’s dry air. She wonders what she should do. Using the locker room mirror, she scans the room behind her. Other girls are already clicking their suitcases shut, and she will lose all hope of a good seat on the bus if she re braids her hair. She decides to settle on a quick fix. She runs her hand under the cold water faucet and smooths out the part down the middle of her head. There, that is good enough, she thinks. In the bus she will cover her braids with nukshay (otter fur) anyway, so who cares if they are fuzzy, she justifies to herself silently. Feeling better about her appearance, she smiles a little at herself in the mirror. She takes a moment and looks at the beautiful beaded dress she wears, her grandmother’s dress, which was gifted to her this year when her parents honored her for choosing to participate in the dance group at her middle school.

Eventually, all the children, both girls and boys, load on the bus and greet their favorite school bus driver. Their advisor watches them kindly but sternly, to make sure the teasing and playing does not get out of hand. Once boarded, they make their way to the highway, off the reservation, to the city named after their tribe. The children feel delighted that, of all the Wapato Indian Club members, they were chosen to go on this field trip during the school day. Their hard work—attending club meetings and dance practices, and having good grade reports from their teachers—had paid off. On the bus ride, they speak about classes they are especially glad to miss, just quiet enough to be out of earshot of their advisors, or so they thought. Once at the venue, all the children crowd out of the bus, excited to be at the event. The advisor gathers the group together before entering the large new brick building. She hushes them with a wave of her hand, and then explains that they are now cultural ambassadors representing the school, the community, and the tribe. She reminds them that she expects their best behavior in front of their audience. The children listen quietly, respectfully. One parent, who is attending as a chaperone, marvels that the advisor can quiet forty middle school children with a motion of her hand.

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Indigenizing the Educational System: Elders, Swans, and Cultural Teachings

The Wapato Indian Club was formed in 1973, as a result of student demands to have a place within their public school where Indian identities
were affirmed and nurtured. At the time, the school district had no curricular or extracurricular activities focused on American Indian culture or history. The club persists because of the belief that it offers something unique and necessary to the children who take part in its activities, as children learn to use their bodies to express their cultural identities and to honor the teachings of their elders. This chapter shares an emerging theory of indigenous social change that is based on qualitative interviews with current and former Wapato Indian Club advisors, club alumni, and their parents.

In this chapter, I argue that the activist education taking place within the Wapato Indian Club helps us understand the body as a site of critical pedagogy. The educational process used in the Wapato Indian Club is an example of how indigenous peoples are reshaping educational institutions to move from dependence to autonomy. The Wapato Indian Club case study demonstrates the power of applying an indigenous pedagogy—as children involved with the club learn a “way of being” that promotes cultural pride, a critical understanding of cultural identity, and a sense of self that is rooted in elders’ teachings. Because of its grounded approach, my analysis of the club’s indigenous pedagogy and the articulation of embodied cultural revitalization process is a contribution to the existing literature on indigenous social change.

The story of the Wapato Indian Club is one of students gaining voice in expressing the importance of a critical indigenous pedagogy. But how did a group of Indian students find a way to create space for indigenous cultural revitalization within the public school system? They approached the only Yakama counselor who worked in the district, Sue Rigdon, a strong woman who cares about the community and her students. In reflecting on the founding of the club, Sue smiled as she remembered how the students “kept pestering” her to teach them. The students trusted that she would respond to their needs to be more connected to their culture. The students were interested in dancing, and they believed that Sue, out of all the people they knew, would be the one person who could help form the Wapato Indian Club dance group.

Sue took her responsibility to the children very seriously, because if they were craving these cultural teachings, then she should make an effort to help them. Sue did what traditional cultural teachings instruct: seek out mentorship from tribal elders. She stated: “I [went to see] Hazel Miller. She taught us, no she didn’t teach, she told us about the dances. Each one has a spirit and its own life. You danced to that.” In her interview, Sue related how elders began instructing her by telling her about the dances, to ensure that Sue understood the background and meaning of the dances or, as Sue more eloquently states, the “spirit” of each dance. In this way, the elders were sharing the lessons that they themselves had learned through the oral tradition.

Perhaps one of the reasons Sue was so understanding and generous in teaching the dances to the children in the Wapato Indian Club is because she shared a strong common bond with them. The Wapato Indian Club served as a common vehicle through which they all learned some aspects of Indian cultures. During the planning stages of this book project, I met with Sue numerous times to review documents and to finalize my interview guides. In our discussions, she shared with me that it was important to ask interviewees whether they had known the dances before they participated in the club, or if they, like Sue, learned the dances as a result of being part of the Wapato Indian Club. Sue was always known as a strong role model for the students, including the way she demonstrated humble leadership by never acting as if she knew things she did not. As written elsewhere, it is important within traditional Yakama culture that leaders do not assert authority for its own sake (Jacob and Peters 2011). Strong Yakama leaders are accountable to the people and humble in their positions of authority, only asserting authority when called to do so by the people. This cultural teaching is what served as the foundation for Sue’s leadership within the Wapato Indian Club, as she worked with students, their families, and the school administration to found the club and begin teaching traditional dances.

Sue’s humble leadership and caring manner helped her understand the feelings of the children who yearned to learn the dances. Sue shared stories about her own childhood, and she shared that her family, like many indigenous families, had struggled with alcoholism. Because of this, she was raised by her elderly and disabled grandmother, who was unable to teach Sue the dances and was physically challenged to attend events where Sue could watch and participate. Thus, Sue did not learn the dances as a youth. A generation later, when Sue was recruited to be the school counselor in the 1970s, she worked with a younger generation who had similar backgrounds. For various reasons, many of the students had a gap in knowledge; they had not learned the traditional dances at home, or they wanted a deeper knowledge of them. Thus, when the students insisted that Sue help teach them the traditional dances, she humbly sought mentorship from elders. Sue took the time to learn the dance traditions from elders so that she could provide that education for the young people who wanted to learn. Thus, by filling her own knowledge gap, Sue was
empowered to make a great contribution to intergenerational teaching and learning. Her work to revitalize and share these cultural teachings connected the young people with the elders’ teachings.

One of the first elders who worked with her was Hazel Miller, an important teacher who provided oral histories and instruction about the dances, which Sue took back to the Wapato Indian Club students. Sue’s involvement in founding the Wapato Indian Club had, at its core, a healing component. By reaching out on behalf of the schoolchildren, Sue learned the traditions so she could share them with the younger generations. Such action represents a step toward healing the soul wound that alcoholism, a destructive response by indigenous peoples to colonialism, had inflicted (Brave Heart 1999, 2003; Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Evans-Campbell 2008; Duran 2006). Sue’s work to learn the lessons and teach them to the schoolchildren healed not only Sue, but also the schoolchildren who wanted to learn the lessons, either more deeply than they had learned at home, or for the first time.

