

DESIGNING A GAME OF RESISTANCE: AN APPROACH TO CULTURAL
MISREPRESENTATION IN EDUCATIONAL VISUALS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the pervasive issue of cultural misrepresentation within Ontario's elementary school curriculum, with a specific focus on the visual content found in educational materials for grades 4 to 6. Through a qualitative content analysis of commercial and Ministry-endorsed teaching resources, this study reveals how visual narratives often reinforce Eurocentric ideologies, marginalize racialized identities, and offer reductive portrayals of culture under the guise of multicultural inclusion. Rather than fostering meaningful cross-cultural understanding, these representations tend to prioritize aesthetic cohesion, palatability, and marketability, ultimately compromising cultural accuracy and complexity.

Guided by Semiotics, Critical Design Theory, and Decolonial Design Theory, this research interrogates the underlying pedagogical and design assumptions embedded in these visual tools. It argues that the erasure or tokenization of non-dominant cultures is not incidental but structurally ingrained, reflecting larger systemic inequities.

In response to these findings, the thesis presents a speculative design intervention—an interactive, critical experience that visualizes and challenges cultural misrepresentation in educational media. This intervention aims not to offer solutions, but to provoke reflection, dialogue, and discomfort. Ultimately, the project advocates for a decolonial design approach that centers cultural authenticity, and amplifies marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives and reimagine how culture is visually represented. **Key**

Terms: Cultural Misrepresentation, Eurocentric, Semiotics, Critical Design Theory, Decolonial Design Theory, Pedagogy, Erasure, Tokenization, Marginalized, Speculative Design.

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1.0 Introduction

In Ontario, young learners are introduced to the world through curated stories, images, and narratives that claim to represent history, identity, and culture. However, these representations rarely go deeper than surface level. For many students, especially Indigenous, Black, and BIPOC youth, these resources often distort, erase, or oversimplify their cultures, leaving them misrepresented or entirely invisible.

Despite Canada's self-identification as a multicultural nation, the Ontario education system continues to rely on learning materials that reinforce colonial ideologies, flatten cultural nuance, and perpetuate stereotypes as fact (Dei, 2017). This dissonance between national identity and educational practice points to a systemic issue embedded in the very tools meant to shape young minds.

This thesis challenges the visual status quo by interrogating how cultural misrepresentation operates in educational resources and how those representations impact students' understanding of identity, belonging, and history. Rooted in critical inquiry, this research positions visual culture not simply as illustrative, but as ideological—an active force in shaping what knowledge is seen as legitimate.

The central problem this research addresses is the persistence of Eurocentric dominance within visual learning resources used in Ontario's elementary education system. This project examines how marginalized cultures are misrepresented, simplified, or excluded altogether within these visual materials, particularly those targeted at school-aged youth between 9 and 12.

Guided by this concern, the study explores the following key questions:

- How does the Ontario curriculum perpetuate cultural misrepresentation through visual resources for school-aged youth (9–12)?
- What are the implications of prioritizing Eurocentric narratives over diverse cultural perspectives through visuals for students' understanding of equity and inclusion?

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of visual and textual elements found in Canadian educational materials, specifically workbooks, textbooks, and visual learning aids designed for children aged 9–12. Materials aligned with the Ontario curriculum were selected and analyzed using a coding framework based on themes of Eurocentrism, tokenism, cultural erasure, and representational imbalance.

The analysis is grounded in decolonial design theory as both a methodological and critical framework, supported by critical design theory to interrogate embedded power structures, and semiotics as an analytical tool for decoding the visual language used in educational materials. These frameworks allow for a nuanced investigation of how visual culture is used to construct narratives of race, identity, and national belonging. Key components of the review include illustration style, page composition, subject focus, character portrayal, and the visual hierarchy of information.

To contextualize these findings, demographic data from Statistics Canada (2021) was consulted to identify disparities between the actual diversity of Canada's population and how this diversity is (or is not) reflected in educational tools. This methodology

seeks to reveal how misrepresentation is embedded in everyday learning resources and the implications it holds for young learners.

As a response to the patterns revealed in the analysis, this research manifests as a board game, a conceptual design project that reflects the lived experiences of navigating exclusionary systems. Drawing inspiration from familiar family and commercial board games, the project subverts the typically playful and lighthearted format to highlight the frustrating, cyclical, and unjust realities that BIPOC students may face in the education system.

In the game, misrepresentation is embedded into the gameplay, erasure shapes the terrain, and privilege accelerates progress. All cultural metaphors are drawn directly from the critical findings. The game is not intended as a teaching tool, but rather as an experiential provocation: it invites players to sit with discomfort, to reflect on systemic bias, and to critically examine how knowledge is legitimized or invalidated within formal education. The game positions design not only as a communication tool, but as a form of resistance and reclamation.

1.1 Position Statement

As a White, multidisciplinary designer-researcher, I recognize the privileges and limitations that come with my position, especially when engaging with subjects like cultural misrepresentation, erasure, and systemic bias. I approach this work with a deep sense of responsibility, humility, and ongoing self-reflection. While I have not personally experienced the misrepresentation being critiqued, I am committed to listening, learning, and amplifying the voices and perspectives of those who have.

This project is shaped by close relationships with individuals from Indigenous, Caribbean, and Filipino communities; within my family, chosen family, and broader circles. Their experiences, insights, and stories have profoundly influenced the direction and intention behind this work. I do not claim ownership over these narratives, but rather see my role as a facilitator and ally using design as a tool to challenge dominant systems and spark critical engagement.

Design, in this context, becomes a method for making visible the often-unseen mechanisms of exclusion within education. This work is not neutral; it is guided by a desire to support decolonial efforts and to confront the ways that design can either reinforce or resist harmful representations. It is both a critique and a call to imagine more just, inclusive possibilities.

This thesis is organized into the following sections:

- Section 1 introduces the research context, guiding questions, and significance of the work. It outlines the structure and provides an overview of the methodology and creative component.
- Section 2 reviews relevant literature on cultural representation in education, the role of visual culture in learning, and decolonial approaches to curriculum and design.
- Section 3 details the research methodology and content analysis process, including criteria for selection, coding framework, and limitations.

- Section 4 presents the findings from the content analysis, highlighting key themes such as Eurocentrism, tokenism, and cultural erasure.
- Section 5 discusses the development of the creative component, including concept development, visual decisions, and the relationship between design and critique.
- Section 6 concludes the thesis with a reflection on the research outcomes, the role of design in cultural critique, and potential directions for future research or application.

2.0 Literature Review

This literature review explores five key themes: Ontario's evolving and diverse population; cultural misrepresentation and Eurocentric perspectives in education; the impact of cultural misrepresentation on student development; the rethinking of pedagogical modes through play as a tool for inclusive, critical education; and the role of design theory in shaping cultural narratives. Each theme is examined to understand how cultural diversity is experienced and interpreted by elementary-aged students. Together, these areas establish the conceptual foundation for this thesis, highlighting the urgent need for more representative, responsive, and equitable approaches to early education, and asserting design's role in shaping more just and inclusive educational futures.

2.1 Ontario's Evolving Population

Multiculturalism in Canada seeks to construct a social mosaic where various traditions contribute to a collective Canadian identity (Panjabi, 2025). Canada's commitment to multiculturalism was formalized on October 8, 1971, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced it as an official government policy, making Canada the first country in the world to do so (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021).

Five decades later, Ontario is the most populous province in Canada, with its population rising from 14,772,726 in 2021 to 16,176,977 in 2025- a total increase of 9.51% in 4 years (Statistics Canada, 2025). This growth has not only made Ontario the largest province by population, but also one of the most culturally and racially diverse. The province is home to a wide range of communities, including the largest Indigenous

population in the country, as well as significant South Asian, Chinese, Black, and Filipino populations (Fig. 1-4; Statistics Canada, 2021). 2021 was the last time Statistics Canada conducted a geographical census.

Statistics (2)		2021 Counts													
Visible minority (15) ^d	Total - Visible minority ^{5, 6}	Total visible minority population ⁷	South Asian	Chinese	Black	Filipino	Arab	Latin American	Southeast Asian	West Asian	Korean	Japanese	Visible minority, n.i.e. ⁸	Multiple visible minorities	Not a visible minority ⁹
	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓
Canada (map)	36,328,475	9,639,200	2,571,400	1,715,775	1,547,865	957,355	694,020	580,240	390,340	360,490	218,135	98,895	172,885	331,800	26,689,275
Newfoundland and Labrador (map)	502,100	16,855	4,550	2,000	3,590	2,265	1,745	750	510	550	220	80	205	400	485,245
Prince Edward Island (map)	150,480	14,305	3,740	3,340	1,815	1,760	1,130	590	1,040	290	115	185	125	175	136,175
Nova Scotia (map)	955,860	93,430	21,650	11,595	28,220	6,615	10,605	2,910	2,405	1,875	2,840	985	970	2,750	862,425
New Brunswick (map)	759,195	44,205	8,630	4,090	12,155	5,190	5,055	2,455	1,895	915	1,650	250	550	1,370	714,985
Quebec (map)	8,308,480	1,340,730	127,995	115,235	422,405	44,880	280,080	172,920	70,455	43,990	10,360	5,310	12,145	34,955	6,967,745
Ontario (map)	14,031,755	4,817,360	1,515,295	820,245	768,740	363,655	284,215	249,190	167,845	212,190	99,425	31,420	124,120	181,030	9,214,395
Manitoba (map)	1,307,185	290,735	71,215	25,395	46,485	94,320	7,815	12,835	11,375	3,445	4,320	1,860	3,215	8,455	1,016,450
Saskatchewan (map)	1,103,200	159,360	44,725	18,005	22,575	43,760	5,575	5,685	8,540	2,830	1,845	830	1,275	3,720	943,840
Alberta (map)	4,177,715	1,161,420	297,650	164,230	177,945	216,710	69,510	66,515	54,005	25,080	24,370	13,555	12,105	39,745	3,016,300
British Columbia (map)	4,915,940	1,689,490	473,970	550,590	61,755	174,280	28,010	65,965	71,785	69,270	72,820	44,125	18,080	58,840	3,226,455
Yukon (map)	39,585	5,065	1,035	645	560	1,945	20	240	165	25	90	175	25	145	34,520
Northwest Territories (map)	40,380	4,920	775	335	1,060	1,665	225	125	305	35	75	105	45	170	35,460
Nunavut (map)	36,600	1,320	180	65	565	310	35	60	20	0	0	10	25	50	35,280

Figure 1. Visible minority: Canada, Provinces, and Territories (2021)

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, Ontario's Indigenous population is not only sizeable, but also younger on average than the non-Indigenous population. In 2021, there were 406,590 Indigenous people in Ontario, representing 2.9% of the population. Notably, Indigenous children aged 14 and under made up 22.3% of the total Indigenous population, compared to 15.8% among their non-Indigenous peers. This highlights the need for culturally responsive education, as a significant portion of Ontario's Indigenous population are children currently engaged with school systems.

