CONTINUED PRESENCE: THE ART AND ACTIVISM OF CHRISTI BELCOURT AND CHELSEA KAIAH

by

EMILY BERKES

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Committee Members:

Annette de Stecher, Ph.D.

Hope Saska, Ph. D.

cam nelson, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Berkes, Emily (MA, Art History, University of Colorado, Boulder Department of Art and Art History)

Continued Presence: The Art and Activism of Christi Belcourt and Chelsea Kaiah

Thesis directed by Professor Annette de Stecher

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues for the need for decolonized research in her groundbreaking book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2021). As Smith details, decolonized research is the decentering of colonial thinking and the recentering of Indigenous voices and perspective. In this thesis, I consider *decolonization*, as defined by Smith, in relation to contemporary Indigenous art and to a legacy of colonial practices in the U.S. and Canada. These colonial practices include the residential school system, the governmental injustices concerning Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples (MMIWG2S), and the violation of treaties between Indigenous nation leaders and settler leaders to exploit the resources of the land.[1]

Drawing from Smith's third edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, I explore how two contemporary Indigenous women artists, Christi Belcourt (Métis) and Chelsea Kaiah (Ute and Apache/Irish settler), like many contemporary artists, work with ancestral art forms, ancestral knowledge, and activism today to heal themselves, their communities, and future generations from colonial trauma. I position this as an assertion of continued Indigenous presence. I connect each artist to an Indigenous project, as articulated by Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies,* to explain the different forms of activism and assertion of Indigenous presence. I do this to ground

[1] Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two- Spirit Peoples (MMIWG2S) refers to the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples in the U.S. and Canada. This movement raises awareness for the disproportionate attack and femicide of Indigenous women and girls.

this thesis in Smith's text, applying her suggested research approaches, to demonstrate different forms of Indigenous activism and action.

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INTRODUCTION

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's statement in her groundbreaking book, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2021), that *research* is a dirty word for Indigenous communities as it silences and creates distrust of the West through the "Othering" of Indigenous peoples, is often most-remembered when reading her text.[2] Smith asserts that Western scholars, both historically and in the present, tend to take and claim ownership of Indigenous knowledge through research; this research creates a greater separation between the West and the Non-West.[3]

In this thesis, I consider decolonization, as defined by Smith, in relation to contemporary Indigenous art and to a legacy of colonial practices in the U.S. and Canada. These colonial practices include the residential school system, the governmental injustices concerning Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples (MMIWG2S), and the taking of Indigenous land by Western colonial practices.[4] Drawing from Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, I will explore how two contemporary Indigenous artists, Christi Belcourt (Métis) and Chelsea Kaiah (Ute and Apache/Irish settler), work with ancestral art forms, knowledge, and stories to heal themselves, their communities, and future generations from colonial trauma. Both Belcourt and Kaiah demonstrate an activist intent and impact outside of their work, incorporating their respective forms of activism in their art practice. With these two artists' work, I take a

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[2] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2021), 1.
*Throughout this project, I use Indigenous peoples as opposed to Indigenous people; this is to maintain consistency with Smith's text and demonstrate solidarity, as Smith argues that the use of 's' at the end of *peoples* represents differences among Indigenous communities and Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. See: Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 7.

[3] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 1-2.

[4] Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples (MMIWG2S) refers to the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples in the U.S. and Canada. This movement raises awareness for the disproportionate attack and femicide of Indigenous women and girls.

decolonizing approach in my research and learning about Indigenous peoples, their communities, and continued cultural practices.

In recent decades, as Belcourt and Kaiah demonstrate, Indigenous artists have used their practice to connect to their community's history as well as assert their presence despite settler-colonialism's attempted erasure through assimilation. Many Indigenous artists draw from creative techniques passed down from their ancestors and close relatives. These art forms include beading, porcupine quill work, hide tanning, and varied forms of painting. As I will discuss, the continuity of these ancestral art forms shows Indigenous makers and artists' rejection of the colonial assimilation of Indigenous peoples.

Would Smith support my thesis project and its approach? As Smith states herself, she is not necessarily anti-research; she is anti- negative effects of research, which includes mass marginalization and Othering, which attempts to erase the continued presence of Indigenous peoples around the world.[5] Through this project, drawing from Smith's directive to center Indigenous voices and agency, I seek to create a positive impact by demonstrating that research does not need to be extractive to be informative.

Theoretical Framework

I situate my theoretical framework at the intersection of feminist and decolonial theories. According to Chippewa and Lebanese Professor of Intercultural studies Andrea Riley Mukavetz, decolonial theory, which decenters colonial ways of thinking, is informed by the daily lives and practices of Indigenous peoples.[6] These daily practices include the continued resistance of

[5] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 8.

[6] Andrea Riley Mukavetz, "Decolonial Theory and Methodology," *Composition Studies* 46, no. 1 (2018): 126.

colonial assimilation, including self-determination, Indigenous sovereignty, and healing from traumas of colonialism and imperialism.[7] Similar to Smith, Mukavetz argues that using decolonial theory is a way to express love and attentiveness to both ancestors and relatives, with the goal of creating a safe space for generations of the present and future.[8] I apply Mukavetz analysis of decolonization in relation to sustainability in Chapter 3, asserting that both concepts are crucial for future generations of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Dr. Kim Tallbear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) argues in her book *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (2013) that decolonizing research about Indigenous peoples, even if it does not involve the use of Indigenous knowledges and/or methods, can reframe the way Indigenous peoples are seen in histories to promote the flourishing of Indigenous peoples.[9] Tallbear closely relates decolonization and feminism, bringing forth that both intellectual worlds and thoughts hold science responsible to the peoples they conduct their research on.[10] In her book, Tallbear highlights the use of "speaking with, not for" when conducting research.[11] The methods I use in my research, including drawing from the direct words of Belcourt and personal conversations with Kaiah, support this approach.

In her pivotal essay, *Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History* (2009), Tanana Athabascan Professor of American Indian Studies Dian Million advocates for understanding the influence of Indigenous women's first-hand narratives on predominantly

[7] Mukavetz, "Decolonial Theory and Methodology," 126.

[8] Mukavetz, "Decolonial Theory and Methodology," 126.

[9] Kim TallBear, "An Indigenous, Feminist Approach to DNA Politics," in *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 21.

[10] TallBear, "An Indigenous, Feminist Approach to DNA Politics," 22.

[11] TallBear, "An Indigenous, Feminist Approach to DNA Politics," 22.

white-male scholarship.[12] Million argues that narratives from Indigenous women explore a different side of colonialism, exploring its facets of gender, race, and sex.[13] Like Smith, Million asserts that these narratives can be dangerous, as it allows Indigenous women to stand and speak for themselves despite the continued systems of oppression as a result of colonialism.[14] I bring forth the narratives of Indigenous women throughout this project to demonstrate how their side of the story is often forgotten, asserting that the histories of Indigenous peoples, specifically Indigenous women, are a crucial first step towards decolonized research. With these scholars in mind, it is important to note that Smith argues that decolonizing practices are not just limited to theory but are about the action taken and call for integrity in research.[15]

Literature Review

Indigenous scholars I draw from include Nancy Mithlo, Chiricahua Apache, Jolene Rickard, Tuscarora, and Paul Chaat Smith, Comanche, to further ground my study in Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. By engaging with these scholars, I situate my work in contemporary Indigenous discourse in a deliberate effort to move away from colonized academic research.

Chiricahua Apache scholar and curator Nancy Mithlo's "They Never Liked the Dark Ones" (2009) offers an important critical framework of my discussion of the issues faced by contemporary Indigenous artists working against Western constructs of Indigeneity and

[12] Dian Million, "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2, Native Feminism (Fall 2009): 54.

[13] Million, "Felt Theory," 54.

[14] Million, "Felt Theory," 55.

[15] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xiii.

authenticity, in the artworld and economic sphere.[16] Mithlo provides a foundation for the understanding of the exclusionary practices against Indigenous artists in the Western contemporary art world. I draw from Mithlo because her text provides an understanding of the complexities of not only how Indigenous artist are seen by outsiders, but how they see themselves in the art world.

I also employ the concept of visual sovereignty, as used by Jolene Rickard, Tuscarora scholar and artist, in "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," which offers a further framework of analysis. Visual sovereignty offers viewers a way to deconstruct colonial views when looking at Indigenous art as a way to interpret Indigeneity.[17] Rickard sets out the intersections between Indigeneity, sovereignty, and colonization and decolonization, and allows scholars to further acknowledge the unique relationship between Indigenous nations and settler colonial nations.[18] She argues that scholars and critics need to understand Indigenous visual culture through the framework of sovereignty, which includes acknowledging the scholarship around decolonization.[19]

Additionally, I draw from Comanche author Paul Chaat Smith, and his book *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong*. Smith describes the discourse surrounding Indigenous activism throughout the twentieth century in relation to the National Museum of the American Indian in his chapter "The Ground Beneath Our Feet."[20] Chaat Smith argues that no history is

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[16] Nancy Mithlo, "'They Never Liked the Dark Ones:' Exclusion, Conformity, and Restrictions," in *Our Indian Princess: Subverting the Stereotype* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research, 2009), 45.

[17] Jolene Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76*,* no. 2 (2017): 83, https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/viewer/pdf/piusahan4f.

[18] Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," 81.

[19] Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," 83.

[20] Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 53.

history without knowing and understanding both sides.[21] I connect his book to a decolonizing methodology of centering Indigenous voices to ensure that Indigenous perspectives of history are uplifted throughout this project. Chaat Smith demonstrates in the chapter, "On Romanticism," that the "ideological swamp" that Indigenous people find themselves in today which heavily concerns environmentalism and the objectification of Indigenous culture and history.[22] He argues that romanticism is a highly developed, deeply ideological system of racism that encompasses culture, history, and language.[23] By understanding the concept of romanticism that heavily affects contemporary Indigenous peoples, I can further discern texts that describe Indigenous peoples as helpless or that romanticize Indigenous life and cultures when describing Indigenous histories.

In addition to drawing from these texts, I will discuss activist movements in relation to Belcourt and Kaiah. To do so, I will consult government policies from both the U.S. and Canada to explain why this activism is needed in the first place. I will refer to documents by the U.S. Congress Committee on Natural Resources concerning the MMIW movement, as seen through *Unmasking the Hidden Crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW): Exploring Solutions to End the Cycle of Violence* (2019). Lastly, I will look at the policies concerning sustainability, referring to the IUCN Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples and their text *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability: Cases and Actions* (1997). These sources on governmental policies will be able to inform my question of how both the U.S. and Canadian

[21] Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, 53-54.

[22] Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, 16.

[23] Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, 17-18.

government policies have fueled, and continue to fuel, discrimination against Indigenous peoples.

Theoretical Framework within the Literature Review

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, scholars specializing in decolonization and co-editors of the *Critical Ethnic Studies Journal*, caution against the use of the term decolonization as merely a metaphor in their article "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" (2012).[24] By using decolonization as a metaphor for change, such as in shallow phrases like "decolonize our schools," Tuck and Yang argue that it recenters colonial thinking, or "whiteness,) and is a premature effort towards reconciliation.[25] Tuck and Yang argue that decolonization is not simply things that we want to do to improve society; decolonization is meant to be uncomfortable.[26] Therefore, decolonization is only responsible for Indigenous futures and sovereignty.[27]

In her book, *Mark My Words: Native Women on Mapping our Nations* (2013), Professor of Indigenous studies Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) argues that Indigenous feminisms are critical to understanding relationships between peoples, land, and how nations were created.[28] Goeman uses an intersectional feminist approach, which she argues creates grounded articulations of violence and its impact on Indigenous peoples.[29] The feminist concept of intersectionality was first coined by Black feminist activist and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in

[24] Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.

[25] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 3, 9.

[26] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 3.

[27] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 35.

[28] Mishuana Goeman, "Gendered Geographies and Narrative Markings," in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 14.

[29] Goeman, "Gendered Geographies and Narrative Markings," 14.

her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," which she defines as the overlapping forms of oppression experienced by peoples based on different parts of identity (race, class, gender, etc.).[30] While Crenshaw defines this specifically in relation to the experiences of Black women, intersectionality can be also applied to the experiences of Indigenous women. I draw from this concept, grounding my own work through an intersectional feminist lens when describing the work of Belcourt and Kaiah and broader issues affecting Indigenous communities.

Methodology

I situate my study in in the principles Smith sets out in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, as she asserts the need for scholars to recognize the harm done in the name of research to Indigenous communities, which I recognize throughout this project.[31] Smith argues that the tools employed by researchers, such as interviews with Indigenous elders, searching archives, and recording information can all be classified as methods, while the processes used during this process are methodologies.[32] Smith argues that Indigenous methodologies better understand cultural conventions, which are more respectful than Western research approaches and include sharing the knowledge acquired with Indigenous communities.[33] By using these Indigenous methodologies throughout this thesis project, I move away from not only Western bias when

[30] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminist Legal Theories*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1997), 33.

[31] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1.

[32] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 17.

[33] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 16.

discussing and describing the work of Belcourt and Kaiah, but also the victimization of Indigenous peoples when presenting Indigenous histories.

To foreground artist voice in this project, informed by Smith, I draw on conversations I had with Kaiah, artist-in residence at the Denver Art Museum from 2022-2023. Through these conversations, I gained insight into her methods and how she connects with ancestral traditions in the current art world and the importance of storytelling, expressed in her artwork. Because there is limited published information on Kaiah's work, our conversations are an original exploration of her practice and provides important insight into her art and artistic processes. I will draw on the scholarship about and written by Belcourt as well as published recorded interviews to ground my study in her words about her art. By focusing on the words from the artists themselves, I ground myself in the centering their voices.

Chapter Outline

Chapter one is structured around an in-depth analysis of *Decolonizing Methodologies,* in a discussion of Smith's decolonizing approach and its relevance for my study. Additionally, I briefly give the histories of colonization and the Enlightenment as presented by Smith. Chapters two and three will be structured around the work of Belcourt and Kaiah in relation to decolonization. Both artists use ancestral techniques to revitalize and maintain ancestral traditions and knowledges, hence together the chapters present an overview of contemporary Indigenous art and issues facing contemporary Indigenous artists.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Smith centers the voice of Indigenous peoples to create a space in the world of research. Smith states throughout her book that she is against the negative impact that research can cause within Indigenous communities. These impacts of research must

be acknowledged by all, but most especially non-Indigenous scholars, such as myself, to understand the power of research and its impact on Indigenous communities. Like Smith, I will begin briefly with an introduction into colonialism, presenting the impact of the Enlightenment period in the US and Europe, then analyze the impacts these events have on Indigenous communities today.

Smith presents forty-five Indigenous projects; I will highlight several of these projects and how I draw on them in my thesis. However, the projects Smith outlines are not necessarily exclusively Indigenous, with Smith asserting two points: first, not all these projects are within empirical research and theorize Indigenous issues, and second, the projects she outlines relate primarily to the social sciences, as opposed to science, technology, engineering, and math projects (STEM).[34] Smith argues that the largest of these projects are the renewal of Indigenous knowledges and the struggle for Indigenous survival.[35] I will apply these projects specifically to the work of Belcourt and Kaiah to apply Smith's articulations of Indigenous projects.

Chapter two explores the work of Christi Belcourt, artist, curator, and activist. Belcourt is well-known for the community-led installation and memorial *Walking with Our Sisters* (2013-2019). The installation was a massive community project that traveled across Canada and to some sites in the U.S., with the purpose to commemorate and honor murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in North America (fig. 0.1). Additionally, Belcourt brings ancestral Métis beadwork artforms together with Western media and techniques as seen in many of her large-scale paintings. I will discuss two of her works, *This Painting is a Mirror,* 2012 (fig. 0.2) and *The Wisdom of the Universe,* 2014 (fig. 0.3). I analyze the motifs and arrangements in these

[34] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 163-164.

[35] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 189.