Sue carefully noted that Hazel told about the dances, sharing the background and meaning of the dances and providing stories that go with each dance. Sue listened carefully to the elder and then started taking that knowledge back to the Wapato Indian Club practices, sharing that cultural knowledge and engaging in the teaching of the dances to students, through rigorous repetition, during group practices. To help with this work of teaching the dances, Sue had to reach out to other elders and adults who then began attending the dance practices, demonstrating, instructing, drumming, and singing to help the children learn. As the advisor for the club, Sue felt a special honor and obligation to teach the students to respect the traditions that the elders shared with the younger generations. Sue emphasizes that she was taught by the elder that each dance has a “spirit and its own life.” Thus, learning to do the traditional dances is a spiritual act, as dancers must learn to represent the spirit of the dance, to become one with it. When discussing the dances, she describes this transformation of people, songs, and the spirit of the dance. An example is the Swan Dance, a dance that is held special in Yakama tradition and has been performed countless times across our homeland. Therefore, teaching the younger generations about the dance connects the youth to a proud tradition of our people and land. The dance connects the dancers and their audiences to a sacred being, the Swan. Legends connect the Swan Dance to the Lake Chelan area in Washington State, and the dance creates bonds across generations of Plateau peoples, who share in the tradition of looking to the gifts of the Creator for important lessons about how to conduct oneself. Sue said:

The girls’ Swan Dance, the dance is beautiful . . . To honor the swan bird, it really is pretty when they dance it. They go up and then they go down, and then they go up and then they go down. You know, like a swan, and then they come to the circle and they chatter to each other. And they go up and they go around again and they dance off. And it is really pretty. It is an honor, an offering to the swan bird who flies through the air with such grace and beauty.

The words that Sue uses to describe the dance include beautiful, honor, pretty, offering, grace, and beauty. Sue shares that the dance is an honor offered to the swan, that the girls who learn and perform this dance are offering respect to the bird. As offerings are a form of prayer, the girls are providing an offering of respect, grace, and beauty.

Such an offering serves as a blessing: to the bird, to the girls who are performing the dance, to the audience participating as witnesses to this offering, to the elders who carry on the teachings and share them with the girls, and to the ancestors who are part of the legacy of the traditional dances. This way of relating to the living beings of our homeland, to all of creation around oneself, is a holistic way of viewing the world. It represents an indigenous view of a good education. As such, the swan plays an important role in my analysis of the Wapato Indian Club, which I discuss further with figure 2.

Sue roots her description of the Swan Dance and its meaning within a spiritual realm. It is not simply a dance about a bird. Nor is it simply a dance to imitate a bird. Rather, it is an honoring of the bird. It is an offering to the bird, who is a beautiful part of creation on our homeland. In this way, the Wapato Indian Club provides a cultural teaching, which is rooted in place-based spirituality. Yet, being associated with a public school, this aspect of spirituality, which Westerners often conflate with “religion,” is not emphasized in public descriptions of the club’s activities. However, the club certainly is known for teaching and sharing cultural lessons of Yakama peoples and a broader pan-Indian culture as well. For example, in a newspaper article about the club’s invited performance at a national musician’s conference in San Diego, a Wapato school board member voiced her support for the trip, saying the Indian Club students “will be goodwill ambassadors for Wapato. I can’t think of a better way to
show people who we are” (“Board authorizes Indian Club trip” 1991). The goodwill message of the dancers touched audiences. Sue recalled, during her interview with me: “People cried every time we performed.” Additionally, Sue explained in a newspaper article that when the club performs, “It’s an opportunity to provide truly intercultural understanding” (“The Past Is the Future” 1993). Such lessons, rooted in an indigenous-centered educational model, provide audiences with a gift. Audiences are overwhelmed by the generosity and beauty of the young dancers and, as Sue notes, were brought to tears.

Dances accomplish several important functions. They affirm the importance of the oral histories and traditional cultural lessons that elders teach; they affirm the importance of the girls who are dedicated to learning these lessons and carrying on the traditions. They affirm the importance of the audiences, who witness and honor the girls and the traditions. And, at a fundamental level, the dances teach—they instruct—Yakama peoples how to live and what should be valued. The Swan Dance teaches the value of unity, as the girls embody working together in unison, and of individuals falling into an order that is collectively greater than any individual. It teaches followers to be aware of the leader, and teaches the leader to be aware of the followers. All participants are crucially important, and a specific kind of unison is needed in order to do the dance in a way that represents the traditional teachings that elders share. The Swan Dance also teaches the importance of having fun, of being social. As Sue stated, “they come into the circle and they chatter to each other.”

The girls demonstrate that they can carry out precision and unity as a group; leader and followers working together are one strong, beautiful, and graceful collective. However, at a special time during the dance, the drumbeat escalates and the girls break out of their single file order and rush to the middle, coming together again as one with their hands fluttering and chattering friendly and excited noises. This is a playtime, a time of laughing and smiling; it is the time when they relax, cheer, and joke. Then, at the appointed time, the drumbeat signals to them that the playtime is over, they need to transition back into their single-file order, backing gently out of the chattering group, the girls again take up motions in unison, bowing gently to each strong drumbeat, until they are back in their original order and performing the graceful actions of diving swans.

The lesson inherent in this part of the dance is that our people must take time to laugh and have fun, to loosen up the strict order and discipline of a precise group, to smile and giggle. Then the transition takes place where the group must, again, regain order and the leaders must be strong, attentive, and proud. Followers must carry out their responsibilities to the group. The followers have a special role in this dance, as they are whom the audience will see most. There are few leaders, and many followers. The leaders must be strong, predictable, and patient, able to change what they are doing (whether pacing slower or faster, or changing the path that the group will take) if that is what is best for the overall unison of the group.

Indigenous Education in Practice: An Ethnographic Reflection

As a youth, I remember being called into Sue’s office. A hall pass had arrived for me, excusing me from my regular class time, because I was required to visit the counselor’s office. Walking down the industrial-carpeted and fluorescent-lit hallway, I make the familiar trek to Sue’s office. It was a popular hangout for Native students. We’d go in to receive a kind smile or just to say hello, or to drop off something that perhaps a family member had sent for Sue, a returned borrowed item, or a small gift to thank her for her generosity with the youth. It is a space where we knew we would be accepted, respected, and encouraged. With the door open, I walk into Sue’s small office, which is cluttered with mementos from adoring students, parents, and community members. I am surprised to see one of my best friends there.