Indigenous identity	Number	Percent (%)
Total - Population by Indigenous identity	14,031,755	100.0
Indigenous identity	406,590	2.9
Single Indigenous responses	389,955	2.8
First Nations (North American Indian)	251,025	1.8
First Nations (Registered or Treaty Indian)	151,555	1.1
First Nations (not a Registered or Treaty Indian)	99,475	0.7
Métis	134,615	1.0
Inuk (Inuit)	4,310	0.0
Multiple Indigenous responses	7,120	0.1
Indigenous responses not included elsewhere	9,515	0.1
Non-Indigenous identity	13,625,165	97.1

Figure 2. *Indigenous Population in Ontario (2021)*

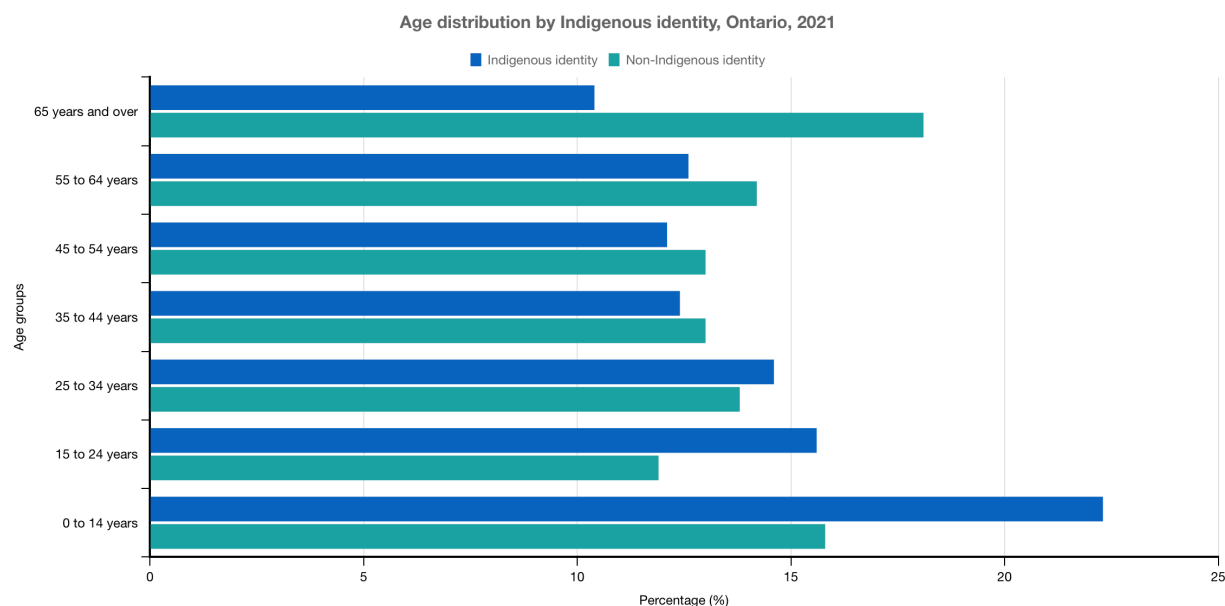


Figure 3. *Age Distribution by Indigenous Identity in Ontario (2021)*

Looking ahead, Ontario's population is projected to reach nearly 20 million by 2046, with much of this growth driven by immigration (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2022). While updated diversity data is not yet available, it is reasonable to infer that these

communities have continued to grow, further shaping the province's social and cultural landscape.

This demographic reality underscores the importance of ensuring that educational systems and materials meaningfully reflect the lived experiences and identities of Ontario's increasingly diverse student population. A clear understanding of the province's population makeup is essential for examining the extent to which the ideals of multiculturalism are genuinely upheld, or fall short, within its curriculum today. Given Ontario's rise in diverse population, diversity in curricular representation has not mirrored this demographic shift.

2.2 Misrepresentation and Eurocentric Perspectives in Education

The foundations of Ontario's education system are deeply intertwined with histories of racial segregation and the Indian Residential School System (Maynard, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Despite Canada's multicultural identity, its educational frameworks continue to perpetuate cultural imbalances by marginalizing nuanced, lived experiences of diverse communities. This persistent reliance on surface-level representations reinforces societal stereotypes and narrow Eurocentric perspectives (Rose, 2016).

Although residential schools have closed, their legacy endures through curricula that often portray Indigenous cultures in fragmented ways, emphasizing historical or ceremonial snapshots while neglecting contemporary presence, knowledge, and sovereignty. Similarly, other racialized identities, such as Black students in Canadian schools, are often faced with curricula that marginalize their histories and contributions,

with educational materials frequently omitting or tokenizing Black experiences, which contributes to a narrow and incomplete national narrative (James & Taylor, 2018). This lack of meaningful inclusion harms BIPOC students by erasing their realities and perpetuating a sense of exclusion within the classroom.

Compounding this issue, the teaching workforce remains predominantly White—90.8% of certified teachers identified as White or White alongside another identity (Ontario College of Teachers, 2023)—and research indicates that White educators tend to be less supportive of antiracist pedagogy and equity measures (Carr & Klassen, 1997). The underrepresentation of BIPOC teachers in leadership further entrenches the association of Whiteness with authority, shaping curriculum decisions that prioritize Eurocentric narratives and limit diverse cultural legitimacy. Educational leaders, especially in early years programs, are crucial in fostering inclusive cultures that support equitable practices (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021).

Moreover, a 2023 review by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and Turner Consulting Group highlights the inconsistent and often incomplete inclusion of Black Canadian histories in K-12 social studies, which frequently default to U.S.-centric examples at the expense of local narratives (Canadian Commission for UNESCO & Turner Consulting Group, 2023).

Taken together, these systemic and institutional factors sustain a curriculum that is far from equitable or representative. Moving forward requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that transcends tokenism to authentically incorporate a broad spectrum of cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and historical realities. Only through

such balanced representation can education foster belonging, critical consciousness, and shared understanding for all learners across Ontario.

2.3 Impact of Cultural Misrepresentation in Education

In *How Does Learning Happen?* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021), the foundations for learning present that every child is seen as a capable communicator and active learner whose sense of self is shaped through meaningful connections and experiences (Fig.4). This foundation outlines the goals to provide students with the best academic experience and outcome (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021). However, when curriculum content and classroom materials fall short in representing diverse identities, these foundational goals become compromised.

FOUNDATIONS	GOALS FOR CHILDREN	EXPECTATIONS FOR PROGRAMS
Belonging	Every child has a sense of belonging when he or she is connected to others and contributes to their world.	Early childhood programs cultivate authentic, caring relationships and connections to create a sense of belonging among and between children, adults, and the world around them.
Well-Being	Every child is developing a sense of self, health, and well-being.	Early childhood programs nurture children's healthy development and support their growing sense of self.
Engagement	Every child is an active and engaged learner who explores the world with body, mind, and senses.	Early childhood programs provide environments and experiences to engage children in active, creative, and meaningful exploration, play, and inquiry.
Expression	Every child is a capable communicator who expresses himself or herself in many ways.	Early childhood programs foster communication and expression in all forms.

Figure 4. Ontario Ministry of Education's Foundations for Learning (2021)

Geneva Gay, in *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching*, highlights research indicating that the academic achievement of diverse students improves when they are

taught through their own cultural and experiential filters (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000, 2002; Hollins, 1996; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994,1995).

In the process of developing a concept of self, all children navigate the world by searching, both consciously and unconsciously, for self-relevant information (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Wagner, 1997). They look out into the world for people who look like them and who have similar characteristics and experiences explains Oyserman & Fryberg (2006). Particularly for school-aged youth in their developing years, being in an environment that reflects and affirms one's identity is essential to the development of self-understanding and belonging. For youth in BIPOC communities, whose lived experiences are often absent or distorted in classroom materials, this affirmation is not just important, it is critical to resisting cultural erasure and fostering a secure sense of self.

While the absence of cultural diversity in classroom materials is most harmful to students from BIPOC communities, it also has significant implications for White students. When White identities, histories, and perspectives are consistently centered and portrayed as the default, White students are rarely encouraged to critically examine their own cultural positioning. This lack of exposure to diverse narratives can reinforce a limited worldview, perpetuate unconscious biases, and contribute to a false sense of cultural normativity or superiority. Without opportunities to engage with perspectives outside of their own, White students may struggle to develop empathy, intercultural understanding, and the critical thinking skills necessary to participate in an increasingly pluralistic society. In this way, a non-inclusive curriculum not only

marginalizes BIPOC students but also fails to adequately prepare White students for the realities of a diverse world.