Figure 0.1: Christi Belcourt, *Walking with Our Sisters* Installation, Shingwauk Residential School Center, 2014, Image courtesy of the Algoma University Archives, http://archives.algomau.ca/main/?q=node/46992

Figure 0.2: Christi Belcourt standing in front of her painting *This Painting is a Mirror*, 2012, Acrylic on Canvas, 206 x 256 cm, Image courtesy of CBC Radio, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/exploring-the-complicated-world-of-cultural-identity-1.3637394/christi-belcourt-turned-an-act-of-discrimination-into-a-work-of-art-1.3639329

Figure 0.3: Christi Belcourt, detail of *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014, Acrylic on Canvas, 171 × 282 cm, Image Courtesy of the *Daily Office Blog,* https://dailyoffice.wordpress.com/2018/10/27/morning-prayer-10-28-18-23rd-sunday-after-pentecost/wisdom-of-universe-hummingbird-detail-christibelcourt-2014/

works and connect them to broader Métis culture and symbolism. I then connect Belcourt's work to her broader activism concerning MMIWG2S and the need for the recognition of ancestral mutual relationships between humans and the natural world.

In chapter three, I discuss the art of Denver-based artist Chelsea Kaiah, who works in ancestral art forms: beadwork and porcupine quill. In many of her works, such as *Quintessence of a Quill* (2023) (fig. 0.4), she uses quills, dyed with bright plant-based dyes to demonstrate different expressions using quills. Kaiah advocates for Indigenous rights and sustainability, highlighting the impact of Indigenous storytelling through her work.[36] Additionally, Kaiah advocates for the use of ancestral techniques and processing methods in relation to hunting, showing her own relationship with the land and non-human animals that inhabit it, seen in her beaded hide bag *Wallow,* 2023 (fig. 0.5).[37] With this, I connect her work to the idea of sustainability from multiple authors, as well as the essay, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: The Third Alternative (Commentary)," by scholars Raymond Pierroti and Daniel Wildcat (Yuchi). Pierotti and Wildcat highlight Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which demonstrates that humans do not have dominion over the natural world but are part of it.[38] Kaiah's work illustrates a direction of the next generation of contemporary artists and how they use traditional artforms in storytelling and honoring ancestral customs to continue Indigenous ancestral knowledges.

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[36] Chelsea Kaiah, "About," Chelsea Kaiah, accessed August 28, 2023, https://www.chelseakaiah.com/about.

[37] The term non-human animals refers to an animal that is not human. The term recognizes humans as animals, humans belonging on the same level as other animals, and animals being on the same level as humans as part of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). I use this term throughout this project to keep consistency with various authors I cite throughout, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith.
See: Raymond Pierotti and Daniel Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: The Third Alternative (Commentary)," *Ecological Applications* 10 (5) (October 2000): 1334.

[38] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1334.

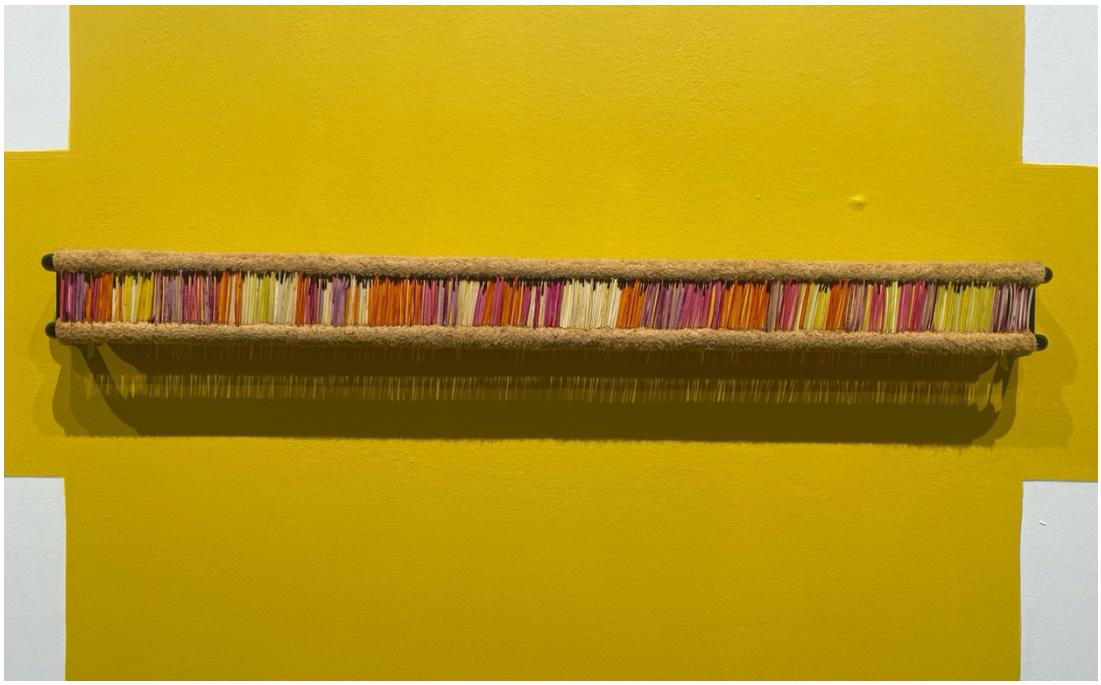

Figure 0.4: Chelsea Kaiah, Close look of *Quintessence of a Quill*, 2023, various dyed porcupine quills (turmeric, blueberries, beets, dye), deer hide, metal armature, thread, 2.5x 30 in. each, Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 0.5: Chelsea Kaiah, *Wallow*, 2023, Chestnut dyed brown porcupine quills, vintage cut beads, miyuki glass beads, Dentalium, rope, felt, bison hide, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, Colorado, Image courtesy of the author.

In my study of these two Indigenous contemporary women artists, their activism, and art, I connect their important work to the broader movement of decolonization, asserting the lasting presence of Indigenous peoples around the world. Million argues that Indigenous peoples are who they are because of the untold histories by the West; these histories have become Indigenous peoples' stories in which there is a refusal to remain silent any longer.[39]

It is important to note that Smith asserts that Indigenous peoples are not victims of their circumstances, as they have found ways to revitalize and bring forth Indigenous knowledge despite racism and attempted assimilation.[40] Smith allows readers to see research as a tool against oppression for Indigenous peoples as opposed to the elitist space that has been present since the Enlightenment Period in the U.S. and Europe. The main direction Smith leads readers throughout her book is one of hope for Indigenous peoples as becoming the researchers has allowed Indigenous peoples to advocate for themselves and help solve global and local issues. My purpose is to support this direction of hope in my thesis, to assert that Indigenous peoples, and specifically Indigenous women, in the scope of this thesis, are not victims of the past, but survivors in the present.

[39] Million, "Felt Theory," 72-73.

[40] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 285.

CHAPTER 1: Colonial Histories and Decolonization

Introduction

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2021), first published in 1999, is a groundbreaking project advocating for the autonomy and rights of Indigenous peoples through a framework of decolonization. In *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Smith narrates the history of Indigenous peoples' experience with Western research and why now, Indigenous peoples hesitate to participate in and conduct research. This book is a seminal text for decolonization and is a strong argument for why decolonization must take place, and how, both in and out of academia. In this chapter I discuss Smith's work and how I draw from it in my study of Christi Belcourt and Chelsea Kaiah's artwork and activism.

I open with a brief biography of Smith, to show how she has been consistent in her advocation for Indigenous rights and empowerment. I then analyze the main arguments of *Decolonizing Methodologies*. After this, I present an overview of colonial history in the U.S. and Canada and its impact on Indigenous communities and research. I outline methods of Indigenous activism, presented by Smith and other scholars, through discussion of five of the forty-five Indigenous projects Smith presents in chapters eight and nine of her book. I draw on Smith's text, applied to Indigenous visual arts and the messages that artists Belcourt and Kaiah convey through their work. In this chapter I present works by each artist to illustrate their respective forms of activism. While I do not examine the deeper meanings in this first chapter, I present a deeper visual analysis of their works in the following chapters to demonstrate how each artist contributes to Smith's Indigenous projects. In this chapter, I reiterate how decolonization is crucial in the face of colonial histories that still impact contemporary Indigenous communities.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith and *Decolonizing Methodologies*

As a well-known and respected advocate for Māori education, Smith currently holds the position of Professor of Education and Māori Development at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. She is also the Dean of the School of Māori and Pacific Development and Director of Te Kotahi Research Institute.[41] Smith details her life in a 2021 conversation with Bhakti Shringarpure, Professor of English, writer, and co-founder of the Radical Books Collective. Smith tells Shringarpure that both her parents are educators committed to the education of Māori peoples.[42] Her father earned his PhD in the U.S. in Māori studies, and her mother was a Māori language teacher; both passionate about the continuance and revival of Māori culture and customs.[43] Therefore, Smith was taught not only the importance of having an education, but how education can empower Māori peoples.[44]

Smith moved to the U.S. in the late 1960s during her teen years, which she describes as a time of substantial social justice in the U.S. concerning Civil Rights and American Indian Rights.[45] Smith credits her growing political awareness to these events as well as the environment her parents raised her in.[46] During her undergraduate years in the 1970s, Smith

[41] "Distinguish Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Chair) | Ngā Pae o Te Māramatanga," accessed September 6, 2023, https://www.maramatanga.co.nz/person/distinguish-professor-linda-tuhiwai-smith-chair.

[42] Bhakti Shringarpure, "Decolonizing Education: A Conversation with Linda Tuhiwai Smith," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 18, 2021, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/decolonizing-knowledge-a-conversation-with-linda-tuhiwai-smith/.

[43] Shringarpure, "Decolonizing Education."

[44] Shringarpure, "Decolonizing Education."

[45] Shringarpure, "Decolonizing Education."

[46] Shringarpure, "Decolonizing Education."

became a founding member of Ngā Tamatoa in New Zealand.[47] Ngā Tamatoa is an activist group who advocate for Māori rights and pointing out the breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi.[48] This resulted in the creation of educational programs and interventions for Māori peoples, such as the Te Kohanga Reo, which Smith briefly describes within *Decolonizing Methodologies.*[49] In a conversation with writer Dale Husband in 2015, Smith described her life as an activist and educator.[50] One of her roles in the Ngā Tamatoa activist group was to talk in front of more hostile audiences, or those who were racist towards Māori peoples, advocating for why the Treaty of Waitangi is important.[51] Smith credits this experience to how she has become an excellent communicator, as she had to learn to give a message despite the racism she faced by audiences.[52]

In *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Smith confronts Western academia and its practices of ethics, methods, methodologies, and entitlement to knowledge that reinforces Western dominance.[53] Smith grounds her book in the connection to her land of New Zealand with the intention that she does not speak for all peoples but advocates for the connection to one's own land and culture with their own research practices.[54] Smith asserts that it is still dangerous to be

[47] "Council Member Profile for Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith | Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi," accessed September 6, 2023, https://www.wananga.ac.nz/about/awanuiarangi-council/linda-tuhiwai-smith/.

[48] "Council Member Profile for Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith."

[49] "Council Member Profile for Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith."

[50] Dale Husband, "Linda Tuhiwai Smith: Transforming Education," *E-Tangata* (blog), July 18, 2015, https://e-tangata.co.nz/korero/linda-tuhiwai-smith-transforming-education/.

[51] Husband, "Linda Tuhiwai Smith."

[52] Husband, "Linda Tuhiwai Smith."

[53] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xii.

[54] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xiii.

Indigenous in the twenty-first century, as she argues that no real progress has been made to decolonize academia or other forms of knowledges.[55] The response to Indigenous activism around the world has been to silence, erase, or empower Western worldviews.[56]

Smith's main argument in *Decolonizing Methodologies* is how colonialism has intentionally corrupted the idea of knowledge, as the dominant Western settler society uses knowledge as a form of oppression against Indigenous peoples.[57] Smith argues that both non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers and scholars need practices to aid in the incorporation of both Indigenous and Western thought in projects.[58] Smith argues that a crucial aspect of decolonization is Indigenous peoples knowing their histories and "rediscovering" themselves and being fundamentally proud of who they are.[59] In the next section, I give a brief overview of colonial history in the U.S. and Canada, to provide a social history context for my discussion of Belcourt and Kaiah's work and activism.

Colonialism in the Americas

Smith argues that before European invasion of North America, beginning around the fifteenth century, there were established systems of social order in Europe. These predetermined social orders then informed European settler- colonizer relationships with Indigenous peoples in the lands they colonized. This social order placed Indigenous peoples in a dehumanized position

[55] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xii.

[56] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xi.

[57] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xii.

[58] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, xii.

[59] Husband, "Linda Tuhiwai Smith."

in a cultural hierarchy.[60] Indigenous peoples' struggles to reclaim their humanity in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries is consistent in anti-colonial discourse regarding colonialism, according to Smith, however, this discourse often fails to address power relations between the colonized and colonizers.[61] Smith refers to Afro-Caribbean philosopher Frantz Fanon, who argues that the idea of the colonized was created by the European settlers.[62] Fanon further argues that colonialism brought chaos to those who were colonized because it disconnected them to their own histories, cultures, and languages.[63]

In *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America*, Joseph P. Gone, scholar and enrolled member of the Aaniiih-Gros Ventre tribal nation of Montana, analyzes colonization in North America through the lens of cultural genocide.[64] Colonial policies of cultural assimilation in the U.S. and Canada were enforced by the removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands and the deployment of military force to aid in the murder of Indigenous peoples.[65] Once contained on reservations, Indigenous peoples received insufficient aid for food and resources from U.S. and Canadian governments, in violation of the treaties agreed on by Indigenous and colonial leaders. This led to starvation, illness, and suffering in many Indigenous communities.[66]

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[60] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 29.

[61] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 29-30.

[62] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 28-29.

[63] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 31.

[64] Joseph P. Gone, "Colonial Genocide and Historical Trauma in Native North America: Complicating Contemporary Attributions," in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Duke University Press, 2014), 278.

[65] Gone, "Colonial Genocide and Historical Trauma in Native North America," 281.

[66] Gone, "Colonial Genocide and Historical Trauma in Native North America," 281.

It is important to note Gone's argument that while it is critical to assess the histories of colonization in North America, using the term genocide to encapsulate everything that happened to Indigenous peoples in North America in the past undermines and ignores the issues facing Indigenous peoples in the present.[67] These contemporary issues include but are not limited to the lasting traumas of residential schools, the MMIWG2S epidemic, and the violation of treaties at the hands of both the U.S. and Canadian governments; all issues addressed within Belcourt and Kaiah's respective artworks and activism.

Professor of Native Sciences Laurelyn Whitt and lawyer Alan W. Clark argue in *North American Genocides Indigenous Nations, Settler Colonialism, and International Law* (2019) that settler colonialism was originally imposed on Indigenous peoples in North America by European powers, which continues in successor states such as the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.[68] They discuss the work of historian Patrick Wolfe, who argues that there are two strands of settler colonialism: first, it aims for the discontinuation of Indigenous societies, and second, it creates a new colonial society in its place.[69]

Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event because it is a resilient establishment that does not end and it uses new management practices to survive.[70] While settler colonialism may have brought expansion of the settler state, it imposed physical, political, cultural, and psychological cruelty on Indigenous peoples.[71] However, Whitt and Clark

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[67] Alexander Laban Hinton, "Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America A View from Critical Genocide Studies," in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Duke University Press, 2014), 326.

[68] Laurelyn Whitt and Alan W. Clarke, "Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Nations," in *North American Genocides Indigenous Nations, Settler Colonialism, and International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 47.

[69] Whitt and Clarke, "Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Nations," 47.

[70] Whitt and Clarke, "Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Nations," 48.

[71] Whitt and Clarke, "Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Nations," 48.

note that while settler colonialism is persistent, Indigenous peoples have resisted, adapted, and refused it, therefore making settler colonialism a far from successful mission.[72] Indigenous peoples are determined to recover from settler colonialism through remembrance, the revitalization of traditions, and ancestral responsibilities to the land.[73] Because of the lasting presence of settler colonialism, Belcourt and Kaiah heavily advocate for the importance of Indigenous knowledges in their practice; Belcourt advocates for the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples and the renewal of mutual relationships between humans and the natural world while Kaiah asserts the need for respecting the earth through ancestral hunting methods and consciousness of materials.