After the flash of surprise, I begin to worry. I can feel my brow furrow and I give my friend a nervous glance. It was unusual for two students to be pulled out of class at the same time for a meeting.

We all greet each other quietly, and then Sue waits a moment before she calmly looks at us and says she is disappointed. We, a couple of the strongest leaders in the club, have been very cliquish lately, she tells us. We weren’t including all the students in our activities, and we acted like we didn’t care about the whole group.

Stunned and ashamed, we knew Sue’s words were true. I feel my cheeks beginning to sting with embarrassment. I think through the past couple of weeks and realize that we had indeed been bratty middle-school kids lately, letting our sarcasm, eye-rolling, and note-passing get out of hand.

We stare quietly at the ground, nervous and embarrassed. After a moment of silence, we mumble apologies to our advisor. After a serious
moment, she clears the air, as she smiles and reminds us how important we are. We know her words are genuine, as we can see the kindness in her dark brown eyes. She lifts our spirits by telling us we are role models to the other students. She tells us to be more inclusive of all students, to spend time talking and sharing with the other students, and to remember that we are responsible to the whole group.

Soaking up her instructive words, we nod our heads in agreement and promise to do a better job. She reminds us of the responsibility and dedication that we need to show as leaders. “That is the way of our people,” she reminds us on a serious note.

After the serious talk, we turn to lighter topics; we talk about the new recycling program taking place at the school. We admire the snapshot photos that someone’s parent had recently brought for Sue. We talk about how our families are doing and the results of the latest sports team competition. After we enjoy our small talk, Sue asks us if we are ready to go back to class.

“I guessssssss,” we moan, pretending that we don’t like school, although we are both pretty dedicated students. She writes us the necessary hall passes and we leave, exchanging smiles and soft handshakes or hugs on our way out the door.

After we think we are out of earshot, we share some candy and gum, of course against the school rules, and we roll our eyes about being called cliquish. But deep down, underneath these adolescent defense mechanisms, we know Sue is right. She is our most treasured role model at the middle school. We love spending time with her and we know she would never steer us astray. We both silently agree that we will try to do better; we will try harder to live up to Sue’s expectations. We know that her teachings are important, but it would take years, even decades, for us to more fully reflect on exactly how important these teachings are, to realize the gift that she is sharing with us.

Articulating a Critical Indigenous Pedagogy

In our interview, I asked Sue about the important lessons that the children would learn through their participation in the Wapato Indian Club. She explained the multiple layers of education that took place, and that student empowerment is a main goal:

I always have a way with teaching. We had fun, you know, we did things that are fun. But when it comes to teaching the dance, I want them to be respectful of what I am giving them. And I want them to be good at it, so when they show it to other people, they will know and they will be proud.

Here we gain insight into the way Sue approached teaching the traditional dances to the children. There are four parts to the pedagogy that she describes.

First, because she is working with children, the foundation of the work must be fun. Without that foundation, the children would lose interest and group members would probably have difficulty bringing a “good heart” to the practices and performances. This is a powerful message from which other activists can learn: decolonizing work can be stressful—challenging the entrenched ways of settler colonialism and its imposition on our lives. Yet, Sue reminds us that activism must allow for fun. Sue’s narrative illustrates that important principles of decolonization include having fun, to ensure sustainability, while also holding high standards and expectations of those involved.

Second, she wants students to understand that, in sharing the teachings of the dances, Sue is providing them with a gift. A main teaching within traditional culture is that one must acknowledge that receiving a gift is an honor, and that one must be respectful of both the gifts received and the giver, who is honoring the one receiving the gift. Gifts serve an important function within Yakama culture. They bring relations together in a cycle of reciprocity. When a child joins the Wapato Indian Club, they are entering into that set of relations where they need to learn to be respectful of the teachings and honorable toward all of the other participants: teachers, elders, past performers, current performers, future performers, audience members, community, and school officials. This elaborate set of relations is nurtured and sustained through efforts to teach about the traditions of giving, receiving, and honoring each other.

Third, students must dedicate themselves to learn the dances and to perform them well. This emphasis on achievement is important, because it would be disrespectful to perform the dances poorly, or to demonstrate a lack of discipline to learn the dances. Sue had high standards, expecting perfection, or close to it, and the students were expected to hold these same expectations for themselves and their classmates. Sue’s insistence on high-quality performances and a respectful dedication to learning traditions is indicative of her awareness of the stakes of cultural revitalization.
If the work is done sloppily or without great respect, then the impact and social change potential of their work will also be diminished, rendering their decolonizing efforts fruitless.

Fourth, students must be high achievers, because they are serving as ambassadors to their audiences. They must perform the traditional dances in a way that proudly represents the Yakama people, American Indians, and the students themselves. Sue describes the fourth part of the teaching process as one that focuses on self-esteem. In her view, the children must do great performances so the audiences will know—and more important, so the children will know—that they have done a good job. The children must feel pride in learning and sharing the traditional dances. This part of the teaching process would not be possible without the other three parts, and I argue that this final part of the process is perhaps the most important—in terms of preparing club members for future grassroots activist work and continuing the cultural revitalization process that Sue helped them learn.

Within the Yakama context, self-esteem differs from the Western notion. Saying the Wapato Indian Club helped students’ individual self-esteem would be an understatement. It would gloss over much of the richness and possibility that we can learn from this example. In the typical Western view, positive self-esteem is about a favorable belief in oneself as an individual. However, in analyzing Sue’s narrative, Yakama self-esteem goes beyond the individual. The collective ethos marks the concept of self-esteem, as it does with Yakama traditions more generally. For Sue, the self-esteem of the Wapato Indian Club members is rooted in the dedication, discipline, and pride that the children feel as part of a collective that is learning and living the traditional teachings. The children feel pride in Sue’s ideal vision of the teaching process, because they have done a good job sharing their knowledge of the dances, and the children feel good about knowing they have shared with and taught their audiences. They feel good because they can be counted on as culture bearers, even at their young ages, as Sue explained:

I tell them when they come in to join us, that they are joining a club that is fun, but it is different. They are coming to learn about the Indian culture. And it’s very proud. And they must treat it with respect.