When diversity and accurate representation are lacking, there are tangible consequences for student well-being and learning outcomes. Drawing on Clement's (2024) exploration of cultural bias, it becomes evident that curriculum inequities significantly influence a child's development, both within the classroom and in broader social contexts. These impacts include:

- Disparities in academic performance
- Limited access to global perspectives
- Marginalization of minority cultures
- Loss of cultural identity
- Negative effects on self-esteem and motivation

These consequences not only hinder academic success, but contribute to the feeling of alienation and reduced participation in society. When students cannot see themselves reflected in their learning materials, they may struggle to engage and realize their potential.

2.4 Rethinking Pedagogical Modes: The Role of Play in Inclusive, Critical Education

Pedagogical modes refer to the diverse methods in which educators deliver content, facilitate learning, and engage with young students. These modes vary widely—from didactic, teacher-centered instruction to inquiry-based, experiential, and culturally responsive approaches. Each mode offering different affordances for engagement and meaning-making.

In many formal educational settings, especially within the Canadian education system, learning is often structured through standardized, outcome-driven instruction. Volante (2007) explains the frameworks in which students are graded on in Canada, Although literacy is related to four domains – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – provincial and territorial assessment programs typically only measure the first two areas.

Although speaking and listening skills are more difficult to assess through a standardized approach, they are essential competencies for the current knowledge economy. This mode privileges rote memorization, linear progress, and assessment-based success metrics, frequently sidelining culturally diverse or affective forms of learning.

However, alternative pedagogical modes, such as play-based learning, offer critical opportunities to engage students beyond traditional cognitive measures. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2016), play is not just recreational; it is a vehicle for learning that lies at the heart of innovation and creativity. Play provides opportunities

for learning in moments when children are most receptive, offering space for identity exploration, emotional expression, and embodied understanding.

Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004) frames games as powerful tools for learning. They argue that games are structured systems that allow players to experiment, take risks, and make decisions with clear feedback—mirroring the process of learning itself. At the heart of their theory is “meaningful play,” where the connection between player actions and outcomes is both visible and impactful. This mirrors how learning happens: through trial, error, reflection, and adaptation. Games create emotionally engaging and often collaborative environments where players are motivated to persist through challenge, make sense of complex systems, and construct meaning from experience. These characteristics make games more than entertainment—they are dynamic learning spaces that model how we come to understand systems, power, and ourselves.

Despite often being dismissed as secondary or unserious, play is foundational to human development. From infancy, our earliest learning involved trial and error; matching shapes, identifying colours, attempting to fit square blocks into round holes. These repeated actions were not random; they were the earliest forms of inquiry, experimentation, and perseverance. Play, therefore, is not a break from learning, it is learning in its most instinctive form.

2.5 The Role of Design Theory in Shaping Cultural Narratives

Design theory refers to the conceptual frameworks, principles, and critical ideas that guide the practice of design. As defined by the University & College Design Association

(UCDA) (2020), it is a system of ideas that explains how and why design works, including visual principles such as alignment, structure, and repetition. It helps us understand not only what design looks like or how it functions, but also the deeper cultural meanings it produces. Design theory is interdisciplinary, drawing from aesthetics, philosophy, cultural studies, education, sociology, and psychology to devise appropriate responses to the contexts being addressed.

Beyond visual principles, design theory also encompasses a range of critical perspectives that allow us to interrogate the cultural, political, and social implications embedded within visual communication. These frameworks help uncover how design contributes to shaping narratives, identities, and systems of power. In this research, three key approaches: Semiotics and Visual Language; Critical Design Theory; and Decolonial Design Theory serve as the primary lenses through which visual educational materials are analyzed. Each offers a distinct but interconnected method for understanding how cultural meaning is constructed, reinforced, or challenged through design.

2.5.1 Semiotics and Visual Language

Semiotics, as described by Daniel Chandler (2022), is concerned with how meanings are made and how reality is represented (and indeed constructed) through signs, sign systems, and processes of signification. In design, semiotics helps us understand how visuals operate as a language, where elements like colour, imagery, composition, and symbolism communicate specific meanings often without using words. Semiotics help us understand how culture is continuously shaped and communicated through signs.

Language and imagery are two of the most powerful tools for shaping cultural meaning. Language conveys complex ideas and emotions, while imagery provides visual representations of these concepts. Together, they create powerful cultural narratives that shape our understanding of the world (Lee, 2025). When applied to educational contexts, particularly classroom materials, semiotics reveals how cultural identities are often constructed or reduced to familiar visual tropes, such as specific clothing, skin tones, or settings. These simplified representations carry assumptions that influence how students come to understand cultural difference.

2.5.2 Critical Design Theory

Critical design is a research through design methodology that foregrounds the ethics of design practice, reveals potentially hidden agendas and values, and explores alternative design values (Bardzell, 2013). As Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013) argue, critical design is less about creating marketable solutions and more about provoking reflection on the status quo. This approach aligns with design that is speculative, discursive, or disruptive in nature, it is designed to spark dialogue rather than acceptance. In the context of visual educational materials, this lens helps reveal how racial, cultural, and historical biases are embedded in visual narratives and pedagogical assumptions.

Applying critical design theory allows this research to interrogate not only what is visually represented in educational materials, but also what is omitted, obscured, or distorted. Grounded in the understanding that design practices can either reinforce or resist dominant systems of power (Costanza-Chock, 2020), this framework enables a

critical assessment of how BIPOC communities are misrepresented, tokenized, or excluded altogether. As Margolin (2002) argues, design is not merely a technical or aesthetic endeavour, but a cultural and political act that reflects and shapes societal values. These visual narratives do not operate in isolation, they contribute to the reproduction of systemic oppression within educational contexts.

2.5.3 Decolonial Design Theory

Decolonial design theory goes beyond critique by actively working to identify and dismantle the colonial foundations of design practice, history, and pedagogy. This framework addresses how Western design systems have historically prioritized eurocentric aesthetics, knowledge systems, and ways of being, often erasing or appropriating BIPOC communities in the process.

As Dori Tunstall (2020) emphasizes, decolonizing design involves re-centering Indigenous and non-Western worldviews in the design process and education. It asks not just how design can be more inclusive, but how the entire structure of design, its values, authorship, and visual language, must change to support justice and sovereignty. In the context of educational materials, decolonial theory provides a way to analyze and resist the settler-colonial narratives embedded in children's visual learning tools. It supports the interrogation of who is depicted as knowledgeable, which cultures are seen as valid, and how history is visually framed. This thesis adopts decolonizing design as both a critical lens and a methodological approach, aiming to resist erasure by surfacing alternate cultural perspectives and truths.

Together, decolonial design theory, critical design theory, and semiotics provide a comprehensive framework for examining how visual materials construct cultural meaning and uphold systems of power. These frameworks reveal that design is never neutral; it actively shapes narratives, either reinforcing dominant ideologies or creating space for resistance and reimagination. In the context of educational visuals, this intersection of theory is essential for exposing patterns of cultural exclusion, misrepresentation, and tokenization. This research leverages these theories to interrogate visual content in educational settings, aiming to illuminate and disrupt systemic biases while promoting authentic and diverse cultural representation.

2.6 Literature Review Summary

Together, these five themes describe a complex problem in which design is implicated through visual materials such as worksheets, textbooks, and digital learning resources that often perpetuate cultural misrepresentation or oversimplification. However, there are also opportunities for design to respond by reimagining these materials with intentionality centering authentic narratives, co-creating with communities, and prioritizing culturally sustaining visual strategies that reflect the diversity of student experiences. The province's rapidly diversifying population stands in stark contrast to the limited and often Eurocentric narratives presented in classroom materials, which continue to reflect the lingering impact of colonial structures. This misrepresentation not only harms the development and self-understanding of BIPOC students but also inhibits White students from engaging critically with diverse perspectives. The consequences of this are far-reaching — affecting academic outcomes, emotional well-

being, and societal participation. In response, this literature points to the need for pedagogical models that move beyond standardized instruction and toward more inclusive, experiential approaches. Play-based learning, in particular, emerges as a powerful mode of engagement that fosters identity exploration, emotional expression, and collective meaning-making. Building on these insights, the following sections of this thesis explore how game-based design can function as both a pedagogical and critical tool to expose, challenge, and reimagine representation in educational spaces.

3.0 Research Approach

This thesis adopts a mixed methods research approach, combining content analysis with research-creation. The research is both critical and generative, aiming not only to examine how cultural misrepresentation functions in visual educational resources, but also to respond to these findings through the creation of an interactive, conceptual board game.

The mixed methods approach allows for both analytical depth and creative expression. It includes a qualitative content analysis of existing educational materials and visual media aimed at children ages 9–12 in Canadian curricula, alongside the development of a creative artifact that visualizes and critiques these systemic issues through experiential design.

3.1 Content Analysis: Educational Visual Materials

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on a curated selection of visual resources commonly used in elementary-level Canadian classrooms. These materials included

South Asian	East Asian	Southeast Asian	Black	Latin American	West Asian/ MENA	Indigenous	White Passing
Indian	Chinese	Filipino	Black	Mexican	West Asian		European
Pakistani	Korean			Guatemala	Arab		Anglo-Canadian
Bangladeshi	Japanese			Costa Rican			
Sri Lanken				Colombian			

Table 1. Ontario's Visible Minority Classification Expanded into Regional Grouping (Statistics Canada, 2016)

workbooks, learning modules, and classroom aids such as posters and banners that are supported by educators and align with both the Ontario curriculum and the guidelines of Ontario's Ministry of Education. The analysis focused on the representation of culture, identity, and history—particularly the framing of BIPOC and Indigenous identities.

Key indicators guiding the analysis included:

- The presence of stereotypical imagery or language
- The absence or tokenistic inclusion of BIPOC groups
- The flattening or essentializing of cultural practices
- Misleading or historically inaccurate depictions

For the purposes of this analysis, the focus is placed on the subject area of social studies, as it most directly engages with representations of culture, identity, and historical narratives. In the early years of education, social studies functions as an umbrella subject, introducing foundational concepts in geography, history, and community.