Exclusion and erasure of Indigenous histories and historical perspectives is a way colonizing powers assert their ideologies and superiority; the colonizer frames Indigenous views as incorrect because they resist colonization.[74] Therefore, Indigenous peoples have argued for the reclamation of their history to understand current conditions, as a major part of decolonization.[75] Smith states clearly in her book that history is a form of dominance.[76] History is predominantly about power, and those who are in power get to tell it.[77] Smith argues that the modernist view of history relates to the idea of social change, with the Enlightenment bringing new ideas of society and the individual, telling the story of what has led to the industrialized and modern society.[78]

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[72] Whitt and Clarke, "Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Nations," 51.

[73] Whitt and Clarke, "Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Nations," 51.

[74] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 33.

[75] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 33.

[76] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 33.

[77] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 35.

[78] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 36.

The Enlightenment and its Impact

In *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Smith argues that the imperialism that emerged from the Enlightenment period in Europe, 1685-1815, is responsible for Indigenous peoples' current conditions.[79] She argues that Enlightenment period philosophers and thinkers created the structure to pursue new knowledge, creating a new system of education.[80] Smith references Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said's idea of "positional superiority," to explain how military strength, raw materials, and most relevant to this section, knowledge, are part of European imperialism.[81] Smith argues that Western research is more than just a Westerner conducting research; Western research follows a positivist tradition, which related to the relationship between the natural world and humans.[82] Smith states that Western knowledge still dominates all knowledge systems expressed through power, which creates a stark difference between Western and Indigenous societies.[83] Smith argues, however, that imperialism, colonialism, and "Othering" existed before the Enlightenment period.[84]

Smith explores how supposed "primitive" peoples, a notion created by the West based in Enlightenment thinking to establish cultural hierarchy, were seen as not able to use their own minds, therefore could not invent, create, or imagine things of value.[85] This resulted in

[79] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 67.

[80] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 67.

[81] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 67.

[82] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 49.

[83] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 50.

[84] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 50-51.

[85] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 28.

Indigenous peoples being isolated by the West because of their opposing ideas of civilization.[86] Because of this sense of Western superiority over the non-West, imperialism allowed for the systematic classification of humans through the hierarchies of race, gender, and other identities.[87] In *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (1996) James Schmidt contends that the Enlightenment is often blamed for totalitarianism, seeing the natural world as commodity, European imperialism, and aggressive forms of capitalism and individualism.[88]

The individualism that emerged from the Enlightenment went against notions of community as well as having strong themes of racism and sexism.[89] While individualism is prevalent in the current state of dominant settler society, Belcourt and Kaiah stress the importance of community in both their life and work. Both artists' lives are centered around community, coming together to keep Indigenous knowledge alive for generations through ancestral practices such as beading and quillwork.

Research during The Enlightenment, as Smith argues, was about the West's power over non-Western societies.[90] Imperialism is the method in which Europeans sought out to discover Indigenous societies and different flora and fauna.[91] Exploitation created new markets for raw materials, as well as supporting the idea of the Other, ultimately positioning the West as an

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[86] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 28.

[87] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 28.

[88] James Schmidt, "What Is the Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences," in *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, vol. 7 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1.

[89] Schmidt, "What Is the Enlightenment?," 1.

[90] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 69.

[91] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 69.

authority.[92] In this process, Indigenous knowledge was commodified by Western colonialism and capitalism.[93] The globalization of Indigenous knowledge and culture was, and is, used to center Western beliefs over all other beliefs, creating colonial education.[94]

Smith argues that during the Enlightenment, history is seen as a scientific view of the past, linked closely to the idea of progress.[95] These ideas of space and time are crucial in understanding the differences between the West and Indigenous societies because of the perceived advancement of humans seen through Western ideas progress.[96] Smith argues that Western history asserts superiority over Indigenous societies through power because colonialism changed the spiritual, economic, and social knowledges in Indigenous communities.[97] The proclaimed superiority of Western knowledge by the West has resulted in Indigenous activist movements around the world that assert the significance of Indigenous knowledges, including the importance of community and reciprocal relationships between humans and non-humans. Belcourt and Kaiah are two of many Indigenous activists demonstrating the power of Indigenous knowledges through the mode of creating, advocating for not only themselves but their communities.

[92] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 69.

[93] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 70.

[94] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 73.

[95] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 62.

[96] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 63.

[97] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 63.

Indigenous Activism

According to Smith, the term cultural revitalization, which came into use in the 1960s around the world, implies that Indigenous cultures are helpless and need saving.[98] While Smith argues that the term cultural revitalization implies a need to be saved as argued by Smith, Indigenous activists use the idea of revitalization to assert continued Indigenous presence, bringing ancestral knowledges to the forefront, as in Belcourt and Kaiah's respective practices. Belcourt is passionate about the revitalization of Indigenous languages and land-based knowledges, while Kaiah advocates for the revival of Indigenous hunting practices.[99]

Movements for Indigenous rights began in North America, concealed from dominant Western society before emerging into the mainstream media.[100] Smith argues that Indigenous issues are part of a larger problem of seeing Indigenous peoples as legitimate, as these movements often formed alliances with other marginalized groups, such as white feminists or the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., often using the collaboration with white people to their advantage.[101]

Smith describes the struggle of Indigenous activism because Indigenous activists may be accused of treason or terrorists for educating about the effects of globalization, or the expansion of knowledges to the expansion of empires and trading.[102] This includes the trade of cultural artifacts, peoples, art, and other items which are exchanged across the world away from their

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[98] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 124.

[99] Tarah Hogue, "Walking Softly with Christi Belcourt," *Canadian Art*, June 21, 2017, https://canadianart.ca/features/walking-softly-with-christi-belcourt/; Chelsea Kaiah in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023

[100] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 124.

[101] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 128.

[102] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 102.

communities of origin.[103] These early forms of Indigenous activism include making "peoples" a plural term to recognize the self-determination of multiple distinct communities within Indigenous culture; recently, these battles are the persistence of Indigenous existence and asserting Indigenous self- determination.[104]

In their book *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (2010) scholars Cheryl Suzack (Batchewana First Nations) and Shari M. Huhndorf assert that while Indigenous activism aims to create material social developments, cultural production, such as art, it also creates critical consciousness that allow peoples to understand the meaning of histories.[105] Suzack and Huhndorf argue that both activism and art have similar goals and address the same issues.[106] Oklahoma Choctaw scholar Devon Abbott Mihesuah describes the different expressions of Indigenous activism within her book *Indigenous American women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism.* These include land and environment activism, retention of Indigenous languages, using creativity as a form of empowerment, filmmaking, and Powwows.[107]

The expression of activism I focus on in this project is how Indigenous artists use creativity as a form of empowerment. I suggest that the various forms of creativity as activism construct an accessible visual language that can relay messages of Indigenous presence in both

[103] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 102.

[104] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 278.

[105] Cheryl Suzack and Shari Huhndorf, "Indigenous Feminism Theorizing the Issues," in *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 9.

[106] Suzack and Shari Huhndorf, "Indigenous Feminism Theorizing the Issues," 9.

[107] Devon Abbott Mihesuah, "Activism and Expression as Empowerment," in *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Lincoln [Neb.]; London: University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London, 2003), 147-155.

art and media to a wide array of audiences. Mihesuah describes how the expressions of Indigenous peoples who want to be successful through art are often expressions that they know non-Indigenous peoples want to see.[108] Smith argues that Indigenous activists have two important skills: communication and the ability to get people to act.[109] These skills can be conveyed in a multitude of manifestations, and for Belcourt and Kaiah, it is through their art.

Decolonizing Methodologies: The Indigenous Projects

Smith sets out forty-five projects that draw from the work of Indigenous researchers and their relationships with one another.[110] Smith sees these projects as not only physical, but spiritual and creative endeavors among other manifestations.[111] While these projects are articulated in relation to research, they can be connected to both Belcourt and Kaiah's artwork. Their art practice can be argued to be a form of activism, as they are expressing activist principles and ideas through visual media. However, Smith does not mean to only make these projects about activism, but the different types of Indigenous work being completed.[112]

I highlight five of Smith's projects in relation to Belcourt and Kaiah's work to provide specific examples of what Smith's projects can look like in practice. Both Belcourt and Kaiah's work can be framed in Smith's project *Creating*.[113] The project of *Creating* goes beyond Indigenous survival and instead leans on imagination, which can create new ideas on art,

[108] Mihesuah, "Activism and Expression as Empowerment," 150.

[109] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 278.

[110] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 163.

[111] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 187.

[112] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 188.

[113] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 180-81.

technology, and beyond.[114] This not only benefits Indigenous peoples, but other marginalized societies as well.[115] Smith contends that by using creativity, Indigenous peoples can create solutions for Indigenous problems.

One project I associate with Belcourt's work is *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared, and the Missing and the Murdered*.[116] Smith draws on the work of journalist Anabel Hernandez, who highlights how four thousand Indigenous women and girls went missing from 1980-2012 in Canada.[117] Hernandez especially highlights the Canadian government's inaction and the government's entitlement to dispose of Indigenous bodies.[118] Because of this, Belcourt initiated the traveling installation *Walking with Our Sisters (WWOS)* which took place from 2013-2019, to demonstrate the activism of Indigenous peoples for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples movement (MMIWG2S) and the resistance against the colonial systems that perpetuate violence against Indigenous peoples (fig. 1.1).

Métis writer and scholar Kim Anderson contends in *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (2021) that for many Indigenous women, there is a deep empathy for those who are missing, as it evokes the feelings of trauma that they experience in their everyday lives.[119] The *WWOS* installations give Belcourt, and many others, hope through

[114] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 180.

[115] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 181.

[116] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 204.

[117] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 204.

[118] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 204.

[119] Kim Anderson, "Introduction," in *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2018), XXI.

Figure 1.1: Christi Belcourt, *Walking with Our Sisters* installation, 2018, Riddell Library and Learning Centre, Mount Royal University, Image courtesy of Walking with our Sisters Mount Royal University, https://www.mtroyal.ca/AboutMountRoyal/MediaRoom/New

volunteers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who work together to spread kindness, compassion, and beauty to families of those missing and the survivors of these systems as well as raising awareness of this epidemic.[120]

Belcourt also embodies the Indigenous project of *Living in Relation*.[121] Smith argues that cultures around the world have different ways of seeing the natural world and humans' roles within it.[122] Smith highlights that separate understandings of animate and inanimate do not exist in a number of cultures, inanimate entities referring to water, air, and earth, and animate referring to animals, insects, and birds.[123] Therefore, the project of *Living in Relation* discusses different understandings of peoples living in relation to other beings, highlighting the relationship between humans and the natural world.[124] *Living in Relation* directly goes against the values instilled by capitalism and the toxically individualistic society, which continues from the Enlightenment period.[125] One way Belcourt does this is through her depiction of flowers and other aspects of the natural world in her paintings that emulate Métis beadwork such as in her painting *The Wisdom of the Universe* (2014) (fig. 1.2) which depicts plants and animals that are endangered or extinct to demonstrate Belcourt's ecological concerns.[126]I suggest that Belcourt's work engages with the *Living in Relation* project through her assertion of the importance of mutual caring relationships

[120] Christi Belcourt, "Waking Dreams: Reflections on Walking with Our Sisters," in *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 2018), XVII.

[121] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 192.

[122] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 192.

[123] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 192.

[124] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 193.

[125] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 193.

[126] "Artist's Statement: Christi Belcourt on The Wisdom of the Universe," Art Gallery of Ontario, August 7, 2014, https://ago.ca/agoinsider/artists-statement-christi-belcourt-wisdom-universe.

Figure 1.2: Christi Belcourt, close look of *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014, Acrylic on Canvas, 171 × 282 cm, Image Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=WRKO_mlolu4

between humans and non-humans, requiring humans to move away from Western capitalistic modern ideas of society.[127]

Belcourt uses her depictions of flowers within her art to say life is beautiful and are physical depictions of her prayers for balance between humans and non-humans.[128] Belcourt argues that creating flowers is an effective way to highlight the importance of climate change; these images raise awareness for the medicinal properties of plants, the need for clean water, the decline in biodiversity, and globalization.[129] In this way, Belcourt uses plants as a manifestation of her spirituality. I suggest this connects with the philosophy of the project *Living in Relation* through Belcourt's rejection of Western competitive society and through her expression of gratitude towards non-humans, including water and plants, in her art and life.[130] Métis, French Canadian, and Dutch curator and writer Tarah Hogue argues in her article "Walking Softly with Christi Belcourt" (2017) that Belcourt highlights a shared responsibility of humans through her paintings and activism.[131]

Similar to Belcourt, Kaiah's work can be associated with the project *Listening to, Feeling and Learning from the Land.*[132] Smith argues that the relationship between humans and non-humans and humans is deeply embedded in Indigenous cultures, values, languages, and stories.[133] However, this does not mean humanizing non-human entities, but to respect and

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[127] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 193.

[128] Christi Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," *Native Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 150.

[129] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 150.

[130] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 150.

[131] Hogue, "Walking Softly with Christi Belcourt."

[132] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 206.

[133] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 206.

recognize the agency of non-humans.[134] This project is about action and what it would mean to integrate these beliefs in colonial-based society.[135] For Kaiah, there is a clear relationship between her practice and the health of the earth.[136] In her Bison hide video series seen at the Dairy Arts Center in Boulder, Colorado in August 2023, the viewer sees Kaiah using the different steps to processing a bison hide (fig. 1.3). Viewers are taken through the varied processes involved, including the hunting of the bison and later the softening of hide with a varied brain mixture and smoking and scraping of the hide, which are then used for her artworks. This series is one of many demonstrations by Kaiah on why non-human animals are important and how deeply this connection with non-human animals is embedded within Indigenous culture and practices.

Kaiah's work also aligns with Smith's project *Discovering the Beauty of Our Knowledge*. Smith argues that discovering beauty is related to Indigenous peoples rediscovering Indigenous knowledge for the benefit of Indigenous development.[137] This discovery connects the relevancy of Indigenous knowledge to the enrichment of Indigenous lives.[138] This project is closely related to the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Yuchi scholar and professor Daniel Wildcat and scholar and professor Raymond Pierotti argue within their article "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: The Third Alternative (Commentary)" (2000) that a fundamental aspect of TEK is that humans are always connected to the natural world, the recognition that non-

[134] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 206.

[135] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 206.

[136] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with author, January 20th, 2023.

[137] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 182.

[138] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 182.