Sue reiterates the main points of the teaching process that I shared in this section. She emphasizes that fun is important, as with all the other youth clubs, but that the Wapato Indian Club is different. Within the club, the most important thing is to learn about Indian culture. She mentions that the culture is very proud, signaling that she expects a serious commitment from the students, that casual participation will not be enough to learn the lessons adequately. She finishes her statement by saying that the students must treat the cultural lessons with respect. Anything else but committed, serious learning will not be tolerated. The club cannot afford to have the cultural teachings disrespected in that way. Again, this is part of Sue’s responsibility as an elder who has herself been gifted these teachings by her elders. If she allows these teachings to be disrespected, then it brings a dishonor to the other students, to the community, to Sue, to the elders who gifted the teachings to Sue, and to the student who fails to follow the rules within this indigenous-centered education. If Sue does not uphold that traditional cultural value in her teachings, then she will not successfully teach the students perhaps the most important lesson, of respecting the cultural teachings and their elders. The pedagogy of the Wapato Indian Club can be understood as an example of what Sandy Grande describes as critical pedagogy. Grande states: “‘critical pedagogy’ operates in the educational landscape as both a rhetoric and a social movement” (Grande 2004, 6). Sue’s efforts to instill in the children a sense of pride in their heritage and responsibility to their community provides youth with a message and example of how to work toward social justice and decolonization, which are the purposes of critical pedagogy (Grande 2004).

While a main purpose of the Wapato Indian Club, from its founding, was to help pass on traditional teachings and dances to Indian youth, the club also honored a multicultural vision that welcomed interested and committed non-Native students into the club. Natalie Cuffman was one such club participant, who was active in the Wapato Indian Club during all three years of her middle-school attendance in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was elected by her fellow club members to serve as a club officer. In her interview, Natalie emphasized a major lesson that she learned through her involvement with the club:

I think the thing that I appreciated most is that Sue included people like me. I am Caucasian. I’m not Native American, but to me the club was important because Wapato is my community, too. I feel like culture is where you live. I think that was the biggest gift. Sue was willing to share cross-culturally . . . I really felt that it was a gift, something to appreciate growing up. It helps you to be more flexible in different senses . . . working with people who are different than you . . . I certainly hope that the club would continue because I
think it is helping to keep the heritage of Yakama people alive, for one thing, and having pride in the culture, but also the chance at cross-cultural experiences are important, to help people like me.

Natalie reflects on her experience as a non-Native member of the Wapato Indian Club and refers to it as a gift that she continues to carry with her. She mentions that it helped her to learn to be flexible and it taught her valuable cross-cultural skills. She credits Sue’s generosity in sharing Yakama teachings; Natalie was encouraged to seek these teachings out because she, too, was part of the Wapato community on the Yakama Reservation. She honors the fact that Sue gifted her with teachings that helped her have a more meaningful connection to Yakama peoples and homeland. Natalie’s experience helps demonstrate that an indigenous-centered educational experience can benefit non-indigenous students.

Yakama Reservation community members speak of the Wapato Indian Club as providing guidance that youth, and their families, need. It provides a safe space for Indian and non-Indian children to learn about Indian cultures. For Native students, it validates the importance and pride in having an Indian identity. Margaret Carter, a teacher at the Wapato Middle School and current Wapato Indian Club advisor, also discussed cultural pride in terms of intergenerational teaching and learning, as club alumni stay involved with the club and mentor the younger students through learning the dances and perfecting their performances. For example, she mentioned that middle-school children who are just starting to learn the dances could sometimes be “shy” or “nervous” during performances. She explained that club alumni hold the children to high standards, knowing the children are representing the larger community when they do their performances:

They come back and teach the little kids and perform with us. It is a strong tie; it’s like they want to stay in the family, which is fine with me! Because the older ones, they are the ones, too, who will say “Hey you need to quit playing around out there.” They are actually more strict than I am, as far as the performance level. I’ll be like, “Well, they are just a little shy.” They’ll say, “No! they need to quit fidgeting.” But that’s good, because it is teaching them leadership also. You become a leader when you’re out there.

Margaret’s narrative describes the characteristics of good leadership within the Wapato Indian Club. Alumni and advisors help younger performers overcome feelings of shyness or nervousness so they can reach their full potential as proud leaders of the club, and ultimately as representatives of the Yakama people and homeland. On the reservation, very few youth leadership opportunities exist; there are no Boys & Girls Clubs or YMCA on the reservation, and local parks and recreation departments offer infrequent programming. The Wapato Indian Club represents a valuable opportunity to teach young people leadership skills and to do so in a way that centers the importance of Native identity, culture, and representation, as defined by reservation community members. As such, it is a leadership training program that takes place on Yakama homeland with the intent of building strong leaders who are comfortable representing where they are from in a way that is proud, dignified, and respectful. The fact that alumni return to the club to work with younger children is evidence that the club’s message is effective. Alumni, who instruct the young children to “quit playing around” on stage, help reinforce the message to youth that their actions matter and the community relies on the youth to be a proud representation of our people and homeland.

Identity, Culture, and Resisting Negative Stereotypes

Interviewees discussed the variety of dances that the Wapato Indian Club performed, including traditional Yakama dances, such as the Swan Dance and the Welcome Dance, and what they referred to as powwow-style dances, such as the Grass Dance and Sneak Up Dance. Such forms of cultural expression are obviously rooted in indigenous traditions. Yet, powwow is understood as a contemporary pan-Indian cultural tradition. The inclusion of powwow dancing as part of the Wapato Indian Club pedagogy confirmed that identity is fluid, rather than fixed. The group could perform a Plateau dance, such as the Swan Dance, and in the next moment perform a Plains-style Grass Dance. These teachings helped students understand the flexibility of identity and gave students the opportunity to learn that being comfortable with contradictions was also important in forming a strong Yakama identity. This teaching is perhaps most evident with regard to the club’s sign language performances. The sign language numbers were performed in unison, with the children wearing their full traditional regalia, to musical renditions that were played via audio system by tape or CD. All of the performances, including the dances and sign language routines, were taught to the children and advisors by elders, including the sign language routine of the Lord’s Prayer. Sue mentioned
that, at times, audience members might question whether the sign language numbers were “really traditional.” Sue’s response was that if an elder had gifted it to her to share with the children, then it became part of the Wapato Indian Club tradition.