Cultural identities in this study are categorized according to the Government of Ontario's visible minority classifications (Fig. 2), further expanded into regional groupings to specify cultures within each category. To support clearer visual assessment, these classifications are organized by geographic region in the

accompanying table (Table 1), with recognition that specific cultural identities are not always visually distinguishable.

To assess cultural classifications, this analysis draws on the visual identifiers outlined in the table below (Table 2). The physical characteristics used to inform these criteria are grounded in established research on human variation, as detailed by Wade and Takezawa (2025). Their work provides a scientific foundation for interpreting physical features within this study, ensuring that the classification process is informed by research-based understanding rather than subjective judgment. These identifiers also reflect common semiotic cues used in visual design, where elements like skin tone, attire, and facial features signal cultural identity in recognizable ways.

Identifier	Example
Physical Features	Skin tone, hair colours/textures, facial features
Cultural Clothing and Accessories	Religious symbols, jewelry, headwear
Language and Text	Names on name tags, labels
Contextual Cues	Flags, maps, architectural elements
Activities and Food	Participating in cultural holidays, eating cultural specific meals

Table 2. *Cultural Visual Identifiers (Wade & Takezawa, 2025)*

4.0 Visual Analysis and Overview of Findings

This section presents the key insights gathered from the content and visual analysis of the educational materials used within the Ontario Curriculum. While many materials appear to embrace cultural diversity on the surface, it lacks depth and is often reduced to generalized Eurocentric frameworks. What emerges is a pattern of superficial inclusion that fails to engage with the depth, diversity, and complexity of the cultures being portrayed. The results discussed below highlight recurring themes, visual tropes, and the broader implications of these portrayals in shaping children's understanding of identity and history.

To assess how these influences manifest visually, I conducted a detailed visual and content analysis of the Grades 4 to 6 workbooks, and online learning modules used within schools. Each page and module was methodically reviewed, with particular attention paid to illustrations featuring human figures. I catalogued all visible faces, categorizing them by perceived race and cultural markers, and analyzing how design principles such as colour, tone, contrast, line work, and stylization were used to imply racial and cultural identity. such as skin tone and traditional or stereotypical attire used to signify identity. The total number of pages, characters, and identified cultural indicators were documented and organized into a table to facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of representational patterns. These design choices serve as semiotic cues, relying on familiar visual tropes to signify cultural identity without offering deeper contextual understanding. By examining how these principles were deployed, it becomes clear that visual representation often leans on generalized or stereotypical

aesthetics, reinforcing reductive notions of difference rather than promoting authentic or multidimensional portrayals.

4.1 Phasing Out Print: Curriculum Modernization and *the Trillium List*

The *Trillium List* is the official catalogue of textbooks approved by the Ontario Ministry of Education for use in classrooms from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Updated annually, it provides a comprehensive record of educational resources authorized for use across the province. Each listing includes key details such as the applicable grade level, subject or course code, title, publisher, distributor contact information, copyright date, and any purchasing restrictions (e.g., expiry dates for classroom use). To be included on the Trillium List, textbooks must meet the standards outlined in the *Submission Procedures for Textbooks for the Trillium List* (Ministry of Education, 2023).

However, investigation into current classroom practices reveals that traditional print textbooks are increasingly rare. Rapid changes in educational standards and real-world knowledge mean that traditional textbooks often go out of date before, or soon after, they are published. In their place, teachers are turning to digital modules and online platforms that offer more flexible, multimedia-rich instructional approaches, while sourcing their own materials that connect to the curriculum at their discretion. These resources include videos, interactive activities, worksheets, and published articles tailored to specific units and student needs. People for Education (2014) found that typically, free online materials are chosen by teachers based on their professional judgment. While some principals referenced receiving support from the Board, or from colleagues for choosing online resources, there is not a well-established system for

vetting the quality of the free online resources that is widely used. To assemble good-quality materials using free online sources makes considerable demands of teachers' time and expertise, most are not trained to develop curriculum.

Recent Ontario data confirms the rapid decline in traditional textbooks: only 31% of elementary schools purchased print resources (versus 36% using free online alternatives), and principals report a systemic move away from print dependence (Chen, Gallagher-Mackay, & Kidder, 2014). Moreover, a Canadian-wide 2023 survey revealed that only 23% of teachers rely on printed textbooks, while 77% create their own materials and use digital versions. These trends reflect textbook obsolescence in the face of evolving curriculum standards and pedagogical demands, and they demonstrate why digital and teacher-curated resources have become central in today's classrooms.

This shift in instructional practice is also reflected in the evolving nature of the Trillium List, which has expanded beyond printed textbooks to include approved digital tools and online educational content. This transition signals a broader systemic move away from static, print-based instruction toward more dynamic, responsive, and accessible forms of curriculum delivery. This is an especially critical adaptation in Ontario's increasingly diverse and technologically integrated classrooms.

4.2 Popular Book Company's Complete Canadian Curriculum Workbooks

Utilizing Canadian curriculum workbooks published by the Popular Book Company as a primary source proved valuable to this research, as these widely distributed materials reflect the standardized educational content accessed by students across various

regions and school boards in Canada. The publisher claims that “all of our educational books and study materials for students are outlined, prepared, and published by an in-house team, including highly experienced teachers, editors, and designers.” This positions the workbooks as authoritative tools that play a formative role in shaping how children are introduced to concepts of culture, history, and social identity during critical stages of development.

Developed and marketed for students from kindergarten through Grade 12, the *Complete Canadian Curriculum* workbooks reflect a standardized approach to education across Ontario. The Grade 4 edition was originally copyrighted in 2017, Grade 5 in 2018, and Grade 6 in 2015; each has since undergone revisions and updates. However, despite these revisions, the content continues to reflect significant visual inequities.

Grade 4	447
Grade 5	366
Grade 6	333

Table 3. *Canadian Curriculum Workbooks: Total Number of Human Subjects in Visual/Textual Content (368 pages)*

	South Asian	East Asian	Southeast Asian	Black	Latin American	West Asian/MENA	Indigenous	White-Passing
Grade 4	0	21	14	6	0	8	2	396
Grade 5	2	15	1	5	4	1	18	320
Grade 6	2	20	0	12	1	2	1	295
Total	4	56	15	23	5	11	21	1011

Table 4. *Canadian Curriculum Workbooks: Cultural Identification*

A detailed analysis (Table 3, 4) revealed a striking imbalance: White-passing figures overwhelmingly dominate the illustrations, accounting for 88.59% of human depictions in Grade 4 compared to 11.41% BIPOC, 87.43% in Grade 5 versus 12.57% BIPOC, and 88.6% in Grade 6 versus 11.4% BIPOC as illustrated in the graph below (Fig. 5). This consistent overrepresentation positions Whiteness as the normative cultural identity, subtly reinforcing Eurocentric values and marginalizing other cultural narratives from an early age. These concerns have not only been identified through academic research, but have also sparked public criticism, including a *Toronto Sun* article that called out the workbooks for inaccurate and stereotypical depictions of Indigenous peoples (Toronto Sun, 2017).

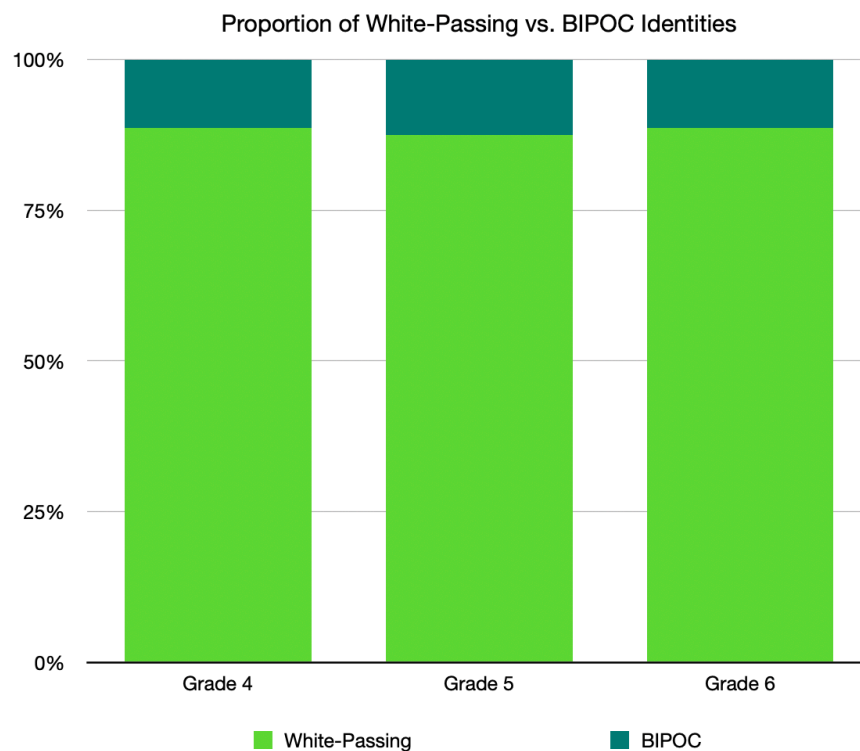


Figure 5. Canadian Curriculum Workbooks: Proportion of White-Passing vs. BIPOC Identities

4.3 *TVO Learn*: A Multimedia Tool

TVO Learn is a free, publicly accessible online education platform developed by TVOntario in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Education. It is advertised as an effective way to support student learning aligned with the Ontario curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12 (TVO Learn, 2025). The platform provides comprehensive curriculum-connected resources, including full unit breakdowns, guided lessons, learning activities, and assessment tools. For elementary social studies, in particular, *TVO Learn* mirrors the expectations outlined in the provincial curriculum, offering insight into how key concepts, such as culture, identity, and history, are framed for young learners.