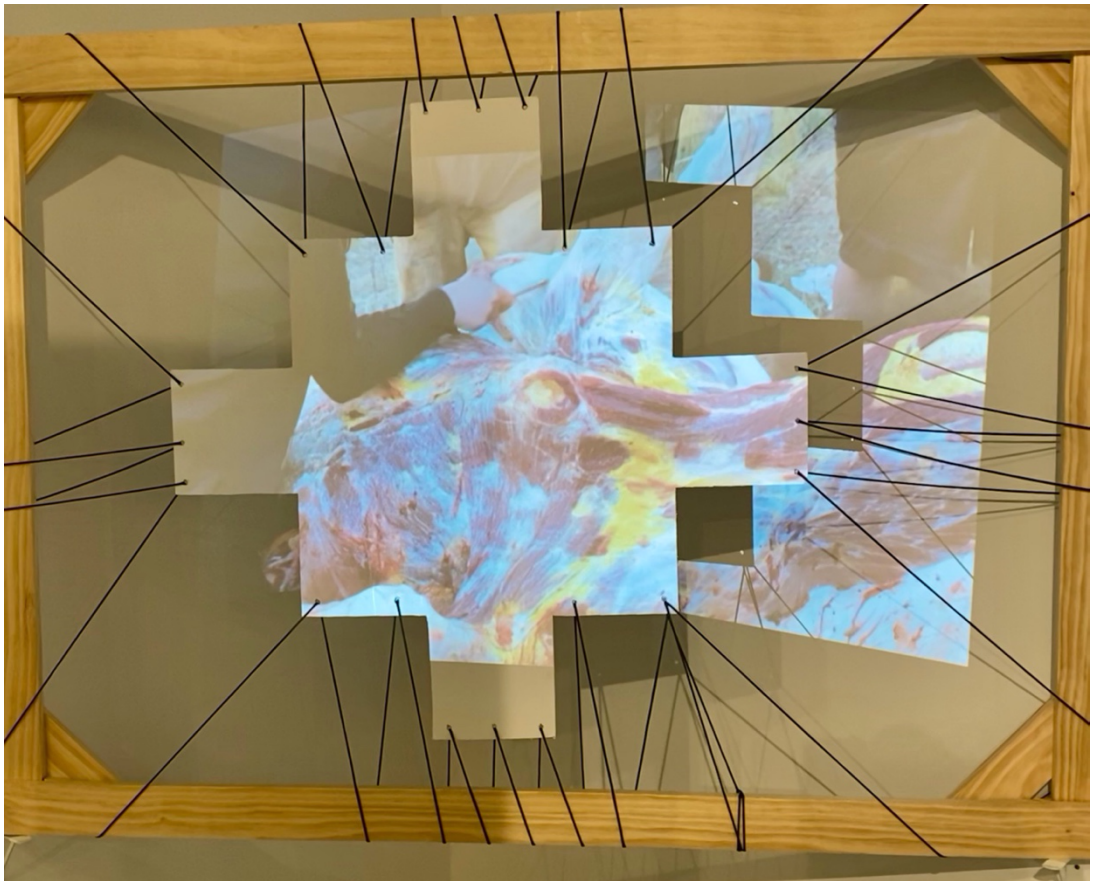

Figure 1.3: Chelsea Kaiah, *Buffalo hide series*, August 2022- June 2023, filmed on a Fuji camera projected on an Apache style diamond made of hard foam tied with cotton yarn within a wooden frame, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO. Image courtesy of the author.

humans are valuable, and the extraction of the natural world refers to seeing non-human animals as members of a community and as prey.[139]

Kaiah closely relates to the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world in her art practice, advocating for the use of Indigenous knowledges to create beauty in the world. In her work *Recusant Ute and Her Absence* (2023), the main subject, a coyote woman, is refusing assimilation (fig. 1.4). According to the description of her work by Kaiah, the gaps of knowledge in the background are filled in by porcupine quills, representing the future of Indigenous knowledge and preservation of Indigenous cultures.[140]

Conclusion

The histories of the past affect the present. The history of colonialism in the U.S. and Canada and the European Enlightenment created the circumstances faced by many Indigenous peoples today. Because of this, Indigenous activism has worked to recognize these histories as well as committing to bettering Indigenous peoples' lives and Indigenous futures. While my study is not primarily focused on Indigenous histories, I incorporate Indigenous histories in my formal analysis of Belcourt and Kaiah's work. Both artists contribute to the Indigenous project of *Creating,* as they both use their art practice to forward recognition and revitalization of Indigenous culture.

While both Belcourt and Kaiah contribute to the project of *Creating,* they also contribute to their own respective Indigenous projects demonstrated by Smith. Belcourt's work aligns with Smith's projects *Living in Relation* and *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared, and*

[139] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1334.

[140] Chelsea Kaiah, *Buffalo hide projects* (Boulder, Colorado: Dairy Arts center, 2023) Museum exhibit label

the Missing and the Murdered. Kaiah's work can be associated with the projects of *Listening to, Feeling and Learning from the Land* and *Discovering the Beauty of Our Knowledge.* In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore how each artists' overall practice contributes to the Indigenous projects Smith articulates within her book as well as broader activist movements.

Figure 1.4: Chelsea Kaiah, *Recusant Ute and Her Absence*, 2023, Porcupine quills (natural and dyed), seed beads, greasy opals, 24K gold Charlotte beads, antelope hide, felt, and rope, 10"x24". Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO. Image courtesy of the author.

CHAPTER 2: Christi Belcourt, A Voice Against Settler Colonial Practices

Introduction

Métis visual artist and activist Christi Belcourt begins her article "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," by informing readers that her art practice and life is led by the question "Who am I?".[141] This question comes from Belcourt's view of her place in the world and how she expresses her point of view through her practices.[142] Métis, French Canadian, and Dutch curator and writer Tarah Hogue asserts in her article "Walking Softly with Christi Belcourt" that through her depictions of beauty, Belcourt shows viewers that new types of relationships are possible in the world (interspecies, otherworldly, and between humans and the land).[143] This includes relationships that go against colonial capitalist ideals that stem from the Enlightenment Period (1685-1815).[144] In this chapter, I connect the artistic and activist work of Belcourt to Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2021). I connect two of Smith's forty-five projects to Belcourt's practice: *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared* and *Living in Relation*.

I open the chapter with a brief history of events that led to the conditions for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples epidemic. I connect these histories to the traveling community outreach installation and memorial *Walking with Our Sisters* (*WWOS),* initiated by Belcourt to bring attention to MMIWG2S, traveling between 2013 to 2019 to twenty-seven sites across Canada and in the U.S. I then describe and analyze two of Belcourt's

[141] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 143.

[142] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 143.

[143] Hogue, "Walking Softly with Christi Belcourt."

[144] Hogue, "Walking Softly with Christi Belcourt."

large-scale paintings, *This Painting is a* Mirror, 2012, and *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014. Belcourt's paintings emulate ancestral Métis beadwork and demonstrate her activist intent through pointed dots that form floral and animal motifs, meant to assert Métis knowledge and history.[145] Belcourt situates Métis knowledge at the forefront of both her activist and artistic work, and like Smith, asserts the continued presence of Indigenous peoples despite policies of attempted assimilation into white-settler society.

Colonial Histories and the Colonial Present: Violence Against Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples

Between 1980 and 2012, 1,017 Indigenous women in Canada were murdered, with one hundred and sixty-four Indigenous women listed as missing in 2013.[146] In both the U.S. and Canada, Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples experience violence at a higher rate than any other group.[147] Mixed race Cree activist and scholar Robyn Bourgeios argues that this epidemic is directly caused by the "dominant social systems of oppression," which includes sexism, racism, patriarchy, colonialism, and social class.[148] In the U.S. and Canada, the legacy of colonial legislation and policies creates a disproportionate amount of violence against Indigenous peoples, in particular women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples, with police failing to protect.[149]

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[145] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 146.

[146] Robyn Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide: The Historical and Sociological Context of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls," in *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 2018), 65.

[147] National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Reclaiming Power and Place Executive Summary of the Final Report," (2015), 7, https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Executive_Summary.pdf.

[148] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 66.

[149] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 75-76.

Bourgeios argues that settler colonialism requires Indigenous lands, and after the formation of Canada as a nation in 1867, the colonization of Indigenous lands was codified through the Indian Act in 1876.[150] Further, The Indian Act enacted policies that removed Indigenous women from their positions of power in their communities, and often removed them from their communities. The Indian Act enforced federal definitions of Indigenous identity that separated many women from their communities. According to the Indian Act, if an Indigenous woman married a non-Indigenous man, the federal government would no longer recognize her Indigenous identity, described in the legislation as Indian status, and the treaty rights that she was entitled to. [151] This would isolate Indigenous women from their families and communities, creating a reliance on their non-Indigenous spouses.[152] This is often identified as one of the main causes of the MMIWG2S epidemic in Canada.[153]

In 1985, Bill C-31 passed into law as a result of activism from Indigenous communities, modifying the Indian Act to end this gender discrimination.[154] Bill C-31 restored to women their previously revoked Indian Status and gave Indigenous nations the right to control their own memberships.[155] However, because this bill gives First Nations control of membership status,

[150] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 71.

[151] Sara Doesbrg and Jaslyne Golaz, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in Canada," in *The Ball Is in Y(Our) Court: Social Change Through and Beyond Sport*, ed. Mary Louise Adams (Queen's University, 2020).

[152] Anita Olsen Harper, "Sisters in Spirit," in *Forever Loved: Exposing the Hidden Crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada*, by Lavell Memee. D Harvard (Demeter Press, 2016), 65.

[153] Doesburg and Golaz, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in Canada."

[154]Joan Holmes, *Bill C-31, Equality or Disparity? The Effects of the New Indian Act on Native Women* (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1987), 1.

[155] Holmes, *Bill C-31*, 12.

women can still denied membership, leading to the denial of housing and isolation from their communities.[156]

The Canadian government outlining who counts as Indigenous through the Indian Act decides who the government is accountable to, such as treaty obligations (for example, the exclusion of Métis, Inuit, and Indigenous women who have married non-Indigenous men).[157] Therefore, The Indian Act contributes to the social and economic marginalization of Indigenous children, which directly leads to violence.[158] According to the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, established in Canada in 2016, after the inaction under the twenty-second Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Joseph Harper, the higher rate of violence against Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous women is due to these policies of attempted assimilation.[159]

In the U.S., no federal agency has comprehensive data on the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The U.S. Government Accountability Office summarizes these issues in reporting in three main categories: underreporting; misclassification of race; and misclassifications of the manner of death.[160] There are barriers to access specific data from law enforcement in the U.S.; according to an Urban Indian Health Institute survey, many law

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[156] Jo-Anne Fiske and Evelyn George, "Bill C-31: A Study of Cultural Trauma," in *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)* 5 (2007): 54.

[157] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 72.

[158] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 73.

[159] National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Introduction," in *Reclaiming Power and Place Executive Summary of the Final Report*, vol.1a (Canada, 2019), 2, https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Executive_Summary.pdf.

[160] United States Government Accountability Office, "Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women: New Efforts Are Underway but Opportunities Exist to Improve the Federal Response: Report to Congressional Requesters," Report to Congressional Requesters (United States Government Accountability Office, October 2021), 24, https://discovery-ebsco-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=5c50f73e-a32c-37c9-918f-da7dd40f0d53.

enforcement departments recalled data by memory as opposed to showing records.[161] However, in a study completed by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the U.S., two out of five Indigenous women experience sexual violence in their lifetime.[162]

Enrollment of Native American Status in the U.S. has historical roots dating back to the early nineteenth century, however, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 created additional requirements for status which, as in Canada, isolated Indigenous peoples from their communities.[163] Later, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) created the Voluntary Relocation Program, which lasted between 1952 to 1972.[164] This program gave funding for one-way transportation plus a couple of hundred dollars to Indigenous peoples in the U.S. who were willing to move to urban areas off reservations. Around 100,000 relocated Indigenous peoples became isolated from their communities, and only had access to low paying jobs while facing the higher cost of off-reserve living, with many Indigenous people experiencing culture shock and higher rates of poverty.[165]

As a response to the criticism for the Voluntary Relocation Program, in 1956 the BIA passed the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, and while it added vocational training options for

[161] Annita Lucchesi and Abigail Echo-Hawk, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls A Snapshot of Data from 71 Urban Cities in the United States," (2018), 13, https://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf.

[162] Kathleen C. Basile et al., "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Report on Sexual Violence" (Atlanta, Georgia: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 2022).

[163] Native American Status in the U.S. is given once an individual provides genealogical documentation to the Department of the Interior. See: Russell Thornton, "Tribal Membership Requirements and the Demography of "Old" and 'New' Native Americans" in *Changing Numbers, Changing Needs: American Indian Demography and Public Health,* (National Academies Press, U.S., 1996).

[164] Max Nesterak, "Uprooted: The 1950s Plan to Erase Indian Country," APM Reports, accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/11/01/uprooted-the-1950s-plan-to-erase-indian-country.

[165] Nesterak, "Uprooted."

Indigenous peoples, it created a lack of federal funding for Indigenous schools, hospitals, and other community needs, making it difficult to live on reservations.[166] Around the time of the initiation of the relocation programs in 1953, Congress began to disestablish treaties, deconstruct tribal governments, and dissemble Indigenous reservations, referred to as "termination".[167] This made clear that the U.S. government intended to eliminate Indigenous communities in the U.S., which has had lasting impacts on Indigenous peoples and is one of many causes of MMIWG2S in the U.S.[168]

Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence argues that individuals who have lost their status have also lost status for their descendants, which creates alienation and isolation from their cultures, such as financial loss, tax benefits, and healthcare benefits.[169] Therefore, the loss of status is the loss of treaty obligations.[170] Cree scholar and lawyer Michelle Good argues that only understanding the history of the truth of brutality against Indigenous women in the name of "settling the West" will aid in Indigenous women being given the respect and dignity they deserve.[171] Belcourt brings attention to MMIWG2S and the importance of the continuance of the stories of those murdered missing women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples through her practice, specifically through the traveling installation *WWOS,* contributing to the Indigenous project

[166] Nesterak, "Uprooted."

[167] Nesterak, "Uprooted."

[168] Nesterak, "Uprooted."

[169] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 73.

[170] Bourgeois, "Generations of Genocide," 73.

[171] Michelle Good, "A Tradition of Violence," in *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 2018), 97.

named by Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies*: *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared.*

Walking with Our Sisters (WWOS): A Traveling Memorial for MMIWG2S

Cree and Métis scholar and writer Kim Anderson begins the introduction to *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* with an account of Belcourt driving to Ottawa from her home in Sudbury, Ontario, thinking about the missing poster she had seen of a young Indigenous woman who had been missing for years.[172] The woman had been missing for years but her family still circulated her photo, hopeful for her return. Anderson explains that for Indigenous peoples, seeing these types of posters can bring feelings of fear, trauma, and even a threat towards their own safety.[173] Anderson explains that through these thoughts, Belcourt came up with the idea for the *WWOS* installation.[174] Belcourt shared in a conversation with journalist Leah Sandals that what really struck home was that this young woman looked like Belcourt's own daughter, asserting that *WWOS* "started on that purely human level… one mother to another."[175]

Belcourt put out a call on social media to the Indigenous community, to invite people to send in pairs of moccasin vamps, the top beaded section of a moccasin, to represent the over six hundred cases of missing women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples reported by the Native Women's

[172] Anderson, "Introduction," XXI.

[173] Anderson, "Introduction," XXI.

[174] Anderson, "Introduction," XXII.

[175] Leah Sandals, "Christi Belcourt Q&A: On Walking With Our Sisters," *Canadian Art*, accessed September 14, 2023, https://canadianart.ca/interviews/christi-belcourt-walking-with-our-sisters/.

Association in Canada in 2012.[176] Belcourt called for moccasin vamps specifically because the vamps remain as fragments of the whole moccasin. The vamps symbolize the unfinished lives of the missing Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples.[177] Further, she notes that moccasins are traditional burial footwear in some Indigenous death rituals, therefore, without feet to dress, the vamps accentuate the absence of both bodies and graves of those missing.[178]

Families who submitted their vamps for *WWOS* gathered to create the vamps, which Anderson argues created new communities across the U.S. and Canada as new beading groups were formed which assisted in creating kinship and new dialogue, creating new allies for resistance.[179] Before *WWOS* began installation in the fall of 2013 in Edmonton, Alberta, 1,763 pairs of vamps arrived to Belcourt, with sixty-five new beading groups formed.[180] Over a dozen people joined Belcourt, creating a national collective of helpers consisting of local Elders, Indigenous community members, and community volunteers at each installation site to aid in the organization of the thousands of vamps.[181] Belcourt was concerned with how to navigate setting up all the vamps, however, she had a dream that clarified her visions.

In the dream, Belcourt stood in a large long-lodge, with many women standing shoulder to shoulder.[182] Then, a drum appears, with men beginning to sing. Elder Maria Campbell, an important Métis activist and community worker, appeared next to Belcourt and began to

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[176] Anderson, "Introduction," XXII.