In the mid-1990s, the Wapato Indian Club began selling self-published booklets about their performance numbers, as a fundraiser to support their travel and regalia-making costs. Within the booklet entitled “Wapato Indian Club: Traditional Dances and Stories of the Yakama Indian Nation,” there is an explanation of the different performance numbers that the club would typically perform. On the cover of the booklet (see Figure 1), there is a drawing of two dancers signing part of the Lord’s Prayer. The booklet included the following explanation of sign language performances:

The first people of this land, which came to be known as America, were diverse in language and social customs. Being extremely separate, yet mobile societies, the effort to communicate necessitated the use of sign language. Our Wapato Indian Club performers do a variety of northern and southern Indian sign language. Much of the American deaf sign language is adapted from American Indian sign language. Some of the numbers that students present are “gifted” to them by their respected elders. A few numbers are choreographed by the group and their advisor. Dedicated “messengers,” the children spend countless hours practicing and perfecting the sign language numbers. It is their goal to speak as one. (Parker 1994, 2)

This formal explanation helped Sue and Wapato Indian Club members situate the sign language routines in terms of connecting to a larger community. The performance of the Lord’s Prayer is obviously part of a strong Christian tradition. Although Christianity is not an indigenous Yakama religion, it is a religious tradition that has widespread appeal across the reservation, with many tribal peoples celebrating Christian traditions, often in concert with indigenous traditions.

Ultimately, the Wapato Indian Club framed the sign language performances in terms of helping students learn important lessons of coming together as a collective who could “speak as one.” The club’s booklet states that, historically, sign language helped bridge communication gaps. In contemporary times, doing the sign language routines positioned the children to be proud “messengers” of indigenous peoples—providing Indian and non-Indian audiences the opportunity to see the youth as leaders in the making. The performances were important reminders that leadership, in the Yakama sense, was always tied to the teachings of older generations, as the children learned to lead by sharing a gift bestowed upon them by
elders. Additionally, the performance of sign language routines emphasized unity, and the group communicating as a united whole. This emphasis on being committed to the collective is also an important Yakama teaching. Although some status differentials existed within the group (i.e., children with more elaborate regalia would more likely be positioned in front during sign language routines), these statuses were not fixed. For example, if a child with less elaborate regalia was an excellent signer, completing the signs with special grace and precision, then that child would be positioned in a more prominent place for the audience to see. Having elaborate regalia did not always correlate with higher social class standing. Some families had very low socioeconomic standing within mainstream society, yet still had wealth in the form of treasured family regalia or had within their family a talented sewer, or bead, quill, or leather worker who could create regalia, often a piece at a time, for the child participating in the Wapato Indian Club. For children whose families did not have regalia and could not afford to sew or bead their own outfits, Wapato Indian Club advisors worked with other parents and community members to sew, loan, and donate outfits, so that no child was turned away for lack of regalia, including non-Indian children. This spirit of generosity and inclusiveness is also a Yakama cultural tradition, with leaders esteemed not because of individual honors or achievement, but because of the ways in which they contribute to the collective good.

Framing their performances in terms that emphasized traditional Yakama cultural values helped ease potential conflict about whether the sign language routines were “authentic” or “genuine,” which are common concerns that surround American Indian performances (Wilmer 2009). As such, the sign language performances could be considered an example of “decolonization in unexpected places” as Andrea Smith articulates in her analysis of indigenous people’s involvement with Christian evangelism (Smith 2010a).

In reality, the sign language numbers captivated the audiences. Interviewees shared that audiences would often be brought to tears when the children would sign the Lord’s Prayer. Theresa Jacob, a Wapato Indian Club parent whose children participated in the club during the 1970s through the 1990s, shared:

A lot of times people cried during the Lord’s Prayer. I think they realized that a culture was being lost and that somehow it was being resurrected, saved. They were Anglos that knew the Lord’s Prayer. And to see Indian people in regalia honoring part of their [Anglo] tradition touched them on an emotional and spiritual level. I mean, they didn’t understand the Indian words to the fancy dance songs. Or, the Welcome Dance, they didn’t understand those words, but when they played the lady or the man singing the Lord’s Prayer, they understood it. [It was in] their own language [English], but they could see the beauty of the sign language. And anybody who was hearing impaired and knew that sign language—that was another culture you were reaching, so I thought it was a win-win. It was always really beautiful.

Theresa’s narrative demonstrates the power that cross-cultural communication could have within the Wapato Indian Club performances. In Theresa’s interview quote, one can see that the children carried a dual responsibility to represent Indian people and cultures, as well as to reach out to non-Indian audiences who valued a Christian prayer. To do this cross-cultural outreach, Sue taught the children to sign the Lord’s Prayer, allowing the children to reach yet another audience in the deaf culture. Outreach to non-Indians was a specific objective of the Wapato Indian Club as Haver Jim, Yakama tribal member and club alumni, who participated in the late 1980s, shared:

I believe that the biggest teaching that I benefited from was exposure to a more contemporary lifestyle, and exposure to the Western culture. You know, the people, they would always talk to you after the performances, or we would go to office gatherings like if Heritage [local college] had a faculty day, we would go perform for them. Or, we’d perform at different businesses in Yakima [a nearby city north of the reservation]. Or, we would go to different events. Thinking back [on my life], I have written down some of the biggest things that had a big influence on me, and my time with the Wapato Indian Club was one of them. And the biggest benefit was being exposed to other cultures. I’ve been able to be more open, to communicate with the Caucasians or Black people, Mexicans. Sometimes kids [at school] that didn’t participate would say, “Oh, quit trying to be an Indian,” when they are Indian! I mean, how dumb is that?! It’s sad.

Haver credits his participation with the Wapato Indian Club as having a major impact on his adult life. He feels the exposure to non-Indian audiences allowed him to learn to communicate across cultures, and work
toward cultural reconciliation. Gaining the strong sense of identity within a supportive environment allowed him to resist negative stereotypes, such as other Native children who teased him for “trying to be Indian” because he showed an interest in learning the routines and performing with the club for non-Native audiences. Haver internalized the positive messages that the club had provided, and as a result he could resist the negative comments about his identity made by some of his peers.

Although he was aware of the value of cross-cultural interactions that the club provided, Haver also reflected on the ways Indian identities could be misunderstood, perhaps even as a result of the performances. He shared:

The only thing that I think wasn’t addressed enough is that powwow is not a religion. You know, powwow performances and all that, dressing up [in regalia], is not spirituality. And I think that was a misconception that a lot of people [non-Indian audiences] had; they viewed that as our form of spirituality. Powwow and performances are completely on their own, contemporary, you know?

Haver’s comments distinguish the Wapato Indian Club performances from his spirituality and religion. He views the dance performances, including powwow, as a contemporary pan-Indian cultural expression, which is still important, but does not define his spirituality. He wonders if audiences conflated the two, and hopes that they did not. Yet he realizes that point may have been lost, at times, within the cross-cultural encounters of the Wapato Indian Club performances. However, Haver also acknowledges the importance of engaging non-Indian audiences despite the misunderstanding that might occasionally happen. He recalls that his uncles strongly encouraged him to join the Wapato Indian Club, to help share the club’s message that Indians are “still here” and are proud of our cultural traditions. He said:

We were encouraged to perform, to go show them [our dancing], and it was a matter of fact, to go show them that we’re still here. To show them that there are real, real Indians right here, you know, on the reservation! And that was the thing for a long time back then.