Utilizing *TVO Learn* as a primary source in this research proved valuable, as it is both widely used by educators and families and directly supported by the provincial government. Described as offering “curriculum-connected resources developed by Ontario educators,” *TVO Learn* is positioned as a trusted and influential educational tool. Its alignment with Ministry guidelines and broad accessibility make it a meaningful resource for analyzing how cultural narratives are conveyed to students during critical stages of identity development.

For this assessment, I am reviewing grades 4-6's social studies, specifically at their learning activities that includes 3 sections:

- **Minds On:** Introduces the learning concepts to be explored in the Learning Activity.
- **Action:** Offers a focused activity to explore the content and discover key concepts.

- **Consolidation:** Provides students with an opportunity to deepen understanding and reflect on learning.

Below shows the two strands included in the learning activities, alongside the title of their subject matter:

Grade 4:

- **Heritage and Identity:** *Early Societies to 1500 CE*
- **People and Environments:** *Political and Physical Regions of Canada*

Grade 5:

- **Heritage and Identity:** *Interactions of Indigenous Peoples and Europeans prior to 1713, in what would eventually become Canada*
- **People and Environments:** *The Role of Government and Responsible Citizenship*

Grade 6:

- **Heritage and Identity:** *Communities in Canada, Past and Present*
- **People and Environments:** *Canada's Interactions with the Global Community*

Grade 4	109
Grade 5	102
Grade 6	116

Table 5. TVO Learn: Total Number of Human Subjects in Visual/Textual Content

	South Asian	East Asian	Southeast Asian	Black	Latin American	West Asian/MENA	Indigenous	White-Passing
Grade 4	17	6	3	15	10	7	6	45
Grade 5	9	3	2	20	7	2	4	55
Grade 6	14	7	4	22	6	5	10	48
Total	40	16	6	57	23	15	20	148

Table 6. TVO Learn: Cultural Identification

Although the TVO Learn platform presents a more progressive and balanced range of visual representation compared to traditional educational resources, there is still room for growth in terms of global cultural inclusion. An analysis of Grades 4 to 6 Social Studies modules reveals that in Grade 4, White-passing figures accounted for 41.28% of human depictions, while 58.72% represented BIPOC identities; in Grade 5, 53.92% were White-passing and 46.08% BIPOC; and in Grade 6, 41.38% were White-passing and 58.62% BIPOC, as illustrated in the graph below (Fig. 6). Visually, the materials showcase a diverse range of cultural identities, signalling a deliberate effort toward inclusivity and improved representation.

The content aligns closely with Canadian history, focusing heavily on European settler narratives and the structure of the Canadian government. Across Grades 4 to 6, there is minimal mention of other ancient societies, aside from brief references to Ancient Egypt, Medieval Japan, and Ancient China, often limited to isolated images and short captions. Notably, although Black identity is the most frequently represented cultural group within the modules, there is a lack of substantive content or discussion around

Black culture, history, or contributions, indicating a gap between visual inclusion and meaningful representation.

These figures reflect a promising shift in how diversity is visually represented, particularly in comparison to more traditional educational resources. However, despite this progress, the content remains primarily focused on Canadian cultural narratives. The limited inclusion of global perspectives means that students are rarely exposed to cultural experiences beyond a national context. This narrow scope may unintentionally reinforce a Canada-centric worldview, rather than encouraging a broader, more interconnected understanding of culture in an increasingly globalized society.

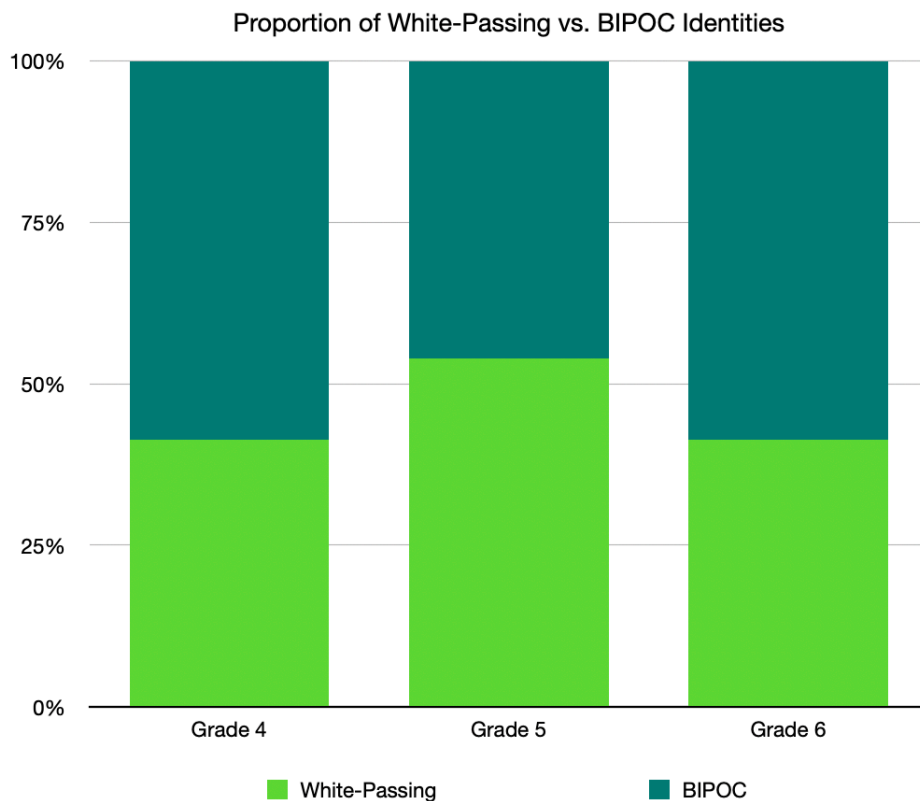


Figure 6. *TVO Learn: Proportion of White-Passing vs. BIPOC Identities*

4.4 Teachers Pay Teachers

Teachers Pay Teachers (TpT) is a widely used online marketplace where educators can buy, sell, and share original teaching resources, including lesson plans, worksheets, assessments, and multimedia materials (Teachers Pay Teachers, n.d.). Launched in 2006, TpT has grown into a global platform that empowers teachers to customize their instruction while supplementing curriculum gaps with peer-created content. In Ontario and other regions, many educators turn to TpT for culturally relevant or engaging resources not readily available through official channels, especially as classrooms diversify and digital materials become more prominent in instruction.

To assess the content on Teachers Pay Teachers, I refined my search to Grade 4–6 Social Studies materials and reviewed the top five best-selling products, including both paid and free resources. This approach provided a representative sample of the most widely circulated materials likely to be used by educators.

While some resources did include human figures, many conveyed cultural ideas through symbols, text, and decorative imagery. For instance, lessons on Indigenous peoples often relied on iconography such as tipis, feathers, or dreamcatchers- visuals that, while familiar, risk reinforcing stereotypical or homogenized representations. In contrast, units on Canadian history frequently lacked any visual cues of BIPOC presence altogether.

Across the reviewed materials, there was a noticeable absence of cultural nuance. Some products grouped diverse cultures under broad labels (e.g., “Asian traditions”) without differentiating between regional or historical contexts. Others made minimal use of visuals beyond decorative borders or clip art, reducing opportunities for meaningful visual engagement with cultural content.

These findings highlight how commercial classroom resources may unintentionally perpetuate cultural flattening or avoid cultural representation altogether, especially when visual design is driven more by marketability than educational depth. For example, one Grade 5 resource grouped cultural celebrations from several Asian countries into a single lesson, using generic clip art of lanterns and fans without any distinction between Chinese, Japanese, or South Asian traditions. This kind of oversimplification offers surface-level diversity while failing to engage with the complexity of each culture. As such, TpT materials often mirror broader issues seen in standardized curriculum (Stroud, 2021), offering visibility without complexity. This is a risk when teachers are responsible for finding their own content that their subjective opinion believes aligns with the Ontario Curriculum.

4.5 Finding Conclusion

Taken together, these findings underscore the disconnect between Ontario’s curricular goals and the lived realities of classroom materials and practices. While policies gesture toward equity and representation, the resources in use, particularly in digital platforms and early years instruction, often perpetuate narrow perspectives or overlook meaningful cultural inclusion altogether. This gap not only impacts the learning

experiences of BIPOC students, but limits all students' ability to engage critically with diverse identities and histories. Addressing these inconsistencies is not simply a matter of adding content, but rethinking how culture, identity, and experiential learning are embedded within the structures of education.

5.0 Creative Output

5.1 Rationale for Using a Game Format

A game as the central creative output of this thesis is both strategic and symbolic. Games are widely understood as tools for entertainment, learning, and interaction. They are accessible mediums that invite engagement. However, they also possess an under-explored potential for critique. By subverting the traditional expectations of play, this game disrupts the perceived neutrality and simplicity of games, using frustration, repetition, and imbalance as metaphors for systemic barriers in education. The game becomes a space of reflection, not escapism.

Using a board game format allows for a tangible representation of how systemic misrepresentation operates: through layered, often invisible rules, uneven pathways, and unequal opportunities to progress. This medium also enables players to embody the experience of navigating a biased system, where their advancement is not based on skill or merit, but on how they are positioned within structures that predate them.

Education plays a foundational role in shaping how young people understand the world and often reinforces broader systems of bias. This game acts as a speculative intervention, created to be accessible to both youth and older generations. By inviting players of all ages to engage with the mechanics of misrepresentation and exclusion, the piece draws attention to the ways systemic bias grows not only within educational institutions but also across society as a whole. While my research stems from schools, where individuals begin to form lasting opinions during the most influential years of

Grades 4 to 6, the game ultimately addresses cultural representation in the wider social context.