[177] Laura Janeth McKinley, "A Pedagogy of Walking with Our Sisters." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education/ Revue Canadienne Des Jeunes Chercheures et Chercheurs En Éducation* 9, no. 1 (May 24, 2018): 64.

[178] McKinley, "A Pedagogy," 65.

[179] Anderson, "Introduction," XXII.

[180] Anderson, "Introduction," XXII.

[181] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XI.

[182] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XII.

dance.[183] The other women began to follow Campbell's lead, dancing until they each disappeared one by one until Belcourt was alone in the lodge.[184] Belcourt's dream became the basis of the set up for *WWOS*; each vamp pair was placed side by side, to represent the women standing shoulder to shoulder together, facing each other in a circle (fig. 2.1).[185]

Belcourt argues that this community installation is not an art exhibition because *WWOS* is not only focusing on art but ceremony, guided by four main principles that Belcourt highlights in the *Keetsahnak / Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* prologue: 1) all peoples are welcome, 2) all installation sites are led by Indigenous peoples, 3) there must be only kindness and love at each installation site, and 4) everyone working at the installations are volunteers.[186]

At each installation site of *WWOS*, when entering the space, visitors were invited to remove their shoes, take tobacco in their left hand, and smudge themselves with sage.[187] These public installation sites, transformed by the staff and community members specific to each site, created sacred spaces informed by local community Elders and grandmothers at each site.[188] This way of viewing created a sense of physicality not usually found in other art installations because its sole focus was not on the art pieces; it emphasized the visitor's connection to Indigenous ancestral traditions.[189] While each installation is unique, in that it followed the beliefs and

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[183] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XII.

[184] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XII.

[185] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XII.

[186] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XIII.

[187] *Smudging* is an ancestral ceremony using smoke to cleanse or purify one's energy. It is widely practiced by Indigenous peoples across the Americas. See: Sandals, "Christi Belcourt Q&A."

[188] Leisa Desmoulins, "Witnessing the Walking with our Sisters Exhibit/Memorial: Learning from Trauma," *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* (Online) 31, no. 2 (2019): 62.
**Sites for *WWOS* listed under Appendix on page 104.

[189] McKinley, "A Pedagogy of Walking with Our Sisters," 66.

Figure 2.1: Christi Belcourt, *Walking with Our Sisters* Installation, Thunder bay Art Gallery, Ontario, Canada, 2014, Image courtesy of Earful of Queer Radio, https://earfulofqueer.wordpress.com/2014/10/05/walking-with-our-sisters/

worldview of the community where it was located, the red fabric that was laid underneath the pairs of vamps is constant at each installation site, a color consistently used in the MMIWG2S movement (fig. 2.2).

Belcourt tells Sandals that the vamps were vastly different from one another, whether they follow a more ancestral-inspired styles or more contemporary.[190] Most of the vamps are worked with intricate motifs of floral designs, animals, insects, people, and words. Some of the motifs are made entirely of beadwork, such as the strawberry vamps created by Crystal Albanese (fig. 2.3). Others used mediums such as paint, with the beading as an accent, such as the intricately painted horse vamps created by Lucy Baker (fig. 2.4). Each pair of vamps is different, as each one is made by different artists in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, made from various mediums including paint, beadwork, mixed media, computer components, pine-needle basket weaving, and fish-scale art, which Belcourt highlights as a traditional Métis medium.[191]

Belcourt and other Indigenous peoples continue to work toward equal and better treatment by both the U.S. and Canadian governments and police. They assert their Indigenous presence over tragedy, bringing attention to this previously ignored epidemic of violence. Belcourt herself acknowledges this resistance against the colonial state, writing:

> "I think, for me, overall, *WWOS* has been yet another example among examples from our communities, stretching back decades, of the resilience, grace, and beauty that exists among Indigenous women and communities. Yes, we continue to face the most horrific tragedies and suffer from collective grief. But, at the same time, we are strong. We are beautiful. We have survived the worst Canada had to throw at us, trying to wipe out our people and our cultures. Young people are picking up the cultures and languages with a

[190] Sandals, "Christi Belcourt Q&A."

[191] Sandals, "Christi Belcourt Q&A."

Figure 2.2: Christi Belcourt and Community Beaders, Close up of *Walking with Our Sisters*, 2017, Image Courtesy of the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (MSVU), https://www.msvuart.ca/exhibition/walking-with-our-sisters/

Figure 2.3: Crystal Albanese, *Strawberry Vamps*, Unknown Year, seed beads, thread, and unidentified backing, Image Courtesy of *Walking with Our Sisters*, http://walkingwithoursisters.ca/artwork/moccasin-vamps/

Figure 2.4: Lucy Baker, *Horse Vamps*, Unknown Year, beads, thread, paint, and unidentified backing, Image Courtesy of *Walking with Our Sisters*, http://walkingwithoursisters.ca/artwork/moccasin-vamps/

> vengeance. We are on the rise once again. This makes me proud. It makes me determined."[192]

Through *WWOS,* the stories of missing and murdered women, girls, and Two-spirit peoples are carried on and remembered despite the colonial state's attempt to erase these tragedies through the lack of data entries and effort to search for missing Indigenous peoples.[193]

Indigenous Project: *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared*

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples are among the demographics most vulnerable to violence in the U.S. and Canada. Smith demonstrates the need to acknowledge and resist the MMIWG2S epidemic by describing the Indigenous project *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared.*[194] Smith argues that Indigenous peoples around the world are at risk of being "disappeared with" by corrupt state regimes, criminal organizations, and even individuals who only wish to create harm.[195]

Smith emphasizes how wide-scale MMIWG2S is in the world, bringing forth the active resistance of families of missing persons, arguing that this particular Indigenous project is about the work that must be done to find those missing peoples.[196] Smith argues this takes courage and allies to spread the message of resistance to those who can create change (such as elites and politicians).[197] I argue that Belcourt's initiation of the traveling installation *Walking with Our*

[192] Belcourt, "Waking Dreams," XVIII.

[193] United States Government Accountability Office, "Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women," 2.

[194] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 203.

[195] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 203.

[196] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 204.

[197] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 204.

Sisters (WWOS) is an ideal example of this resistance, which has created communities of people advocating for change through creating vamps and installation sites for this wide-scale series.

These are the acts of courage that Smith refers to in relation to the Indigenous project *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared.* Belcourt directly contributes to this project through her calls to action, as well as calling attention to the conditions that have led to this epidemic and the view of Indigenous women as disposable.[198] The *WWOS* traveling installation began in 2013. It called attention to the MMIWG2S epidemic two years before the Canadian government announced on December 8th, 2015, the initiative of The National Inquiry to causes of disproportionate violence against Indigenous women and girls, including underlying social, cultural, and economic causes.[199] It is important to note that in September 2015, *WWOS* visited the Carleton University Art Gallery (CUAG). Nearly six thousand people visited the installation over three weeks, making it one of the most visited events at CUAG.[200] I suggest that this is evidence of the concrete change *WWOS* created across the U.S. and Canada, as it can be argued that the growing outcry for MMIWG2S from *WWOS* in part created the circumstances for the Inquiry.

Belcourt decenters the ideals of colonialist policies and regimes to acknowledge the lives of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples' lives lost.[201] Belcourt participates in

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[198] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 204.

[199] "Manitoba Indigenous Reconciliation | Province of Manitoba," *Province of Manitoba - Manitoba Indigenous Reconciliation*, accessed November 19, 2023, https://www.gov.mb.ca/inr/mmiwg/https:/inr/; Kirsten Patrick, "Not Just Justice: Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women Needs Public Health Input from the Start," *CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association Journal* 188, no. 5 (March 15, 2016): E78

[200] Sandra Dyck, "FASS Blog - Walking With Our Sisters and Other Journeys by Sandra Dyck (Director of the Carleton University Art Gallery)," Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, November 3, 2015, https://carleton.ca/fass/2015/11/fass-blog-walking-with-our-sisters-and-other-journeys-by-sandra-dyck-director-of-the-carleton-university-art-gallery/.

[201] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 204.

carrying on Indigenous stories of the importance of human's connection to the natural world through her own personal artwork as well, drawing on the traditions of ancestral Indigenous beading techniques in her paintings using motifs of plants and animals as symbols for her message.[202]

Christi Belcourt and Ancestral Knowledge of Beading

While Belcourt demonstrates activism in *WWOS,* she also asserts Indigenous presence and ancestral Métis knowledge through her own artistic practice. During the nineteenth century, the Métis peoples were recognized for their fine floral beadwork designs and were known as the "Flower Beadwork People."[203] Canadian historian Lawrence J. Barkwell argues that Métis beadwork acts as visual markers of identity and a sign of wealth and gift-giving.[204] Most Métis beadwork is created using a two-needle technique: the maker strings the beads on a double thread on one needle laid down onto a pattern on hide or fabric. That thread is then secured with a single thread on a second needle.[205] The Métis maker begins by beading the center of the flower with a center bead on a dark-colored hide, velvet, or woolen cloth, beading circular rows out from the center, changing colors every couple of rows.[206]

Barkwell highlights that Métis beaders often use Ojibwa designs by showing the four parts of plants: seeds, the leaves, the buds, and the fruits, which aligns with the cycle of four

[202] Dakota Hoska, "Christi Belcourt: The Wisdom of the Universe," In *Hearts of Our People Native Women Artists*, ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2020), 108.

[203] Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Characteristics of Metis Beadwork," (Louis Riel Institute, 2012), 1.

[204] Barkwell, "Characteristics of Metis Beadwork," 1.

[205] Barkwell, "Characteristics of Metis Beadwork," 2.

[206] Barkwell, "Characteristics of Metis Beadwork," 2.

analogies seen within Ojibwa and Chippewa belief systems.[207] The Métis five petal prairie rose is one of the best-known Métis floral motifs, often including the flower buds, leaves, and vines, which Barkwell argues is a characteristic that has remained over the last two hundred years (fig. 2.5).[208] Métis artist Katherine Boyer says in an interview that prairie roses are important to Métis women in particular because they are "durable, tenacious, beautiful, and widely found on the plains," and often looked to for creative inspiration.[209]

Belcourt paints flowers in a style that emulates Métis beadwork to raise awareness for the Métis nation and as a comment on mainstream Canadian society's lack of knowledge of the Métis nation, further noting that she feels this is her contribution to the Métis nation.[210] Belcourt argues that the Métis are the least celebrated founding peoples in Canada and that the Métis are a "forgotten people."[211] Belcourt states that she uses her painted designs of beadwork to assert that Métis peoples have survived Canadian colonial assimilationist policies.[212] The flowers represent her desire to create something beautiful for the viewer, counterbalancing "negative forces of destruction, despair, violence, and death we are exposed to on a daily basis."[213]

In Belcourt's painting *This Painting is a Mirror* (2012), the background is a deep black; Belcourt paints brightly colored dots that represent small beads, to form motifs of flower

[207] Barkwell, "Characteristics of Metis Beadwork," 2.

[208] Barkwell, "Characteristics of Metis Beadwork," 3.

[209] Lauren Fournier, "Métis Beading and Ancestral Knowledge: A Conversation with Katherine Boyer," *Canadian Art,* accessed March 30, 2023, https://canadianart.ca/interviews/metis-beading-and-ancestral-knowledge-a-conversation-with-katherine-boyer/.

[210] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 147.

[211] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 147.

[212] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 147.

[213] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 148.

Figure 2.5: 4 Sisters Métis Beadwork, *Purple Quill Beadwork*, 2022, Image courtesy of 4 Sisters Métis Beadwork Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/4sistersmetis/

blossoms, vines, leaves, bees, berries, and birds (fig. 2.6). The pattern of floral motifs on the left and right sides of the composition mirror each other, while the plant with large red berries or flowers surrounded by bees in the center of the design field unites the two sides. The bright red Prairie Roses directly refer to ancestral Métis floral motifs commonly used for Métis beadwork on hides. Motifs of flowers, vines, and birds fill the composition of *This Painting is a Mirror*, with little negative space.

The lower area of the design field is filled with a white root system, which connects the ground plants together in harmony. On each side of the composition, there are blue jays and hummingbirds that reflect one another. Belcourt explains that *This Painting is a Mirror* is intended to show the viewer that beauty is already present within them, asserting humans place alongside the natural world as opposed to having dominion over it, highlighting the love and kindness inside all beings.[214] Belcourt often uses motifs of animals and plants to convey Indigenous ancestral knowledge in her work. Belcourt describes her work and its symbolism in relation to a solo exhibition, *Christi Belcourt: Lessons from the Earth* (October 2003-January 2004). She explains that the root systems in her paintings represent two things: all life needs the earth to live, and that there is more than what meets the eye.[215] Additionally, the roots represent the influence of one's cultural heritage in human's lives.[216] The lines that connect the plants represent interconnectedness of all beings. The flowers and leaves are facing upward to look up towards a future that is uncertain due to climate change.[217]

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[214] "Christi Belcourt, This Painting Is a Mirror," *Resilience Project*, accessed September 22, 2023, https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/christi-belcourt.

[215] Tracey Henriksson, "Christi Belcourt's *Lessons from the Earth* Solo Exhibition," Christi Belcourt Showcase, (2003-2004), http://www.christibelcourt.com/Artist/Print_Press/CB_lessons.html.

[216] Henriksson, "Christi Belcourt's *Lessons from the Earth* Solo Exhibition."

[217] Henriksson, "Christi Belcourt's *Lessons from the Earth* Solo Exhibition."

Figure 2.6: Christi Belcourt, *This Painting is a Mirror*, 2012, Acrylic on Canvas, 206 x 256 cm, Image courtesy of The Resilience Project, https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/christi-belcourt

Similar to *This Painting is a Mirror,* in *The Wisdom of the Universe* (2014), Belcourt places Métis knowledge at the forefront through her inclusion of several plant and animal species that are threatened, endangered, or extinct, including the eastern prairie fringed orchid, dwarf lake iris, karner blue butterfly, the cerulean warbler, and Acadian flycatcher (fig. 2.7).[218] Once again, the background of the composition is a deep black, with bright floral and animal motifs filling the design field, directly drawing from Métis beadwork on hide. Like *This Painting is a Mirror,* the pattern of florals seen within the composition of *The Wisdom of the Universe* on the left and right sides mirror each other, while the large, red plant at the center of the design field unites the two sides.

The large, cascading red plant and a white and brown bird are a focal point within the composition. The dark royal blue of connected roots and branches unifies the large royal blue stem system throughout. The floral blossoms are brightly colored, and the greens, blues, reds, yellows, and purples stand out in contrast to the dark background, with the royal blue plants acting as the dominant color throughout the composition. Once again, there is little negative space; the motifs fill the composition, with yellow dots framing the motifs. Belcourt argues that the world is in crisis because of the amount of suffering for many species on earth, which includes humans.[219] With this, she demonstrates in *The Wisdom of the Universe* that all beings are part of the same system, arguing that if humans continue to see themselves as beings that have dominion over the natural world, humans lose their humanity and create imbalance, urging viewers to realize that humans have the ability to change our habits so this does not continue.[220]

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[218] Hoska, "Christi Belcourt," 108.

[219] "Artist's Statement: Christi Belcourt on The Wisdom of the Universe," Art Gallery of Ontario, August 7, 2014, https://ago.ca/agoinsider/artists-statement-christi-belcourt-wisdom-universe.

[220] "Artist's Statement."