Haver outlines important lessons contained within the Wapato Indian Club critical pedagogy. As a dancer, he embodied a proud representation of indigenous people. In doing so, he resisted the stereotype of the “vanished Indian.” Haver’s leadership within the club helped solidify these critical teachings, and looking back, he understands why his uncles encouraged his participation.

Ryan Craig, a Yakama tribal member and club alumni, participated in the Wapato Indian Club in the 1990s. Ryan is now a DJ with a daily show on the Yakama tribal radio station, KYNR. Ryan is also an accomplished artist, known across Indian country for his musical talent, and has been awarded a prestigious Native American Music award for Hip Hop Artist of the Year. During our interview, Ryan discussed the importance of cultural pride and representation of his people, values he learned in the Wapato Indian Club. He specifically connected his success in the radio and music industries to his participation in the club:

Just being able to present yourself to non-Indian people and people outside of your own community, even though the job I have now in radio is for the tribal community, it’s not just Indians who turn on the radio. It’s people of all backgrounds ... I don’t want some rich white people to think that everybody within our tribe is uneducated or everybody within our tribe can’t speak on the microphone. So when I would go to those Indian Club trips, we wanted those people to see that Indians aren’t stupid. Indians are the ones that are providing the entertainment for them. We didn’t have to have their pity or anything like that. So now in my job, when I go on the radio, I don’t think of myself like “Oh I’m just at a job for a tribal radio station.” Not! I want to be better than any radio DJ. Like the Indian Club showed us, just because you’re Indian doesn’t mean you’re less than. Or just because you’re not rich, it doesn’t mean you can’t be somebody in life, because look at all these places you went for all these white people and these rich people doing performances. And that’s how I want to live my life now. Being at our tribe’s radio station ... I can be a representation of our entire people, not just myself. I can be the voice of all these classmates and all these people that I grew up with. And then I have the rap thing, making the music and all that, that’s pretty much the same as Indian Club, it’s just that now it is rap music, we go to shows like at universities. If I was never in Indian Club, I would never know how it feels to be behind that curtain waiting for it to open and go out there.

Ryan’s narrative interweaves the lessons he learned as a participant in the Wapato Indian Club with his daily work as a DJ on the tribal radio station and his musical work as a rap artist. The teachings that Indian people
must be proud of their identities, resist negative stereotypes, and represent Indian people honorably are lessons that Ryan continues to carry with him on a daily basis. Traveling across the country today to do concerts, Ryan still thinks of his middle-school years standing behind a curtain, dressed in traditional regalia, waiting to perform as part of the Wapato Indian Club dance troupe.

Leadership as Embodied Critical Pedagogy

Revitalizing the traditions of intergenerational teaching and learning helps to fill the cultural knowledge gaps that disrupt indigenous cultural survival. Seeing this gap, and hearing requests from children who were eager to learn the dances, a group of dedicated Yakama people came together to make that education possible. Now, nearly forty years later, the Wapato Indian Club has been teaching children on the Yakama Reservation about traditional dancing and the importance of intergenerational teaching and learning. Contained within those lessons are important teachings about cultural pride, leadership, and responsibility to the future generations. These teachings are the heart of the critical indigenous pedagogy developed within the Wapato Indian Club. Adults involved with the club treated the children with respect so that children could have a safe, fun learning environment. Sue’s husband, Mel Rigdon, was another important role model for the children. He remarked that the children called him “grandpa,” and indeed, he was a trusted elder who volunteered his time to serve as a chaperone, driver, and sound-system coordinator during performances. In this way, Mel modeled the leadership that Wapato Indian Club advisors hoped to instill in the children. As I examined a collection of archival materials of the Wapato Indian Club (three large boxes of newspaper clippings, programs, and photos held within Sue and Mel Rigdon’s home), nearly every photo showed proud Indian children who were representing their people with dignity and respect. As figure 1 shows, the children are embodying the leadership lessons learned within the club.

Archival data included some historical files from the 1950s, in which Yakama families had given family stories to be included in local history projects, an early effort to represent Yakama peoples and perspectives in the curriculum. These took the form of biographies of family members, as well as descriptions of important dances, including the Swan Dance, which is described as an honoring of the swan, whose beauty “has graced our stream and lakes,” and with the Yakama women performing the dance, all peoples are reminded that we are blessed in our relationship with mother earth, who provides food and shelter (Rigdon n.d.). From these historical documents, Sue created a curriculum for an Indian cultural class to be offered in the Wapato public schools. The file contains a mimeographed copy of a detailed outline of topics that would be covered in such a class. Attached to the outline is a handwritten note from a school administrator, who states “I'm still not real happy with this outline ... [it] doesn't really state how or with what methods the class will be taught—which is the most important factor” and Sue is urged to get in touch with the University of Washington for further guidance (Rigdon n.d.). The administrator’s response to the curriculum is indicative of a lack of understanding of indigenous perspectives, histories, and methods for teaching. One of the stated outcomes of the class that Sue had proposed was “being able to state what the idea of Manifest Destiny was and what its significance was in regard to the settlement of the United States.” This is a specific outcome that is easily addressed with a critical indigenous perspective of history. A simple method for teaching this is to tell the story of encroachment and land dispossession of Native peoples. Yet, rather than seeing the value and potential of this form of critical education, the administrator questions the curriculum. This political context encouraged such teachings to take place in an extracurricular capacity, rather than during the regular academic periods of the school day. This decision had strategic implications. As a club, rather than a class, the Wapato Indian Club could have the freedom to bring in elders to teach via oral histories, role modeling, and with song, all of which are indigenous pedagogies that sometimes face scrutiny in Western educational systems, due to confusion about curriculum rigor, assessment, relevance, and importance.

Once established as a club, the critical pedagogy of the Wapato Indian Club focused on preparing the next generation to be strong leaders. This point was touched on across all interviews that I conducted. For example, Ryan reflected on the importance of reaching out and providing encouragement. In his comments, he spoke about the challenges of sustaining cultural revitalization efforts, like the Wapato Indian Club, and how future leaders may feel it is difficult to fill the shoes of our beloved elders.