5.2 Connecting Theory to Practice: Informing the Design Intervention

The theoretical insights gathered from this research, particularly around cultural misrepresentation, visual semiotics, and curriculum studies, serve as a critical foundation for the proposed design intervention. Central to this connection is the understanding that visual design is not neutral; it plays a powerful role in shaping how culture is seen, understood, and valued in educational spaces. Drawing on scholars like Hall (1997), who emphasized the constructed nature of representation, and Rose (2016), who advocated for critical visual methodologies, this project positions design as both a site of harm and a potential space for repair.

The design intervention responds to key findings such as the overuse of stereotypical imagery, the erasure of racialized identities, and the prioritization of market-friendly aesthetics over cultural accuracy. These themes will directly inform the visual language, format, and narrative strategies of the final output. Rather than presenting a singular “solution,” the intervention aims to provoke reflection, discomfort, and critical awareness in viewers regarding the biases embedded in everyday classroom visuals.

By translating theoretical concerns into tangible design decisions, such as material choices, imagery, tone, and interactivity, the project demonstrates how design can critically engage with educational content. In doing so, it moves beyond decorative or didactic functions and enters the realm of advocacy, using visual storytelling to

challenge normative assumptions and make space for multiple cultural realities within the learning environment.

5.3 Design Goals and Conceptual Framing

The primary goal of the game is not to educate in a didactic sense, but to create a critical experience. It asks players to engage with the complexities of cultural erasure, stereotyping, and privilege in a system that is often presented as fair or merit-based. Drawing from decolonial design theory and critical pedagogy, the game is meant to provoke, frustrate, and reveal. It visualizes the misrepresentation of culture as a structural condition rather than an isolated flaw.

5.4 Key framing questions included:

- How can game mechanics reflect the unequal distribution of cultural representation?
- What does it mean to “play” through a system that was never designed to represent you?
- How can design reinforce discomfort?

5.5 Game Mechanics That Reflect Systemic Barriers

Every mechanism in the game has been intentionally designed to mirror specific forms of bias, misrepresentation, or structural inequality:

Path of Privilege: A fast-track route that allows certain players to bypass obstacles without penalty. This symbolizes how proximity to Whiteness, economic privilege, or dominant narratives can accelerate one's progress in education systems, while others are left behind.

Cultural Quicksand: A space that traps players unless they roll under a certain number—or sacrifice points representing hard-earned knowledge. This mechanic reflects how difficult it is to escape the effects of cultural erasure or tokenism once caught within it.

Shortcut of Stereotypes: A tempting advancement that comes with a cost—players move forward, but must draw a Misrepresentation Card. This mechanic explores how playing into stereotypes may offer short-term rewards but reinforces long-term harm.

Checkpoints like Bias Boulevard, Token Town, and Land of Assumptions: These zones serve as symbolic resting points—named spaces that embody different forms of bias and othering, where players momentarily pause but are reminded of their constructed roles within the system.

Misrepresentation Cards: reflect real-world moments of cultural flattening, erasure, or distortion—textbook omissions, stereotypical depictions, and token diversity moments. These cards add “misconception points,” which counteract players' progress.

Reclaim and Resist Cards: offer glimpses of resistance, solidarity, or moments of authentic representation. These cards add “cultural knowledge points,” a mechanic meant to symbolize regained dignity, clarity, and identity.

Player identity is intentionally abstracted, emphasizing how players are not meant to play as themselves, but instead to navigate a system that categorizes and limits them regardless of their intent or identity.

5.6 Development Process

The game was developed through an iterative process that included sketching, system mapping, and visual experimentation. Early drafts explored various board configurations—linear, cyclical, and grid-based—to determine how movement could best reflect systemic entrapment and slow progress. The final form balances frustration with moments of agency, encouraging players to continue while questioning the fairness of the system itself.

Visual elements—such as the board design, card layouts, and symbolic illustrations—were developed in tandem with the game mechanics. The aesthetic avoids overtly educational or school-themed visuals to resist replicating the very systems it critiques. Instead, it draws inspiration from metaphorical landscapes, fragmented visual language, and symbolic roadmaps to create a visually immersive world that feels slightly surreal, yet eerily familiar.

6.0 Discussion and Ethical Considerations

This project explores themes of cultural misrepresentation, identity, and systemic inequities, necessitating thoughtful ethical considerations throughout both the research process and the development phase. At the heart of the research is a commitment to respectful representation. Instead of portraying specific cultural groups or identities directly, the game employs metaphor and abstraction to avoid oversimplifying lived experiences into reductive mechanics or stereotypes. This approach seeks to illuminate systemic challenges while preventing the trivialization of marginalized narratives.

Emotional safety was also a key consideration. The game is intentionally designed to evoke feelings of frustration, confusion, and exclusion- emotions that mirror real-world experiences of misrepresentation. To mitigate potential harm, reflective prompts are integrated to encourage post-game dialogue, fostering thoughtful engagement and providing space for players to process discomfort in a constructive manner.

Finally, the project conscientiously avoids cultural appropriation by refraining from using sacred imagery, culturally-specific language, or symbolic references that could be perceived as exploitative. Instead, it critiques systems of misrepresentation without visually replicating them, ensuring sensitivity and respect toward the cultures involved.

7.0 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how cultural misrepresentation operates within educational visual materials in Ontario, particularly those targeting students aged 9–12. Through a critical content analysis of textbooks and workbooks aligned with the Ontario curriculum, the research revealed a consistent pattern: while the appearance of diversity is sometimes present, the depth, accuracy, and authenticity of cultural representation are often lacking. Whiteness is visually positioned as the default, while BIPOC and Indigenous cultures are either oversimplified, tokenized, or erased altogether.

By combining critical research with research-creation, this project responds to these findings not just through analysis, but through design. The resulting board game acts as a metaphorical intervention—an experiential critique of the systemic inequities embedded within educational systems. Using gameplay mechanics that mirror real-world dynamics of privilege, exclusion, and resistance, the project invites players to confront the discomfort of navigating a biased system. In doing so, it transforms play into a mode of critical inquiry.

The implications of this work span multiple domains. For education, it underscores the urgent need to rethink how visual learning materials are produced, reviewed, and implemented, especially when shaping children’s understanding of culture and identity. For design, it expands the role of visual communication beyond aesthetics or function, positioning it as a powerful tool for critique, reflection, and social change. And for broader cultural discourse, it adds to the growing body of work calling for more inclusive, accurate, and decolonial approaches to knowledge production.

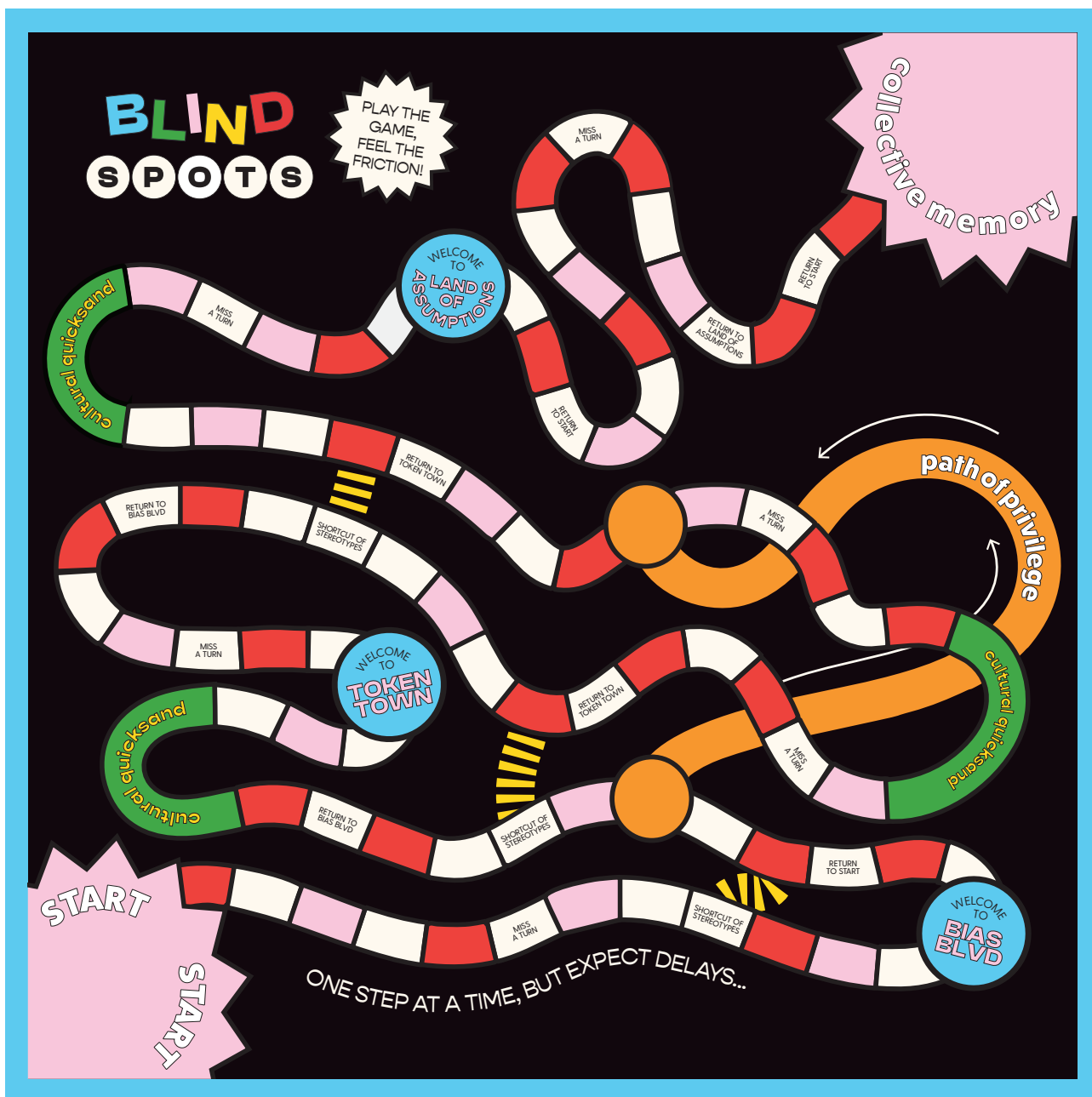
While the game is not intended as a solution or instructional tool, it serves as a starting point for critical dialogue. It has potential applications in teacher training, public exhibitions, and educational workshops—spaces where reflection, discomfort, and conversation are encouraged. Future iterations could involve co-design with students and educators, or digital adaptations that expand accessibility and reach.