Figure 2.7: Christi Belcourt, *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014, Acrylic on Canvas, 171 × 282 cm, Image Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, https://ago.ca/agoinsider/artists-statement-christi-belcourt-wisdom-universe

Belcourt carries the values of the Métis community and humans' relationship to the natural world in her own practice, highlighting the need to recognize the mutual relationships between humans and non-humans. Dakota Hoska, Oglala Lakhóta curator and scholar and Assistant Curator at the Denver Museum of Art, argues that Belcourt's work emphasizes the impact of the losses of biodiverse plant and animal species, again reminding the viewer of the interconnected nature of our existence.[221] Belcourt's respect for this interconnectedness, which Hoska states is central to many Indigenous cultures, stems from her Métis heritage, with Métis knowledge and tradition fueling her work.[222] Hoska argues that through her work, Belcourt demonstrates why humans should abandon the unsustainable path that is being followed.[223]

Indigenous Project: *Living in Relation*

Smith's Indigenous project *Living in Relation* articulates the ancestral relationship between humans and the natural world. This project questions the roles of humans in the natural world and emphasizes how animate and inanimate is not defined in some cultures, including some Indigenous cultures.[224] *Living in Relation* recognizes the importance of both the living and nonliving, asserting the need for mutual responsibility between humans and non-humans.[225] Therefore, *Living in Relation* goes against imposed Western modernist ideas of how humans should live in our current society; *Living in Relation* is in direct opposition of individualism and

[221] Hoska, "Christi Belcourt: The Wisdom of the Universe," 108.

[222] Hoska, "Christi Belcourt: The Wisdom of the Universe," 108.

[223] Hoska, "Christi Belcourt: The Wisdom of the Universe," 108.

[224] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 192.

[225] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 193.

capitalist societies, advocating for gratitude, asking permission, and reciprocity.[226] Belcourt demonstrates these concepts through her beadwork paintings which maintain that life is beautiful, asserting the connection that humans have to the earth.[227] I suggest that Belcourt's artwork represents a philosophy of *Living in Relation.* She asserts the importance not only being thankful to the natural world a world that seeks mutual relationships between humans and non-humans, as she demonstrates through her depictions of beautiful flowers to bring beauty to the viewer, but her assertion of a need for humans to change their capitalistic ways to prevent further environmental crises.

The fine floral beadwork Belcourt represents in her paintings is an ancestral Métis arts practice. According to Belcourt, her depictions of animals, birds, and plants relay concerns for the environment, the decline of biodiversity, the importance of Indigenous spirituality, and bring awareness to Métis culture in Canada, allowing the viewer to make connections between these concepts.[228] In both *This Painting is a Mirror* and *The Wisdom of the Universe,* Belcourt uses motifs of strawberry plants emerging from the ground, including the red berries, leaves, and roots of the plant. In a conversation alongside Ojibway artist and musician Isaac Murdoch, Belcourt tells that the strawberry fruit specifically reflects the ancestral knowledge of the Ojibway, often used by Métis beaders as argued by Barkwell, and are a symbol of life and happiness often called the "heart berry".[229]

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[226] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 203.

[227] Belcourt, "Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self," 150.

[228] Christi Belcourt, "About: Christi Belcourt," Artist Website, *Christi Belcourt Art*, accessed September 19, 2023, https://christibelcourt.ca/pages/art-practice.

[229] Gail Picco, "Christi Belcourt: The Brilliance of a Great Artist." *The Charity Report*, December 16, 2021, https://www.thecharityreport.com/literary-circle/christi-belcourt-the-brilliance-of-a-great-artist/.

As in the project of *Living in Relation,* Belcourt represents ancestral Métis values through symbols such as prairie roses and strawberries, that assert Métis presence. She also demonstrates this through depictions of roots to show human's dependency of the earth, and line to show the interconnectedness of human nature.[230] Through her art, Belcourt urges viewers to understand the need to abandon capitalist and individualistic traits to recognize the importance of ancestral mutual relationships between humans and all beings. Belcourt therefore reminds her viewers through her art that humans do not have dominion over the natural world: we are a part of it.

Conclusion

Belcourt calls attention to the MMIWG2S movement and creates change through active resistance, highlighting the colonial policies responsible to bring justice to women, girls, and Two-Spirit people through the groundbreaking traveling memorial *Walking with Our Sisters.* In addition, she transmits her Métis heritage to the next generations through her paintings that resemble beadwork, making viewers question human's roles in the natural world and our interconnectedness with the environment. Belcourt's artistic and activist work can be tied to Smith's Indigenous projects through her active resistance against the attempted assimilation of Indigenous peoples into the white-settler colonial state.

However, it can be argued that within Belcourt's practice, art and activism are the same. Belcourt expresses her activist intent both through wide-scale memorial installations that fully collaborate with Indigenous communities as well as through her own individual painting practice. These directly contribute to Smith's Indigenous projects articulated in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Belcourt advocates for and creates resistance against colonial ideals that emerged

[230] Henriksson, "Christi Belcourt's *Lessons from the Earth* Solo Exhibition."

from the Enlightenment period, asserting an Indigenous, more specifically Métis, presence into the mainstream art world.

CHAPTER 3: Chelsea Kaiah and the Sustainability of Ancestral Knowledge

Introduction

In *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends that the world is in environmental crisis due to the over extraction of resources by the West in the Non-West.[231] Access to food, clean water, and other basic human needs is becoming a privilege reserved for wealthy people.[232] As a result, Indigenous communities are seeing a greater rise in poverty and worsening health conditions, with many young people leaving to find more opportunities to provide for themselves and their communities.[233] Indigenous peoples continue to work hard to survive under the guise that this is progress and development.[234]

I had the privilege of having multiple conversations with Chelsea Kaiah, Ute and Apache/ Irish settler artist and activist for sustainability and the importance of community. I suggest Kaiah is a representative of a new generation of Indigenous artists who highlight human relationships to the land.[235] Kaiah advocates for a grateful and mutual relationship between humans and nature. I connect her artistic and activist work to Smith's Indigenous projects *Listening to, Feeling and Learning from the Land* and *Discovering the Beauty of Our Knowledge.* This connection is evident in the beadwork and quillwork, which passes on the knowledge that her community Elders and father gave to her to reclaim her Indigenous heritage.

Professor of sustainability science Peter Jacques argues in *Sustainability: The Basics* that sustainability is the act of being able to continue something, and asks how sustainability relates

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[231] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 109.

[232] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 109.

[233] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 110.

[234] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 111.

[235] Thank you, Chelsea, for the knowledge you gave me about your life, art, and practice.

to economics, social hierarchies and marginalized groups, and how to move forward with protecting the environment.[236] Artists who use sustainable art practices, in the context of this chapter, refers to using environmentalist actions that meet the material needs of current artists while preserving resources for future generations.[237] Climate change and biodiversity loss is ongoing, with global efforts aiding in the reversal of damages. These efforts in the U.S. and Canada have created movements to acknowledge the relationship between humans and non-human animals, a term which acknowledges that there is no binary between humans and other animals, and the responsibility that humans have for the continuance of shared social-ecological systems. [238]

The *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability Cases and Actions,* the Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples created by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Switzerland, argues that sustainable living must be respectful to all life. It must improve humans' life, conserve biodiversity, minimize the overuse of resources, and must change personal attitudes toward environmentalism.[239] IUCN further argues that Indigenous peoples' ancestral knowledges may provide an environmental model for the world and vast

[236] Peter Jacques, "Introduction" in *Sustainability: The Basics,* ed. Peter Jacques (Routledge, 2021), 6.
[237] Jacques, "Introduction," 6.

[238] Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions," In *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 564, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199685271.013.31.

[239] IUCN Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples, *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability Cases and Actions* (IUCN Indigenous Peoples and Conservation Initiative International Books, 1997), 32.

information about nature.[240] Therefore, they argue that the concept of sustainability is embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems.[241]

It can be argued that decolonization and sustainability go hand in hand, as Chippewa and Lebanese Professor of Intercultural studies Andrea Riley Mukavetz argues that the goal of decolonization is to create habitable spaces for future generations.[242] Mukavetz asserts that with decolonization, like environmental sustainability, it is crucial to consider how knowledge is created through the relationship between humans and their surroundings.[243] Ultimately, decolonization is defined by the interconnected nature of Indigenous knowledge, with mutual relationships between humans and nature having the ability to define the future.[244]

Most information I present in this chapter pertaining to Kaiah is through my conversations with her. Through these conversations, I center her voice and her perspectives on her art practices, a practice to center Indigenous voice that Smith strongly advocates in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. I begin this chapter with the concept Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as well as broader themes of environmental justice from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the U.S. and Canada to highlight the work of Indigenous activists and Indigenous relationships to the land. I relate these themes to Kaiah's work and her respect for non-human animals, connecting her work to Smith's Indigenous projects. Kaiah embodies the interconnection of sustainability with Indigenous knowledge in her practice, asserting that by

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[240] IUCN Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples, *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability Cases and Actions*, 35.

[241] IUCN Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples, *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability Cases and Actions*, 36.

[242] Mukavetz, "Decolonial Theory and Methodology," 126.

[243] Mukavetz, "Decolonial Theory and Methodology," 127.

[244] Mukavetz, "Decolonial Theory and Methodology," 127.

being more conscious of our actions and how they affect the earth, it is possible to create a better future for generations to come.

Indigenous Relations to the Land: TEK and Indigenous Activism in the U.S and Canada

During our conversations, Kaiah stressed the importance of Indigenous knowledge in relation to sustainability. Scholars Raymond Pierotti and Daniel Wildcat (Yuchi) argue in "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: The Third Alternative" that Western attitudes about the natural world come from Western philosophy, most predominantly the Enlightenment period.[245] The scholars cite Aristotle, René Descartes, and Immanuel Kant to illustrate their argument, as these philosophers argued that humans have dominion over nature.[246] They argue that the natural world has resources that *benefit* man; in this Enlightenment view, as John Locke argued, nature is there for the comfort of humans.[247]

However, Pierotti and Wildcat describe a different approach, which comes from Indigenous peoples in North America, known as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).[248] A fundamental aspect of TEK is that humans are always connected to nature, the recognition that non-humans are valuable, and the extraction of nature refers to seeing non-human animals as members of a community and as prey.[249] Pierotti and Wildcat highlight four aspects to TEK: first, respect for all peoples (including non-human), second, acknowledging the bonds between humans and non-humans, third, the importance of place-based relationships, and last, humans are

[245] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1334.

[246] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1334.

[247] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1334.

[248] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1333.

[249] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1334.

part of nature and not separate from it.[250] Pierotti and Wildcat argue that while TEK has "traditional" in its name, that does not mean that it is stagnant; "traditional" is meant to represent how long this belief has been around for.[251]

However, Indigenous peoples were not viewed as agents of environmental conservation by non-Indigenous people until the twenty-first century. Instead, Indigenous peoples have been viewed as victims of the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss.[252] Indigenous land management practices have shown to result in higher biodiversity on Indigenous reservations than on non-reservation land.[253] Because of this, ecologists push for collaboration with Indigenous communities for land conservation to one day meet global conservation goals set for each country.[254] Potawatomi environmental justice scholar Kyle Whyte begins his article "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions" with the argument that Indigenous peoples assert self-determination through their own forms of government and laws, which helps to challenge the still-present forms of colonialism.[255] Whyte emphasizes the skills of Indigenous environmentalists, which includes their organizational and intellectual capabilities.[256]

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[250] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1335.

[251] Pierotti and Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," 1338.

[252] Linda Etchart, "The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Combating Climate Change," *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (August 2017): 1.

[253] IUCN Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples, *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability Cases and Actions*, 51–52.

[254] IUCN Inter-Commission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples, *Indigenous Peoples and Sustainability Cases and Actions*, 52.

[255] Whyte, "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions," 563.

[256] Whyte, "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions," 565.

In Canada and the U.S., treaty rights have served as protection of lands against industrial entities because other legal protections have failed.[257] In his essay, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," American sociologist Brett Clark argues that the environmental issues that are more often faced by Indigenous communities are tied to centuries of colonialism.[258] The over extraction of land resources by the U.S. government began through programs to depopulate Indigenous reservations, with the encouragement of Indigenous urban relocation movements during the twentieth century, such as the Voluntary Relocation Program (1956).[259] With the unstable political climate of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S., the interest in raw resources increased, such as for metal and ore.[260]

As a result, the environmental justice movement gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States as grassroots groups formed, with Indigenous peoples making up a large part of the movement.[261] The Indigenous Environmental Movement (IEM) in the U.S. is grounded in the need to sustain the environment to defend ways of life and to retain treaty rights and Indigenous sovereignty.[262] These movements include going against over-mining and defying industrial corporations. These movements are radical in form, challenging the capitalist Western

[257] Jonathan Clapperton and Liza Piper, "In the Shadow of the Green Giants: Environmentalism and Civic Engagement," in *Environmental Activism on the Ground: Small Green and Indigenous Organizing*, ed. Jonathan Clapperton and Liza Piper (Calgary, CA: University of Calgary Press, 2019), 5.

[258] Brett Clark, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," *Organization and Environment* 15, no. 4 (December 2002): 415, https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026602238170.

[259] Clark, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," 418.

[260] Clark, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," 418.

[261] Clark, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," 411.

[262] Clark, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," 411.

society as well as the system that allows the over-extraction of resources that allows for the gain of capital.[263]

Associate Professor of Anthropology Anna J. Willow argues in "Strategies for Survival: First Nations Encounters with Environmentalism" that Indigenous activism in Canada has moved towards community-based and collaborative approaches that protect lands while incorporating Indigenous peoples and their knowledges since the movement began in the 1970s.[264] Willow argues that environmentalism is only one key movement in Indigenous communities to ensure cultural survival and the continuance of land-based subsistence that Indigenous peoples depend on.[265] The Canadian government acknowledges Indigenous environmental leadership, arguing that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples have been at the forefront of these movements. For the Canadian government, Indigenous ecological knowledge is crucial to achieve foundational changes to address climate change.[266]

Kaiah contends that for Indigenous peoples, especially those who grow up on reservations, activism has a different definition than what the dominant settler culture associates it with.[267] She argues that activism can be conversations about injustices within Indigenous communities which creates vulnerable conversations that can be a key for change.[268] For Kaiah,

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[263] Clark, "The Indigenous Environmental Movement in the United States," 435.

[264] Anna Willow, "Strategies for Survival: First Nations Encounters with Environmentalism," in *Environmental Activism on the Ground: Small Green and Indigenous Organizing*, ed. Liza Piper and Jonathan Clapperton (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2019), 25.

[265] Willow, "Strategies for Survival," 26.

[266] Environment and Climate Change Canada, "A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy: Canada's Strengthened Climate Plan to Create Jobs and Support People, Communities and the Planet" (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020), 10.

[267] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

[268] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

activism is not just educating on sensitive topics, which is often how it is perceived in the West, but focusing attention on communities affected by said injustices and to take charge and labor to improve lives.[269]

In her own activism, Kaiah works with people going through hard situations because of attempted assimilation, offering resources and support to community members. She argues in the age of social media, activism in the form of verbal education has dominated the idea of activists, saying that there is an uneven balance between those that educate versus those who physically go into communities and help.[270] One way Kaiah expresses this activism is through her art practice, and while her art is not necessarily meant to act as activism, the work she creates facilitates conversations for the need for mutual respect for all beings and the importance of Indigenous knowledges.

Ancestral Knowledge

Kaiah began her artistic practice in her late teens, discovering her deep connection to her Indigenous heritage while completing her B.F.A. at Watkins College of Art and Design in Nashville, Tennessee.[271] Before this, she had spent most of her teenage years separating herself from her culture and spirituality. At nineteen she started to reconnect with her culture, beginning with creating a relationship to the land and non-human animals through her father's teachings when hunting. Kaiah served as the Artist in Residence at the Denver Art Museum in the winter

[269] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

[270] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

[271] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

of 2022 and is currently the Artist in Residence at Redline Contemporary Art Center in Denver until 2024.