After Sue [founding Wapato Indian Club advisor] retired, it would be hard to pick it up where she left off. She had it to where Wapato Indian Club was like professionals. And everybody knew that. And that is why she got all the recognition that she did, and she deserved that recognition, but, I guess we just need a few leaders to step up.
and then be the ones that influence people. For example, for me at the radio station, let’s say if I never went into radio, you wouldn’t have anybody there under the age of fifty years old. Ok? And if I were in some other field, I would never want to be a part of it. But if I’m twenty-eight, and I’m able to influence people that are twenty-one, and fourteen, and even as young as five or six years old, then that’s a start, and that’s where we’re going to build it from.

Now with Wapato Indian Club, you have Adam [a current Wapato Indian Club advisor]. Adam’s a basketball coach, and he’s a really good guy. If he can influence those students to say, “Hey, you should come be a part of this Indian Club,” “Maybe we can set up these performances,” or “Maybe we can do this and do that.” If he can get those one or two kids to step up and be leaders and decide they want to have kids take pride in their culture and heritage and our tribe, that’s the first step. Because the reality is that it was Sue that got people to be a part of it. If nobody would have said [to me] “Hey, you should come sign up for this,” or, “You should come on these trips,” I wouldn’t have gone, because I was a kid; I didn’t know. But if Adam can be that one to take that one leader who is maybe a seventh or eighth grader and if that one leader can be a positive role model for the sixth graders, and the sixth graders can be role models for their younger siblings, it will be right there. That’s the point.

The point is that I can live my life and I can be mad about this happening to me, or “I don’t have this,” or “I don’t get paid enough for that,” or, “All my classmates or some of my relatives are on drugs or alcohol.” I can sit around and I can pout, and I can be mad that our tribe doesn’t do this, or our tribe doesn’t do that. Or, I could go live my life and do the best that I can in everything I’m involved in. And then somebody’s going to look at me and say, “Hey he’s still doing his best and he’s still doing what he loves to do.” And if that person does that, then it is like a domino effect.

In his interview, Ryan reflects on the rich meaning that his participation in the Wapato Indian Club held for him. He continues to carry those teachings with him, and he has a vision of leadership and social change that is rooted in the lessons that he learned in the club. He articulates that it takes a caring elder to reach out and teach the younger generations, to encourage and inspire the young people to reach their potential and to emerge as a leader in whatever field they pursue. Ryan also mentions that Sue’s leadership earned her numerous awards. For example, Sue was honored for her work with the Wapato Indian Club when she was named Woman of the Year in 1999 at a gala event hosted by the Larson Gallery and the Yakima Valley Community College Women’s Program (Cooper 1999). Ryan respects Sue’s strong leadership and example, and he internalized the positive role modeling she provided. In this way, the powerful messages of the Wapato Indian Club dance troupe continue to transcend space and time, leaving a positive legacy on the reservation and beyond.

Critical Pedagogy as a Tool to Heal the Soul Wounds of Colonialism

Haver discussed the ways that participating in the Wapato Indian Club influenced him. He recalled that one of the most powerful experiences was helping to teach younger students how to dance. Beyond teaching them a series of steps and movements, Haver helped mentor them on how to carry themselves as proud and healthy Yakama people who were free of bitterness and hatred. He said:

And so participating in something like that was a way to bring those children in. You know, to teach them, but to teach them in a good way. That was the hard part, because I have so much anger, or hatred or bitterness towards the white race because of the stories that I heard.

Haver goes on to clarify that during his childhood he heard the oral histories of genocide and colonization inflicted upon Indian peoples. These teachings sometimes stirred ill feelings toward non-Indians, who were the primary audiences for Wapato Indian Club performances. At times he struggled to overcome feelings of negativity, because of, he said, the things I was taught. But at the same exact time I was taught that, not to hate them [whites], because it’s not directly their fault. ’Cause the people that did that died a long time ago. But to know that they still carry that same trait. I don’t know if you call it genetic trait or whatever it is that they carry inside them, they brought from Europe, that was what I was told. Maybe this generation won’t be that way. But our job as performers was to try to maintain that understanding of peace. You know it was hard to understand that as a child. And those are the things that I’ve reflected on.
In his narrative, Haver describes how his participation in the Wapato Indian Club helped him process the seeming contradictory teachings that he learned at home—about remembering the violent past and genocide of our people but moving forward in a peaceful way. As a child, it was difficult for him to understand the expectations placed on him by his elders, who shared these teachings with him. Within the Wapato Indian Club, when Haver became a lead male dancer, he was responsible for teaching and mentoring younger students. He had to decide which teachings he would focus on in his work with the other students. Haver looked to Sue, the advisor of the club, for guidance, and he articulates in his interview that it was clear to him that his responsibility as a Wapato Indian Club performer was to maintain that understanding of peace across cultures and races.

This teaching of peace was important to Sue and other adults involved with the Wapato Indian Club because of the violent social and historical context in which the children were living. The club was founded amid unprecedented crime and violence in Wapato and within the school. Local news files at the Yakima Valley Regional Library contain headlines of Wapato’s gang and drug violence problems in the 1970s and early 1980s. But then, a shift in discourse takes place, as culturally focused youth activities begin taking hold within the school, with Sue Rigdon involved in many of these efforts. One example was the Cultural Unity Fair, a celebration of food, dance, and culture that involved all students, teachers, and staff at the Wapato Middle School. Within the news file, a noticeable shift takes place. Eventually, the Wapato headlines begin to be dominated by the children who are embracing their cultures and sharing them with the community and other audiences. The headlines of drugs and gang warfare begin to fade into the background.

While we cannot draw a simple causal arrow between youth cultural activities and the reduction of gang and drug crimes, we also cannot deny any connection. Haver talked about the connection that he saw between these phenomena. In his interview, he spoke generally about the difficulties facing Indian people in and around the Yakama Reservation. He remembered how, during his youth, drugs and gangs were prevalent; they swept up so many people, hundreds of people. You know at that time I didn’t understand why it was such an urgency, and I think that is what contributed to the popularity of Wapato Indian Club. Back then [the club] used to be in the newspaper; it was a big thing. Because, and I think that is why it was such a big thing, because there were just so many people dying, the death rate was so high, that it [the club] was the one good thing that was coming out of our community, you know? And I think that is why it was such a big thing. And you know, there’s such a large, that large number of people that had died at that time... It took me whole life to understand this stuff.