Ultimately, this project demonstrates that misrepresentation is not a passive oversight—it is a structural issue with tangible consequences. But it also shows that through intentional, reflexive, and justice-oriented design, it is possible to challenge dominant narratives and imagine new ones. Design, in this context, becomes more than a tool—it becomes a form of resistance.

Game Documentation

BLIND SPOTS

Blind Spots Logo



Blind Spots Game Board



Game Setup



Blind Spots Game Board Box, Front and Back

On This Land

This game was created on land that is the traditional territory of many Nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples.

This land, governed by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit, encompasses Toronto, where the creator lives, learns, and works. It continues to be home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

As a project that engages with the misrepresentation and erasure of culture, *Blind Spots* acknowledges its place within colonial structures. This statement is a small but necessary gesture toward resisting those systems, through education, critical design, and ongoing reflection.



Land Acknowledgement Card, Found in Box

© Victoria E. Collins 2025. All rights reserved.
Blind Spots is an original game created for educational and artistic purposes.
This game is intended for non-commercial use only. No part of the game,
including its content or artwork, or mechanics, may be reproduced, distributed,
or adapted without written permission.
Designed to spark dialogue around systemic bias and cultural misrepresentation.
For permissions, inquiries, or educational use: eloventhhousecreative@gmail.com

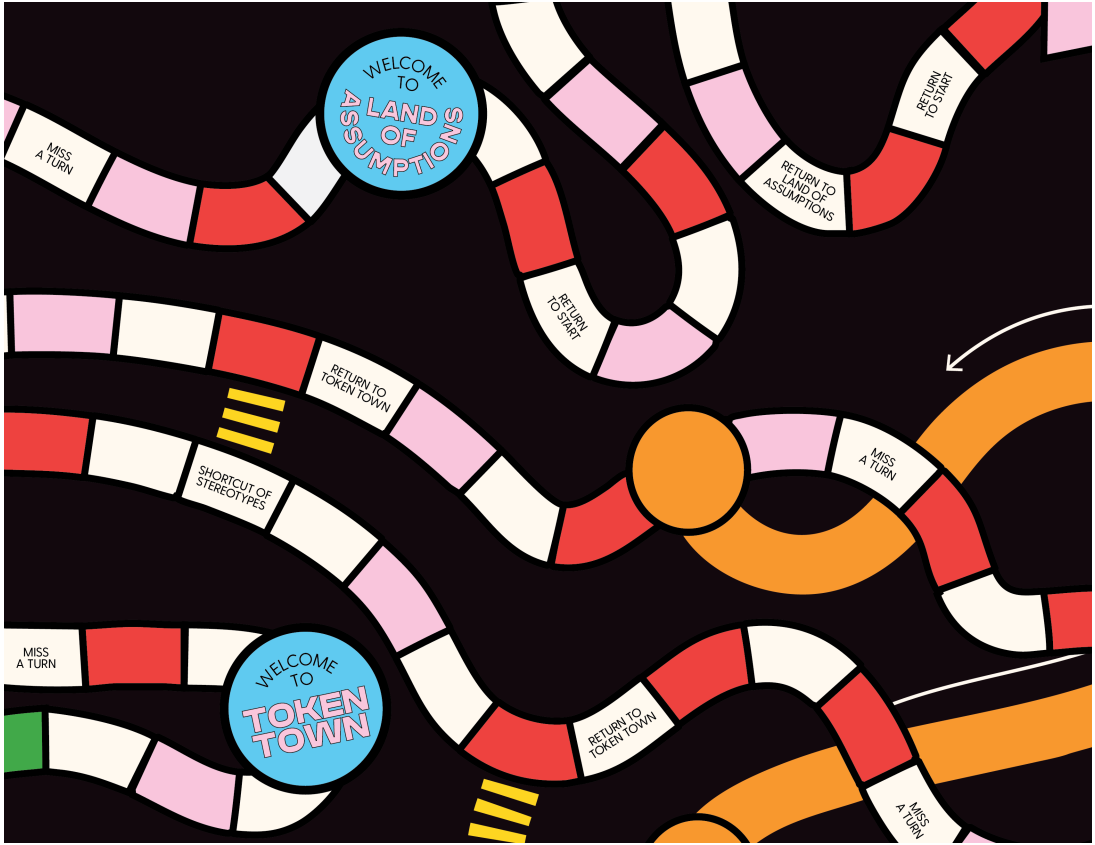
2-4 players
(ages 9+)

BLIND SPOTS

See the system, feel the friction

A game about navigating systems,
resisting simplification,
and reclaiming truth

game guide



pieces • set up



Whats Inside:

- Game Board
- 4 Player Tokens
- 1 Die
- Cultural Knowledge Point Tokens
- Misconception Point Tokens
- Misrepresentation Card Deck
- Reclaim & Resist Card Deck

4

pieces • set up

Game Set Up

In this game, you'll move through challenges that represent real obstacles in the system. Everyone starts the same, but the path won't be fair or easy. Draw cards, follow instructions, and see how far you can get. This game shows how progress can be slow and full of surprises. Get ready to think about what your journey means.

- 1 Each player chooses a player token and places it at Start
- 2 Each player gets:
3 Cultural Knowledge points
0 Misconception point
- 3 Shuffle the Misrepresentation and Reclaim & Resist cards into two separate decks.
- 4 Decide who goes first (e.g., highest dice roll)
- 5 Start the game!

5

how to play

- 1 **Roll the die**
On your turn, roll a die to determine how many spaces to move.
- 2 **Move your player**
Advance your player token along the board according to the number you rolled.
- 3 **Follow the space instructions**
Where you land may prompt one of the following:
 - Draw a Misrepresentation or Reclaim & Resist card
 - Gain or lose Cultural Knowledge or Misconception points
 - Move forward or backward
 - Enter or return to a special zone or path
- 4 **Resolve any card effects**
If you draw a card, read it aloud and follow its instructions:
 - Misrepresentation Cards apply negative effects (e.g., move backward, gain Misconception points).
 - Reclaim & Resist Cards offer empowering actions (e.g., trade Misconception points for Cultural Knowledge).
- 5 **Deal with special spaces**
Refer to page 4 for space instructions
- 6 **End your turn**
Pass the die to the next player and continue clockwise.

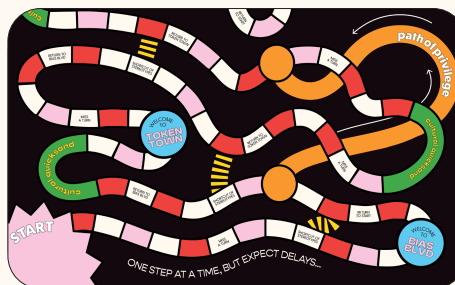
6

how to win

Objective

Travel through a system designed to misrepresent. Your goal is to collect as many Cultural Knowledge points as possible while avoiding or reducing Misconception points.

At the end of the game, the player with the highest total wins.



Winning the Game

Once a player reaches the final space, all players finish that round. To tally your final points:

$$\text{Cultural Knowledge Points} - \text{Misconception Points} = \text{Final Score}$$

The player with the highest total wins.

In the event of a tie, the winner is the player who reached the final space first, symbolizing the quickest progress through the system.

7

game spaces

Spaces

**Misrepresentation Spaces**

Reflect societal biases, erasure, and stereotyping. You must pick up a misrepresentation card, and follow the negative effects.

**Reclaim & Resist Spaces**

Empowering acts of truth-telling and resistance. You must pick up a Reclaim and Resist card, and follow the positive effects.

**Blank Spaces**

These spaces may have no consequences, consider it a resting point. You may come across a skip a turn, or return to start on one of these spaces.

**Collective Memory**

A place of recognition and resilience. No obstacles here, pause to honor what you've learned and prepare to carry this truth forward.

8

game spaces

Special Paths

**Path of Privilege**

A shortcut that allows you to bypass key checkpoints and major obstacles, helping you advance more quickly through the challenges on the board.

**Cultural Quicksand**

You're stuck in this spot until you Roll under 4 on your turn, or sacrifice 1 Cultural Knowledge point to escape immediately.

**Shortcut of Stereotypes**

Landing here offers a jump ahead on the board, but you must draw a Misrepresentation Card. You gain progress but accumulate harm.

Checkpoint Zones

(No penalties on entry)

These are non-punishing areas on the board, but some spaces may send players back to these zones. Returning to a zone is a loss of progress.



9

symbolism and systems

Cards

Misrepresentation Card

A reflection of institutional harm. Symbolizes unexpected encounters with bias, erasure, and distortion – from education to media to everyday interactions. These cards disrupt progress and simulate the emotional toll of being misrepresented.

Reclaim & Resist Card

A moment of empowerment. Symbolizes acts of truth-telling, resistance, and cultural reclamation. These cards reflect real-life efforts to interrupt systems of harm and rewrite the narrative with accuracy and agency.

Collective Memory

This is more than a finish line, it's a point of recognition.

As you move through the game, you've encountered distortions, obstacles, and moments of clarity. You've collected Cultural Knowledge and learned how systems shape what is seen, heard, and believed.

Collective Memory represents the stories that endure – those passed through communities, reclaimed from erasure, and protected from simplification.