Kaiah did not learn her practice from her biological family, as many members of her family suffer from addiction on her Indigenous side due to the trauma of attending a boarding school for Apache children in Arizona during the twentieth century. This school was one of many in the U.S. and Canada boarding/ residential school system, which were created during the nineteenth century to attempt to assimilate Indigenous children into white- settler society through means of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.[272] This system scarred Indigenous communities, as one of the main purposes of the schools was to strip children of their culture and language. Kaiah's legal surname is James because of this system, as this name was given to her father by the school.[273]

However, her father was able to break the cycle and is a strong influence in her life and practice.[274] A large part of Kaiah's art practice engages with the transfer of intergenerational knowledge. Ute community members taught Kaiah ancestral art practices, such as quillwork and beading, which is part of a larger movement of Indigenous youth developing an interest in ancestral practices. However, Kaiah told me that this did not happen easy, and that like any practice, Indigenous makers must reach out and apply themselves to learn these skills.[275] Because Ute community members taught Kaiah her beading and quilling practice, she makes a

[272] See: Natahnee Nuay Winder, "Colliding Heartwork." in *Residential Schools and Indigenous Peoples from Genocide via Education to the Possibilities for Processes of Truth, Restitution, Reconciliation, and Reclamation*, ed. Stephen Minton (1st Ed. Routledge, 2019), 141- 163. and J. R. Miller*, Residential Schools and Reconciliation: Canada Confronts its History* (Toronto; Buffalo; University of Toronto Press, 2017), 4-7.

[273] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 29th, 2023.

[274] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

[275] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 29th, 2023.

significant effort in her activism to give back to her community. She teaches beading and quillwork classes and workshops, with the quillwork lessons being exclusive to Indigenous peoples to keep the knowledge within the community.

Kaiah explains that sourcing her own hides from bison, deer, and antelope embodies her art practice. Sustainability is the foundation of her practice as using second-hand materials or materials she has collected herself from deer, bison, or antelope, reduces the need to manufacture new products because of the lower supply demand, reducing the consumption of new materials.[276] When hunting with her father, who is knowledgeable of the land the Ute reservation is on, he told stories of his own life experiences on the land. Hunting with her father means the telling of stories and recounting memories of the mountains to pass down to the next generations of Indigenous hunters on the Ute reservation. His storytelling helps her learn the land because the reservation is mostly unmapped, making stories crucial to navigate the land around them.[277] Kaiah's father taught his children to shoot guns, hunt, and butcher the animals they hunted, which organs are what, what cut of meat they are looking at, and how to take the hides off the animals. These are the hides she quills and beads in her art practice. These valuable teachings, which taught her how to maintain relationships with the land around her, show the transfer of Indigenous ancestral knowledge through the power of oral stories.

Kaiah demonstrates the importance of intergenerational knowledge in a variety of mediums. In the exhibition *Abhorrent Behavior* at the Dairy Arts Center in Boulder, Colorado (2023), her video project titled *Buffalo Project*, which she filmed on a Fuji camera from August 2022 to June 2023, takes viewers through the processes of smoking hides. One part of the series

[276] Saleh Md Arman and Cecilia Mark-Herbert, "Ethical Pro-Environmental Self-Identity Practice: The Case of Second-Hand Products," *Sustainability* 14, no. 4 (January 2022): 2154.

[277] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

is shown on a screen which lays flat on the floor, covered in a duct tape frame and pebbles, meant to represent how Kaiah suspends a hide while she rubs it with a varied brain mixture (fig. 3.1). The other two video displays of the project are on the walls, one in front of a yellow wall color and the other projecting on an Apache-style shaped screen, which Kaiah says is seen on Apache quillwork and beadwork pieces (fig. 3.2). All the hides that are shown being processed in her videos are used to make her beadwork and quillwork bags. This video series demonstrates these various knowledges taught to Kaiah by her community, which embodies her entire practice.

Another work created by Kaiah that demonstrates the need for mutual relationships between humans and other beings is her beaded hide bag *Wallow* (2023) (fig. 3.3). The composition of the beaded hide bag takes place on the Plains, where the main subject, Kaiah, leans near a bison with her hair flowing around her. Both figures have exposed ribs and heart, showing their connection and similarities to one another through identical styles of beadwork and quills as the ribs. The background of the composition is filled with swirling shades of blue and black, with stark white shooting stars crashing down towards the earth. The handles and border of the bag are light blue and lavender, which is a stark contrast to the deeper colors within the composition.

Kaiah describes this bag as a personal piece about mourning and how it relates to hunting.[278] According to Kaiah, this hide bag is one of the strongest examples of the intergenerational transfer of Indigenous knowledge as well as different forms of activism concerning the environment. For Kaiah, hunting and processing hides can be a form of activism in itself as it directly goes against trophy hunting practices, which aim to hunt the biggest

[278] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 29, 2023.

Figure 3.1: Chelsea Kaiah, Floor installation of *Buffalo hide series*, August 2022-June 2023, filmed on a Fuji camera projected on screen, frame made from blue tarp, and rocks, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO. Image courtesy of the author.

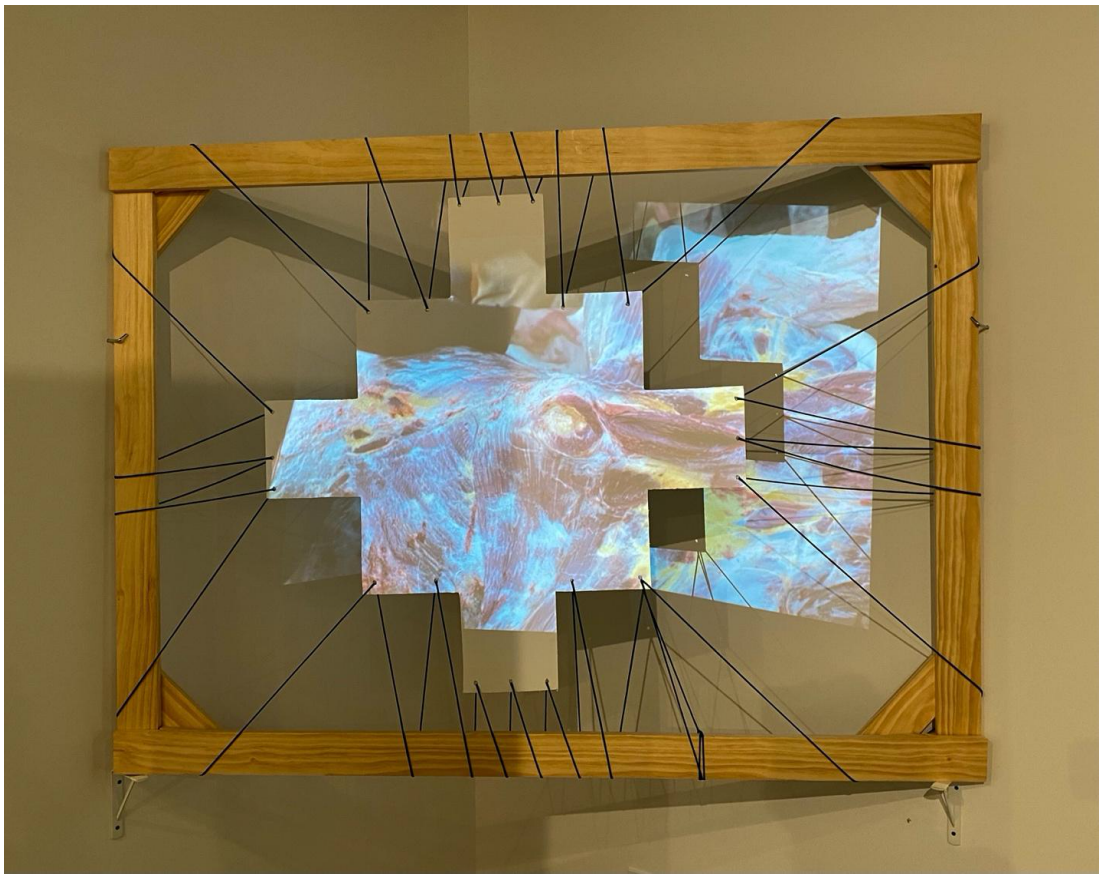

Figure 3.2: Chelsea Kaiah, *Buffalo hide series*, August 2022- June 2023, filmed on a Fuji camera projected on an Apache style diamond made of hard foam tied with cotton yarn within a wooden frame, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO. Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 3.3: Chelsea Kaiah, close look of *Wallow*, 2023, Chestnut dyed brown porcupine quills, vintage cut beads, miyuki glass beads, Dentalium, rope, felt, Bison hide, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, Colorado, Image courtesy of the author.

animals not for meat or hide but purely for sport.[279] While there is a connection between Kaiah and the bison, there is a mourning for the life that is taken. The bison shown is also female, creating a deeper connection between Kaiah and the Bison; ultimately, *Wallow* describes gratitude and love towards living beings. *Wallow* demonstrates a different side to the hunting process. While *Buffalo Project* is showing the exact process needed to be done to prepare a hide, *Wallow* shows the internal side of the act of hunting.

Indigenous Project: *Listening to, Feeling and Learning from the Land*

Kaiah contributes to Smith's Indigenous project *Listening to, feeling and learning from the land* through her two works: *Buffalo Project* and *Wallow*. The *Listening to, feeling and learning from the land* project demonstrates the ancestral relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land around them, shown through stories, values, and language.[280] This project is supported by the idea of *living in relation*, working towards recognizing the agency that non-humans have. However, the difference between this project and the project *Living in Relation* is the action behind it. Therefore, the project *Living in Relation,* which I relate to the work of Christi Belcourt in Chapter 2, is the *mindset* while *Listening to, feeling and learning from the land* is one that asks what these principles would look like in real world applications.[281] Smith mostly refers to this project in a scientific context, but I suggest the project can be manifested in different ways, for example, Kaiah's artworks and practice.

[279] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 29th, 2023.

[280] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 206.

[281] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 206.

Buffalo Project walks viewers through the varied steps of hide processing, hides that are then used for Kaiah's bags. These techniques have been passed down through generations and have survived attempts to dismantle Indigenous knowledges in the U.S. and Canada. Kaiah uses these techniques in her everyday life, fully incorporating ancestral knowledge into her practice. In *Wallow,* the viewer is confronted by two figures, one human and the other non-human, shown to have the same inner makeup. This directly shows Kaiah's relationship with nature, which is reciprocal between both.

The understanding between Indigenous peoples and nature is seen as one of mutual respect, where they see humans and non-humans as equals rather than on a hierarchical scale. TEK provides another way of looking at these relationships, as there is no romanticization of non-human animals or nature but acknowledging that non-human lives are just as valuable as human life. In the narration of her *Buffalo Project*, Kaiah says, "Let's honor the land we are on, and let's honor the animals. The animals we are able to learn from. They teach us so much. How to be curious, how to be mischievous, how to embrace the land that surrounds us, and the skills that are so important to uphold these lessons."[282]

Gratitude Towards the Natural World and Its Beings

In one conversation, I asked Kaiah what sustainability specifically means for her artistic practice. For her, sustainability stems from hunting bison, deer, and antelope to collect materials. Along with being able to harvest materials for her art, the meat sustains her family for the entire year. Hunting is not just the process of setting out to kill an animal, it requires skill and patience

[282] Chelsea Kaiah, *Buffalo Project*, (2023), 4:05, https://www.chelseakaiah.com/video.

to learn what they eat and where they reside during the winter months, making the process challenging.

With a Native Arts and Cultural Foundation grant, Kaiah built a smoke shed on the Ute reservation, meaning she must go home to sustain her practices.[283] She argues that if you do not regularly practice the skills of hide processing, you will lose them.[284] She begins by saging the bison or antelope, a process of burning a bundle of sage and using the smoke to cleanse the non-human animal, then removing the hide. Kaiah then rubs a brain- mixture liquid on the hide.[285] After resting in the sun for a few days, Kaiah takes off all the fur from the hide with a double-handled knife.[286] Finally, she smokes the hide in her smoke shed. With these hides, she makes many works of beaded or quillwork art, which she argues is inherent in her practice of sustainability. I was fortunate enough to visit her studio at the Redline Contemporary Art Center in Denver and get first-hand experience touching an antelope hide, which was soft, velvet-like, and smelled strongly of smoky campfire.

Kaiah argues that while she does not necessarily see her own work as activist due to her art training, she must be an activist for her art process.[287] She argues that by creating hide work, she is demonstrating the history of colonization and the history of Indigenous peoples' relationship to both bison and hide work. This is a reason why Kaiah is pro-hunting, because she

[283] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

[284] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

[285] Portage College, *Hide Tanning: The Traditional 13 Steps*, (2017), 7:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jw50DFNQveQ.

[286] Kaiah, *Buffalo Project*, 2:18.

[287] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

educates non-Indigenous people on the importance and role of hunting for Indigenous communities and what an Indigenous hunter looks like.[288]

Additionally, Kaiah aims to only use naturally occurring or recycled art materials. A large reason why she decided not to pursue painting was that most paints are not environmentally friendly and damage the earth.[289] By hunting and finding her own supplies through second-hand stores and trade networks with fellow artists, she is able to know the source of those materials. To her, it is worth it to do extra steps in collecting material when accounting for the environmental impact. Kaiah argues that it is completely possible for all artists to be more environmentally conscious through being aware of what materials they are using. She argues that the baby steps are just as important as the bigger steps, such as reusing cups, repurposing old material, and taking good care of art equipment to avoid over consumption.[290]

In *Quintessence of a Quill* (2023), Kaiah displays the dynamics of quillwork, through intricately dyed quills worked on deer hide (fig. 3.4). When approaching the work, the viewer is met with three different sets of quills, each with a different color palette: greens, pinks and oranges, and blues. Looking closely at the quills, one can see that there are splotches of dye throughout, showing the different levels of dye absorption (fig. 3.5). Kaiah dyes her quills using plant-based materials. The plant-based dyes absorb into the quills differently, creating various shades of color. In this piece, she used turmeric, blueberries, and beets to achieve her desired color palette. The metal armature that is surrounding the quills is wrapped in deer hide that she processed herself. Porcupine quills are hollow, as she explained, and so for this piece she weaved

[288] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

[289] Tina Porwal, "Paint Pollution Harmful Effects on Environment," *Social Issues and Environmental Problems*, Vol. 3., no. 9:SE (2015): 1.

[290] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

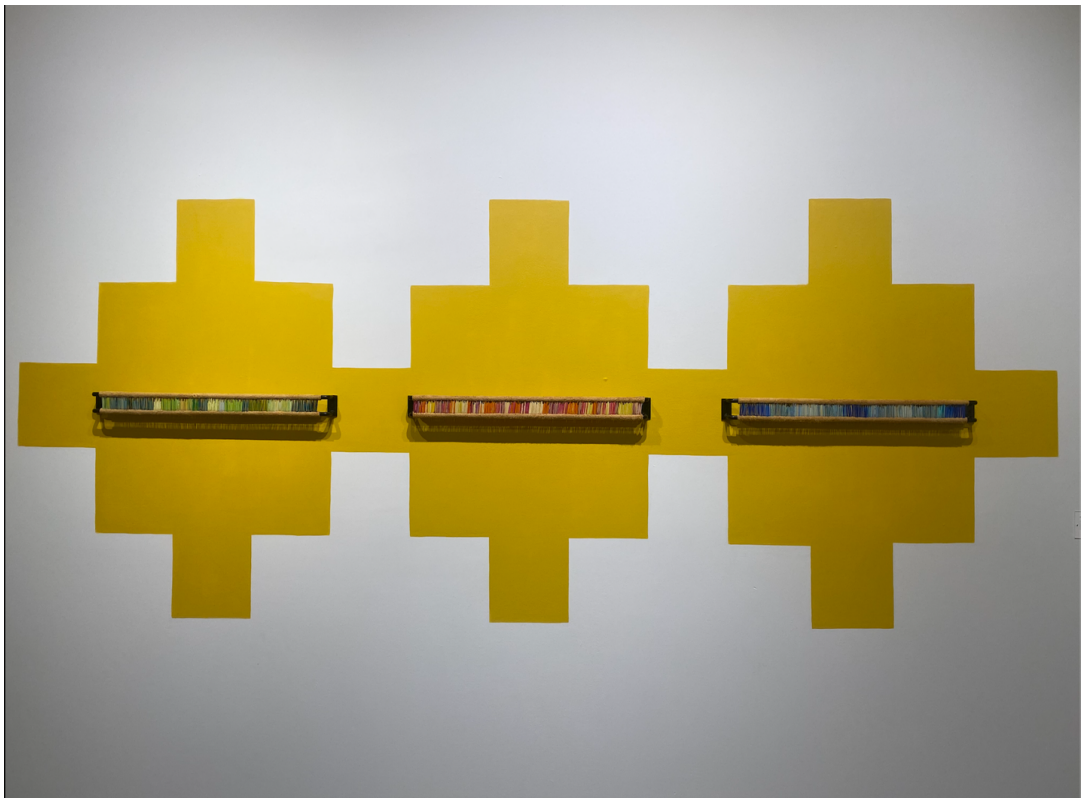

Figure 3.4: Chelsea Kaiah, *Quintessence of a Quill*, 2023, various dyed porcupine quills (turmeric, blueberries, beets, dye), deer hide, metal armature, thread, 2.5x30 in. each, Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 3.5: Chelsea Kaiah, Close look at the dye absorption in *Quintessence of a Quill*, 2023, various dyed porcupine quills (blueberries, dye), deer hide, metal armature, thread, 2.5x30 in. each, Redline Contemporary Art Center, Denver, Image courtesy of the author.

the thread through the quills to hide the stitching she used to secure them.[291] The vibrant yellow wall at the Redline Contemporary Art Center in Denver provides contrast to the artwork, accentuating the various shades of dyed quills.

