

Montreal · First Person

Why it's important for Indigenous people to tell our own stories

When you remove us from our own narrative, we lose who we are

[Ossie Michelin](#) · for CBC First Person · Posted: Jun 03, 2021 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: June 3



Ossie Michelin stands by Muskrat Falls in Labrador, now the site of a hydroelectric dam, with his camera on June 11, 2014. (Submitted by Ossie Michelin)

This First Person article is the experience of Ossie Michelin, a Labrador Inuk journalist from the community of North West River. For more information about CBC's First Person stories, please see [the FAQ](#).

Growing up in my home community of North West River, in central Labrador, we saw a number of researchers, writers, explorers and others come and go. Sometimes, they would hire someone from my family as a guide.

The best ones made lifelong friendships and their work benefited our community well. But what many of them wrote about us, or what they said, didn't match up with our lived experience.

For centuries, the humanity of Indigenous people has been hidden behind stereotypes, myths and prejudices. Indigenous voices have long been silenced, only allowed to be heard when deemed valid by an "expert" like a priest, scientist, politician or bureaucrat.

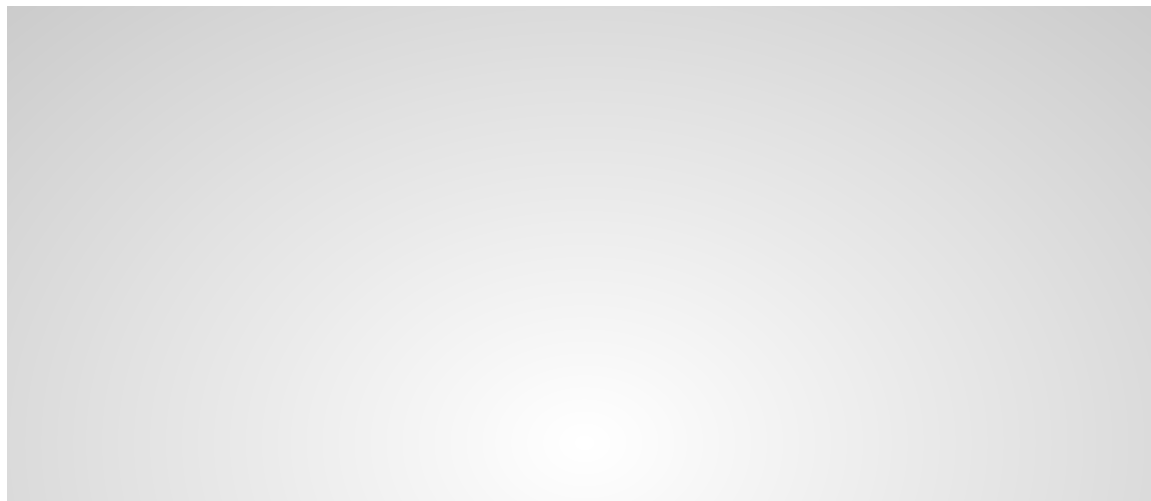
By denying us access to the conversations that shaped this country, we were written off into the history books as a relic from a bygone era.


Even before Canada became a country, colonialism weaponized stories about Indigenous people. These were used to scare settlers into thinking we were dirty, dangerous and drunk — not to be trusted or deserving of empathy. These stories made settlers feel contempt for the Indigenous people surviving colonialism.

- **VIDEO** [Survivors share experiences, impacts of life at residential school](#)

Our stories make us human; they are how we pass on culture, language and ways of life. They're how we connect with our families and ancestors. When you remove us from our own stories, we lose who we are. When the church and state took Indigenous children away from their homes and placed them in residential schools, it was so that they could remove the children from the stories that told them they were proud, strong and part of a beautiful way of life. They were instead told stories that they were broken, going to hell and in need of taming.

Many of the children in these schools were abused, tortured and killed because both church and state refused to see our humanity, refused to hear our stories.





'Our stories are a chance to get to know us, to see our humanity, to see us as multifaceted beings instead of two-dimensional stereotypes.' (Submitted by Ossie Michelin)

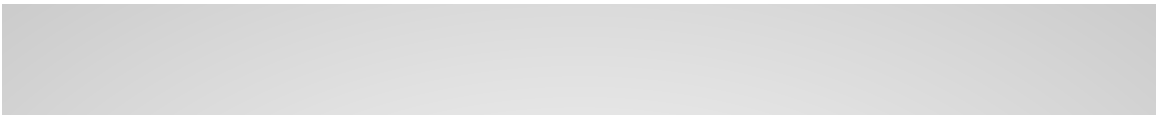
As Indigenous people, we have always known that our worldviews are dynamic, our storytellers are captivating and our perspectives are unique and varied. When we have a chance to share our stories with others, it is a chance to recognize our common humanity, to see our similarities and learn from our differences.

This doesn't mean that people from outside our communities are incapable of accurately portraying us. But even when they mean well, they can miss out on important subtleties, misunderstand context or lack important details. The same old tropes about Indigenous people can pop up from their subconscious and into their work. Aspects of Indigenous people's lives can get flattened to fit into pre-existing biases.

Sometimes you just need that lived experience to really explain something.

When I travelled outside of Labrador, even to Newfoundland, I came to realize that not a lot of people knew about us. This made me want to become a journalist or some kind of storyteller, to share stories about my home so people would learn about Labrador, so we could feel included and so Indigenous people don't have to do all the work of explaining the Indigenous world as we go about our daily lives.

When our Indigenous stories were hidden from the rest of Canada, they were also hidden from other Indigenous people. Sharing our stories with other Indigenous people is always a treat. Even though we have different cultures, or are from different areas, we have so much in common. We always want to see how other people do things, especially when their lands and waters are similar to our own.





Ossie is seen here in 2011, early in his career when he worked as a video journalist with APTN. (Submitted by Ossie Michelin)

I wanted there to be someone from Labrador who could tell our stories with respect and understanding. For the last decade, I have been working in Indigenous media, starting out as a video journalist for APTN, to do just that.

Having the ability to tell your own stories, to define your own world view, is called narrative sovereignty. It means that you have the ability to share ideas that are important to you. When Indigenous people have narrative sovereignty, stereotypes and myths fall away and we are free to truly represent ourselves.

Our stories are a chance to get to know us, to see our humanity, to see us as multifaceted beings instead of two-dimensional stereotypes.

When someone, especially someone from Labrador, tells me to keep sharing Indigenous stories, it fills me with pride.

Things are changing. Indigenous people are being given a turn in the spotlight, and while it's a good start we still have a long way to go. We have generations of stereotypes to prove wrong, and generations to come to surprise, enrich and grow narratives of our own.

Ossie Michelin is the writer and director of the new CBC podcast [Telling Our Twisted Histories](#), an 11-episode series that reclaims Indigenous history by exploring 11 words whose meanings have been warped by centuries of colonization.

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