For those whose histories have been misrepresented, this space honours that resilience. For those newly learning, it's an invitation: to listen, remember, and carry forward what's been uncovered.

Truth is not just an individual discovery, it's a shared responsibility. At this final space, you arrive not at an ending, but at a deeper awareness, one that asks you to move through the world with more understanding, more care, and more truth.

10

symbolism and systems

Pathways

Path of Privilege

A fast track paved with invisible advantages. Symbolizes how certain individuals benefit from systemic bias, advancing quickly with little resistance, but gaining little depth or awareness along the way.

Shortcut of Stereotypes

A tempting leap forward that costs you. Symbolizes how stereotypes may offer quick recognition or access but often come with long-term distortion or harm.

Cultural Quicksand

The harder you try, the more you sink. Symbolizes how systemic misrepresentation can trap individuals in cycles of misunderstanding, where correcting the narrative is exhausting and progress feels impossible.

Checkpoint Zones

Land of Assumptions

Where your identity is decided before you speak. Symbolizes how dominant systems rely on stereotypes, making people feel unseen and inaccurately defined based on race, class, gender, or culture.

Token Town

A space for decorative diversity. Represents surface-level inclusion where visibility doesn't equal voice, and representation serves optics rather than real systemic change.

Bias Boulevard

A smooth path for some, a struggle for others. Symbolizes implicit and structural biases that shape how people experience the same systems differently, often invisibly.

11

reflection and discussion | optional**Discussion**

This section offers an opportunity to extend the experience of Blind Spots beyond gameplay. While not required to play, engaging in discussion can deepen understanding of the systemic issues the game reflects. The prompts are designed to spark critical conversations about power, misrepresentation, and access, encouraging players to connect game mechanics to real-world dynamics. Whether used in group settings, classrooms, or personal reflection, this step invites players to consider the blind spots that exist within systems, and within ourselves.

How did the game's structure affect your sense of control or progress?

How did the game mirror your own experience or understanding of cultural narratives?

What blind spots did this game reveal in your thinking?

How can awareness of these blind spots influence the way we navigate everyday situations and conversations?

What changes to this game experience would need to be made for everyone to have a fair chance?

If the game represents a system, what do you think it's saying about how that system works in real life?

Did success in the game feel like it came from skill and effort, or more from luck and circumstance?

If you played again, would you expect the outcome to be different? Why or why not?

12

reflection and discussion | optional**Emotional Impact**

This game is intentionally designed to create moments of frustration, exclusion, and imbalance. If you felt powerless or overlooked during gameplay, that emotional response is part of the experience. These feelings are meant to reflect the real-world barriers and systemic inequities that many individuals face, particularly within education systems. Rather than offering a perfectly fair or "winnable" game, this experience aims to highlight how uneven and discouraging systems can be for those who are misrepresented or marginalized.

Ongoing Reflection

This game experience serves as a prompt to think critically about whose stories are centered, whose identities are erased, and how bias operates through seemingly neutral structures. After playing, take a moment to consider:

What steps can you take to challenge bias in your own spaces?

How can you speak up against misrepresentation when you see it?

In what ways can you support the inclusion of historically excluded voices, whether in education, media, design, or daily life?

13

glossary**Cultural Knowledge**

The understanding and awareness of different cultures, histories, and identities—especially those that are often excluded or misrepresented. In this game, gaining Cultural Knowledge means recognizing truth and complexity.

Misrepresentation

When a person, culture, or group is shown in a false, incomplete, or harmful way—through media, education, or stereotypes. Misrepresentation distorts reality and contributes to misunderstanding.

Systemic Bias

Unfair rules or patterns built into systems—like schools, media, or governments—that benefit some groups while disadvantaging others. These aren't always obvious, but they affect outcomes for people every day.

Tokenism

Including a person or group in a shallow way just to look diverse or inclusive—without real effort to listen, understand, or make change. Tokenism is about appearance, not impact.

Stereotype

A fixed idea about a group of people that's often oversimplified, inaccurate, or harmful. Stereotypes ignore individuality and often come from bias or misinformation.

Privilege

Unseen advantages some people have just because of parts of their identity—like race, gender, or income. Privilege doesn't mean life is easy, but it often means facing fewer barriers.

Erasure

The act of ignoring, excluding, or deleting the histories and contributions of certain groups. Erasure can happen in books, classrooms, maps, or media—and it makes people feel invisible.

14

glossary**Reclamation**

Taking back something that was lost, erased, or misused—like a story, name, language, or identity. Reclaiming helps people regain power and truth.

Resistance

Standing up against unfair systems, ideas, or representations. Resistance can look like speaking out, creating art, educating others, or simply surviving in a world that misrepresents you.

15

Break the Silence

Skip a turn to hold space.

On next turn, gain 3 Cultural Knowledge points and 1 Reclaim card

Healed, Not Erased

You mend a generational wound.

Visit the Path of Privilege

Cultural Festival

You attend a celebration of resistance and truth.

Gain 2 Cultural Knowledge points

Voices Heard

The campaign gains traction, officials issue a public apology.

Move ahead 2 spaces

Roots Reconnected

You reconnect with what was hidden.

Gain 3 Cultural Knowledge points

Collective Power

You and your community push back against erasure.

Everyone move up 2 spaces, ignore any penalties

Name Restored

They misnamed you. You reclaim your full name with pride.

Move ahead to the next Checkpoint

Unexpected Ally

Negate a Misrepresentation card—but only once.

Discard after use

Community Mural Painted

Art reclaims space and sparks conversation.

Gain 1 Cultural Knowledge Point

Correct the Record

You challenge a teacher's narrative and provide evidence.

Skip next Misrepresentation card

Story Circle

You share your stories that heal and connect.

Trade a Misconception Point for a Cultural Knowledge Point

Community Archive

You join a project documenting real stories.

Move forward 2 spaces, ignore any consequences

You Make Space

You step aside so someone else can step forward.

Give a bonus turn to another player

Land Teachings

You attend a community workshop on Indigenous land stewardship.

Roll again

Cultural Potluck

A table of traditions. You contribute and learn through food, care, and connection.

Move forward 2 spaces, ignore any consequences

Language Revived

You learn your ancestral language and share it with others.

Skip next Misrepresentation card

Echoes of Action

One voice sparks a wave, shared stories ignite shared steps.

Everyone move forward 1 space, ignore any consequences

Open Ears

You enter the space to learn, not to respond. The act of listening becomes an act of care.

Skip next Misrepresentation card

Truth Over Tokenism

You push for meaningful representation, not surface-level change

Gain 1 Cultural Knowledge point

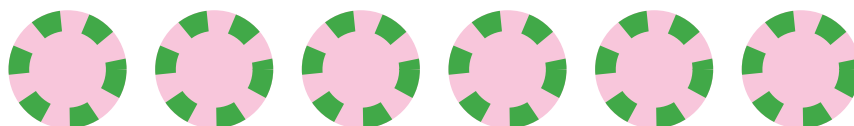
Heirloom Threads

You wear a piece of clothing that embraces your culture.

roll again

**RECLAIM
+ RESIST**

Reclaim and Resist Cards, Front and Back



Cultural Knowledge Points

Textbook Erasure

Your culture's history is skipped in the curriculum.

Skip a turn

Lost in Translation

Your culture is simplified into a cliché.

Skip a turn

Language Erasure

Your native tongue is labeled irrelevant or banned.

Move back 2 spaces

Cultural Commodity

Your traditions are sold and packaged, losing meaning.

Gain 1 Misconception point

Cultural Reduction

society simplifies your culture into costumes.

Move back 2 spaces,
gain 1 misconception point

Disconnected Generations

Generations lose touch with their cultural roots and identity.

Return to start

Hidden Histories

Important events are kept secret or erased from records.

Everyone return to start

Misplaced Blame

Your culture is unfairly blamed for societal problems.

Return to start

Media Mishap

A viral show misrepresents your traditions.

Gain 2 Misconception points

Name Erasure

Your name is too hard to pronounce, the workplace calls you something else

Move back to the previous Checkpoint

One Way Ticket

Advance? Not quite.

Visit the last checkpoint for 2 turns

Visual Erasure

You're never represented in art, advertising, or textbooks.

Gain 2 Misconception Points

Systemic Gaslighting

You're told your experience isn't real.

Trade ALL Cultural Knowledge points for 1 Misconception point

Political Erasure

Your community's demands are ignored in policy and law.

Give up 1 Cultural Knowledge Point

Fabricated Fact

A Stereotype is Taught as a Fact.

Move back 5 spaces

It Was A Joke

A harmful stereotype is brushed off as humour.

Move back 5 spaces

Silenced Traditions

You're told your experience isn't real.

Trade ALL Cultural Knowledge points for 1 Misconception point

Misused Symbols

Your cultural symbols are appropriated without meaning.

Gain 2 Misconception points

Cultural Mislabelling

You're incorrectly grouped or named.

Visit the last checkpoint for 2 turns

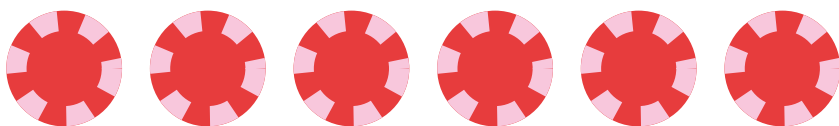
Decorative Diversity

Your culture is displayed only for aesthetics.

Move 3 spaces back

MISREPRESENTATION

Misrepresentation Cards, Front and Back



Misconception Points

Glossary

Term	Definition
Misrepresentation	To give a false or misleading representation of usually with an intent to deceive or be unfair
Eurocentric	centered on Europe or the Europeans especially: reflecting a tendency to interpret the world in terms of European or Anglo-American values and experiences
Semiotics	a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics
Pedagogy	the art, science, or profession of teaching
Erasure	an act or instance of erasing
Tokenism	the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort (as to desegregate)
Marginalized	to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group

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