During his interview, Haver recalls his middle-school days and the overwhelming grief and suffering he witnessed within the community due to the violence and death attributed to gangs and drugs. He specifically remembers the numerous funerals he attended, and how it was difficult for him to make sense of it all as a child. US Department of Justice statistics confirm Haver’s memories of violence in Indian Country. In a decade-long study (1992–2002), the Department of Justice reports that American Indians experienced a per capita rate of violence twice that of the US population (United States Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs 2004). Perhaps even more disturbing is that “American Indians experienced an estimated 1 violent crime for every 10 residents age 12 or older” (United States Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs 2004, iv). While the Wapato Indian Club helped protect Haver from some of the violence around him as a middle-school student, eventually he, too, had struggles with substance abuse. He shared:

You know I battled, seriously battled with alcoholism and drug use myself. To the point where I was in the hospital, going to admit myself to the psych ward, and if it wasn’t for a picture of my auntie on the wall, I was walking down the hallway and I saw her picture there and she was in her outfit just like that, but she had a hat on [he is pointing to a portrait of a person wearing their traditional regalia]. And she is the one who gave me my Indian name, you know. And right next to her was another picture a little bigger than that one of two sweathouses and this was five years ago in Seattle Harborview Medical Center and I tried to overdose ‘cause I had that pain that I speak of was so overwhelming that you know I didn’t know of any other way but suicide, because you know, you see it so much your whole life... when I was in treatment they tried to diagnose me and give me medication and I told them no, I know what is wrong with me. Just leave me alone, I just need is to get away from everybody. You know, get back to myself. And so yeah, and all the scars on my body are a testament to the battles that I’ve been through. You know
physical contact with my environment. And people in my environment. And that’s what I want to do with my own work, in school, my research. You know, to learn how to, with sociolinguistics, to be able to develop programs in language and things like the Wapato Indian Club. So I think it is, in the sense of all the things that our people have been through, where we’re at now is a very large leap into that healing process. A gigantic leap.

Haver goes on to further credit Sue’s tireless efforts to help the children. He refers to her work as the foundation of all the good work that club alumni will do in the future. In an analysis of his comments, the activism of club alumni is apparent as part of an intergenerational effort to heal our people:

You know, I think that Sue’s dedication is, how would you say, a very strong placing stone, I guess you could say. You know, something that, in history, is there. She held us there just long enough. And I think with the support of the community, with the families that participated, maybe they couldn’t get as far as we could, but just because they were there now, we can get a little bit farther.

Haver recalls the crucial support that Sue provided during his youth. The Wapato Indian Club gave him an opportunity to begin healing; it uniquely connected him with his own culture and with other cultures. He uses the memories and examples of the Wapato Indian Club to inform his own scholarship and work. As a reentry student at Heritage University, a local university, Haver is inspired to use his studies to develop youth programs similar to the Wapato Indian Club and to continue helping nurture the next generation of leaders on Yakama homeland.

Core Values and the Wapato Indian Club’s Model of Indigenous Social Change

From its inception, the Wapato Indian Club has advanced what indigenous studies scholars would call a decolonizing agenda. Indigenous youth, resisting an assimilationist agenda of the settler-colonial education system, insisted that their cultures and traditional teachings be offered to them. By analyzing the critical pedagogical work and politics of the Wapato Indian Club, we can understand the important place of indigenous youth and their allies in cultural revitalization efforts.

After analyzing interview data and the limited archival material about Wapato Indian Club, I created a list of core values that served as the foundation of all the work done in the club. In my second interview with Sue, I shared the list with her, and we talked about each value, and any possible revisions that the list might need. Ultimately, we finalized the following list: Respect, Inclusivity, Responsibility, Self-Awareness, Listening, Healing, and Unity.

These are the core values that guide the club. They are the basis of how the club teaches youth “how to be” in accordance with elders’ instructions. Even decades later, alumni are able to articulate how their participation in Wapato Indian Club helps them to continue striving for these ideals, as Haver articulates so eloquently. By carefully listening to participants’ narratives, I was able to envision a model that would represent the Wapato Indian Club and the process of teaching the core values to participants. But I knew that this model needed to be something more than an assemblage of arrows and boxes. I wanted the model to be rooted in the culturally based stories and teachings that were so precious to the people involved in the Wapato Indian Club. Below, in figure 2, I share my conceptualization of this emerging model. Within the model, there are representations of powerful features of the bird who was so important in the Wapato Indian Club performances—the swan, wawilúuk, who is sacred to Plateau peoples. It is a being that is strong and enduring, and is a powerful place-based example for our people. Its elegance reminds us of the beauty of our traditions, and its graceful flight provides a guiding light that the club follows, always striving and reaching toward a gracefulness and discipline that will bring about healing and unity. As the archival materials and interview data quoted within this chapter indicate, the swan was an important symbol to communicate the message of respecting all creation and paying honor to nature through performances. Within the model, the swan itself embodies the core values taught within the Wapato Indian Club, serving as a reflection of and an image of guidance for the critical pedagogy used within the club. As the swan embodies the teachings, so too are the children expected to embody these values, as they learn and carry on the teachings of their elders. As such, the children’s bodies become a site for critical pedagogy. The praxis developed in the Wapato Indian Club thus contributes to our understanding of indigenous social change theories, encouraging us to remember the potential and
contribution of recognizing young people's leadership and the importance of the body as a liberatory tool for critical awareness, leadership development, and decolonizing praxis.

This model provides an example of a decolonizing praxis that emphasizes the importance of the local context and the connection to place-based teachings. It encourages all peoples to build a relationship with the special beings/relatives with whom they share the land. According to indigenous teachings, the Creator has placed important teachers, like the swan, in our presence, and we have the honor to learn from these beings/relatives. The model I provide here demonstrates the importance of an indigenous place-based paradigm for learning and teaching.

Figure 2. Wapato Indian Club model. (Drawing by Michelle M. Jacob and Christopher J. Andersen)

I Don’t Want Our Language to Die

Indigenous Language Revitalization, Survivance, and the Stakes of Building a Moral Community

An Ethnographic Introduction: Dancing to Honor the Past, Present, and Future

We sit around a table at the university cafeteria, enjoying our lunch together. Then, all of a sudden, the elder announces that she would like to have dancers at the honor dinner tomorrow night. Word quickly spreads across the lunchroom. Soon a practice session is organized, and several women have committed to dancing. The elder is pleased and agrees to help teach the dance during the practice session.

Later that afternoon, the women assemble in the longhouse on campus. The elder scans the room until she finds suitable instruments. She uses a spatula and a cardboard box as a makeshift hand drum. Upon testing out her new “drum,” she explains the legend that accompanies the song she will be singing, and she reminds the women of the dance steps for the Farewell Dance. The legend that she shares is place-based, reminding us of our surroundings and the legendary beings who shaped the world before our time, from the ocean to the Columbia River Gorge to places in between. This particular legend explains the formation of Beacon Rock, a prominent landmark that stands next to the Columbia River.

As elders do, she explains how she learned the song and dance. She tells a story of when she was a young girl, perhaps fourteen years old, when