Kaiah acknowledges that having access to sustainable materials is not always an option for every artist, due to costs of supplies. To combat this, Kaiah has set up a trade system with other makers and artists. She argues that this allows for other artists to have the assets of her work as well as the assets of their work for herself with no monetary transactions involved. She told me that she values this system more than money, especially because it has the addition of forming connections with other Indigenous makers. Kaiah and I briefly discussed the dominant settler society's need, historically and today, to commodify Indigenous art practices, which stems directly from the Enlightenment period. As stated, Kaiah is apprehensive to teach non-Indigenous people the art of quillwork, as she is unsure of what the learner would do with that information. Kaiah, in reference to using porcupine quills, said of the matter:

> "I think a lot of people's mindset is really muddled today. They're like, how can I make money from this?... How can I commercialize it? And that's really scary because this is an animal and the way that it's sourced right now is very sustainable. It's very sustainable. This animal was roadkill and now I'm able to sustain my practice and teach others from it for years. So, it's scary to think if someone were to learn quill work and then try to commercialize it, it would most likely lead to capturing and killing the porcupine specifically to make quill work. So, when you have this type of knowledge, and you have an animal that you work from… you have to be really particular."[292]

Quillwork is directly tied to spiritual work for her, often another reason why she is wary of teaching this information to outsiders. She honors and respects the animal and thanks them for giving her materials for her practice.

[291] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, March 1st, 2023.

[292] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

Most of the porcupines Kaiah has sourced are roadkill, as it is difficult to find them in the wild to hunt. If Indigenous makers find a porcupine that is alive, Kaiah told me that the aunties will hit the animal with a blanket, which allows the quills to stick to the material to be harvested.[293] After this, the women let the porcupine go on its way. The North American Porcupine, *U-pŏŏch* in Ute, as Kaiah told me, is the only kind that climbs trees in the *Kava Avich*, or the Rocky Mountains. During a studio visit, she showed me her large supply of these quills, all sourced from a single animal (fig. 3.6).[294] The cardboard box contained thousands of quills, with the porcupine fur still attached, and leaves and sticks remained in the box. To begin the quilling process, Kaiah washes the quills to remove their oily coating to make sure the dye can fully soak into the quill.[295] She then clips the tips of the porcupine, which have one-way barbs that make it harder to remove from the skin, causing irritation to those who get pricked.[296] She then presses the quill with her teeth to flatten them so they can be woven into designs.

Kaiah's beaded bag *Recusant Ute and her Absence* (2023) shows the often-seen subject in Kaiah's beaded hide bags, Coyote-Woman, who has the body of a human and the face of a coyote, most likely representing the Ute creation story (fig. 3.7). The Ute creation story begins with the Creator, Sinawav, and Coyote, who were the only ones who lived on Earth.[297] Sinawav gave Coyote a bag of sticks and told him to carry the bag and empty it at the sacred grounds to

[293] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

[294] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, March 1st, 2023.

[295] Kealey Boyd, "A Contemporary Take on Traditional Indigenous Porcupine Quillwork," *Hyperallergic*, September 8, 2022, http://hyperallergic.com/741700/a-contemporary-take-on-traditional-indigenous-porcupine-quillwork/.

[296] Uldis Roze, "Introducing Porcupines," in *Porcupines: the animal answer guide* (JHU Press, 2012), 2.

[297]Alden Naranjo, "Ute Creation Story," Southern Ute Indian Tribe, ed. William Wroth (Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 2000), https://www.southernute-nsn.gov/history/ute-creation-story/.

Figure 3.6: A look into Chelsea's Quill Supply, 2023, Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 3.7: Chelsea Kaiah, close look of *Recusant Ute and Her Absence*, 2023, Porcupine quills (natural and dyed), seed beads, greasy opals, 24K gold Charlotte beads, antelope hide, felt, and rope, 10x24 in., Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO. Image courtesy of the author.

increase the people. However, the curious Coyote opened the bag too early, and the people came spilling out, speaking different languages and running in different directions, unable to be caught. The disappointed Sinavav told Coyote that the escaped people are the tribes that will always bother the chosen ones, the Utes, who are most valiant of heart. Because Coyote failed his task, Sinawav cursed him to wander on all fours and only be a nightcrawler for the rest of time.[298]

In the composition of *Recusant Ute,* Coyote-Woman is "thrown" into the Apache- style grid, filled with red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and pink squares. The blues of the coyote face of Coyote-Woman contrast the brighter shades of the Apache-style grid. Within the squares are large quill- circles around the composition, which are spread in the background as well as layering on top of the figure, representing gaps. Kaiah describes these gaps as absences from attempted colonial assimilation. The circles are filled in with quillwork, representing Indigenous knowledge filling in the gaps, which cuts off the Coyote-Woman. The beadwork and quillwork fill every space of the hide bag, making viewers solely focus on the story of the work. Kaiah creates this piece in the hope for Indigenous futures and the continuance of Indigenous knowledges, such as beadwork and hide work.

Indigenous Project: *Discovering the Beauty of Indigenous Knowledge*

Smith argues that the main goal of the project *Discovering the Beauty of Indigenous Knowledge* is to create systems that help facilitate Indigenous development and enrichment of Indigenous lives.[299] Smith primarily refers to this in relation to science, arguing that Indigenous

[298] Naranjo, "Ute Creation Story."

[299] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 182.

knowledges have rarely been taught in schools in the West, and further arguing that Western knowledges are hostile to Indigenous knowledges.

Smith argues that by investing more in matters that interest Indigenous peoples, such as environmental and biodiversity concerns, there are new possibilities for Indigenous peoples to engage in these topics and find creative solutions for problems. Smith contends that this project is closely tied to Indigenous knowledges concerning the environment, or TEK.[300] Smith argues that Indigenous knowledges are not exclusive to the environment. These knowledges are relevant to human behavior and ethics and mutual relationships between humans and other humans or between humans and other beings. Smith argues that these knowledges have beauty that has the power to make the world beautiful.[301]

The hunting and processing of the animals takes Kaiah months at a time. She also acknowledges the mindset in many non-Indigenous hunting circles, which is to trophy hunt, or go after the biggest animal. Those who trophy hunt seek the largest bucks with the biggest antlers, but her hunting goes against that. Kaiah's father discouraged this mindset to her and her siblings. Her father also instilled the mindset of gratitude to the animals and their lives that sustain them.

Additionally, Kaiah is adamant that porcupine quillwork weaving should not be seen as just craft. According to Kaiah, porcupine quillwork takes a lot of time, energy, and effort, including the actual sourcing of the animal. For the artist, it is not a mere act of collecting the quills from roadkill, it is a spiritual act. When she has sourced the materials from the porcupine's body, she buries the rest of the porcupine, making sure to bless the animal. Therefore, Kaiah

[300] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 182.

[301] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 183.

leads her art practice with knowledge from her family and community. Her father taught her how to hunt, and her community taught her the beauty of quillwork and beadwork. By using these practices in her art and practice, Kaiah is continuing to pass ancestral knowledge down to the next generations of Indigenous youth, demonstrating the importance of these knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The call to create environmentally sustainable choices in everyday life is not new, but it is gaining greater attention through the voices of Indigenous activists. Kaiah asserts the need for environmental action through her art and her self-awareness of materials she uses. Additionally, the act of storytelling is deeply embedded in her work through her father's stories that taught her lessons of the land and her telling of the Ute creation story. These stories demonstrate the power of Indigenous oral stories and traditions, creating memories that guide her practice. Through her quillwork and beadwork bags, she carries on the ancestral traditions and stories from her culture while still presenting contemporary themes through intricate designs. Kaiah told me that this practice is everything she could have wanted for her life and her art, as she has the opportunity to honor the animals and show non-Indigenous people "why these animals are so important, why indigenous animals in this land are so important. And for Native people to be able to work with them and have access to them, and to have this connection with them is so important."[302]

[302] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, January 20th, 2023.

CONCLUSION

Smith states throughout *Decolonizing Methodologies* that her focus is anti-exploitative research, not anti-research. While the first part of the book is intended more for non-Indigenous scholars, as Smith explains, the second part of the book provides insight that is valuable for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers to understand Indigenous perspectives in activism and research.[303]

It is important to note that Smith asserts in the first part of the book that Indigenous peoples are not victims of their circumstances, as they have found ways to revitalize and bring forth Indigenous knowledge despite historical and ongoing racism. Smith allows readers to see research as a tool against oppression for Indigenous peoples as opposed to the elitist space of Western scholars. I connect these colonial histories of oppression and their impacts on contemporary Indigenous communities to the work of Christi Belcourt and Chelsea Kaiah, who in their own distinct practices assert the presence of Indigenous communities in the U.S. and Canada.

Belcourt is an activist for multiple causes concerning Indigenous and First Nations peoples. Among them, she is a strong advocate for recognition of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit peoples' epidemic. Belcourt proudly highlights Métis and First Nations knowledge through the community installation and memorial *Walking with Our Sisters*. She asserts that Indigenous peoples survived the attempts of colonial genocide and assimilation in projects and arts practice that connect to and support the principles of Smith's Indigenous project *Finding and Seeking Justice for the Disappeared*.

[303] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 288-289.

Belcourt also confronts the erasure of Métis peoples in Canada through her personal practice, asserting Métis presence and culture in the mainstream art canon. The visual language and symbolism in her paintings that reproduce Métis beadwork assert Métis ancestral knowledge as well as advocating for humans to understand our ancestral role in nature. Belcourt acts as one representative of the Métis community through her assertion of Métis knowledge of humans' interconnectedness to nature, contributing to the Indigenous project *Living in Relation*. An avenue I wish to explore in the future is Belcourt's passion for medicinal plants and her teaching the topic on various social media channels, which further adds to her assertion of ancestral Indigenous knowledges.

Kaiah is an advocate for environmental sustainability in her practice, with ancestral Indigenous knowledges strongly informing her practice. Kaiah highlights mutual relationships between humans and nature in her work. She demonstrates this through hunting for both subsistence for her family and materials for her art, contributing to the Indigenous project *Listening to, Feeling and Learning from the Land.* Kaiah uses her art practice to reconnect with her Indigenous heritage, which was not taught to her earlier in her life due to the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and the attempted assimilation by the U.S. government.

Kaiah passes down the skills of beadwork and quillwork to others in her community, continuing the sharing of knowledge that community members gave to her, contributing to Smith's Indigenous project *Discovering the Beauty of Indigenous Knowledge.* Kaiah's activism is not tied directly to art itself, as she told me in conversation, but to the processes she uses to highlight the importance of hunting to Indigenous peoples and the advocation for more

sustainable art materials.[304] I deeply appreciate her insight into her art and practice in our many conversations. One avenue to explore in future study is more of Kaiah's activism, as she also highlights many causes on her own social media platforms, such as MMIWG2S and Indigiqueerness in the community.

Comanche author Paul Chaat Smith argues that too much of Indigenous art is expected to be that of protest, anger, and easy celebration of surviving genocide.[305] He asserts that Indigenous peoples' survival against the odds of settler colonialism is worthy of celebration, however: "Dressing up, intellectually or literally, to someone else's idea of who we are insults that rich tradition of struggle and resistance, and turns our party into someone else's freak show, with us as entertainment."[306] I have drawn from Paul Chaat Smith's attitude throughout this thesis, and see the importance in avoiding making overarching statements about Belcourt and Kaiah, and acknowledge that they are not the only voice for their respective causes, with many others working alongside them. I also recognize that each of their respective works have deeper meanings than the legacies of the Indigenous oppression they may highlight.

This thesis is not a comprehensive survey of colonial practices in the U.S. and Canada in relation to contemporary Indigenous artists; there is still much work to be done on the topic. However, my thesis contributes to the discourse surrounding decolonization in relation to visual language and Indigenous activism. Other avenues of study remain for how efforts of activism are enacted through Indigenous artists' work. Outside the scope of this project were more details concerning Indigenous-led activist movements in the last century, including those actively

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[304] Chelsea Kaiah, in conversation with the author, September 28th, 2023.

[305] Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians is Wrong,* 26.

[306] Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians is Wrong*, 27.

fighting for the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty as well as the representation of Indigenous artists, specifically women, in the museum space.

From this study, I have first, gained insight into how contemporary Indigenous artists actively work against the erasure of Indigenous knowledges through their respective art forms and activism. And second, I have learned approaches and methods to center Indigenous voices in research. In the exhibition of Indigenous visual arts, collaboration and conversation between Indigenous communities and museums is increasingly becoming an essential practice. This thesis aims to support this practice, to demonstrate that it is possible to have open dialogue with Indigenous creators to show their work in non-exploitive ways. There is a growing movement towards having Indigenous advisory committees and conversations with Indigenous artists in museums across the U.S. and Canada. I argue throughout this thesis why these practices are crucial.

I suggest this project is an important contribution to discussions around contemporary Indigenous art as it shows the various dimensions of Indigenous women's art practices. These dimensions include community care, gratitude, and appreciating the beauty of the land. It is a practice that is deeply engrained with hope. Both Belcourt and Kaiah demonstrate through their art and activism that Indigenous peoples are not victims of settler colonialism, but survivors of it, asserting the continued presence of Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada.

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APPENDIX

W*alking with Our Sisters* Installation Sites (2013-2019)

2013: University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta; First Nations University Gallery, Regina, SK.

2014: Tower Hill Museum Hosted By G'zaagin Art Gallery, Parry Sound, ON; Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg, MB; Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, Sault Ste. Marie, ON; Algoma University, Flin Flon, Manitoba; Elks Hall, Flin Flon, MB; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, ON; Wanuskewin Heritage Park,Saskatoon/Wanuskewin, SK.

2015: Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife, NT; Kwanlin Dun Cultural Centre,Whitehorse, YK; Red Deer Museum & Art Gallery, Red Deer, AB; K'omoks Band Hall, Courtenay, BC; Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, ON; Kawehnoke Recreation Center, Akwesasne First Nation.

2016: City of North Battleford Chapel Gallery, North Battleford, SK; Brandon University, Brandon, MB; Ziibiwing Centre of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways, Mt. Pleasant, MI.

2017: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, NS; Kateri School, Kahnawà:ke First Nation, QC; Aboriginal Education Centre, Tkaronto (Toronto), ON; The Gathering Place by the Grand, Six Nations, ON.

2018: Laurentian University, Sudbury, ON; Super 8 Hotel, Kenora, ON; Riddell Library & Learning Centre, Calgary, AB; Art Gallery of Grand Prairie, Grand Prairie, AB; Taylor Community Hall, Fort St. John/Taylor, BC.

2019: Batouche National Historic Site,Batoche, SK.