

**MY GRANDFATHER THE CEDAR  
MY GRANDMOTHER THE WOOL**

By

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# Abstract

This thesis is a personal journey that seeks to comprehend whether First Nations philosophies, specifically the Coast Salish can contribute to current research on sustainability. As a Coast Salish person, I initially set out to deepen my understanding of my own culture and ended up learning about the environment – simply because the two cannot be teased apart. My praxis explores stories based within Coast Salish knowledge of the land, seasonal harvesting, elder’s guidance, and a traditional philosophy of respect. I weave this with Western philosophies centered on land ethic and systems thinking to create a space of hybridity. This thesis describes my new understanding of materiality in our interdependent world. The writing structure is woven and fragmented with different voices that reflect the academic, the poetic and the making. The writing is tangential, repetitive and circular, which mimics the structure of the traditional oral history of the Coast Salish people.



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# A Conversation

Alright.

You know, I hear this story up north. Maybe Yellowknife, that one, somewhere.  
I hear it maybe a long time. Old story this one. One hundred years, maybe more.  
Maybe not so long either, this story

Thomas King, *One Good Story, That One*

Alright.

You know, I hear this story from the Coast. Maybe Saanich, that one, somewhere.  
I hear it maybe a year ago. Old story this one. One hundred years, maybe more.  
Maybe not so long either, this story...

Rachelle Clifford, "My Grandfather the Cedar, My Grandmother the Wool"



Cedar Tree located on the Tsawout Reserve

# Opening Words

I am Coast Salish.

The Tsawout Band.

Saanich Peninsula.

Vancouver Island.

British Columbia.

Coast Salish Territory.

Want.

A deepened understanding.

This is my chance.

Immersion.

Bachelors of Fine Arts.

University of Victoria.

Sculpture.

A process.

Working with my hands.

Working with materials.

Understanding materials.

A tacit knowledge.

Slow.

Repetitive.

Entering.

Masters of Applied Arts.

Emily Carr University.

New.

Design.

Connections.

First Nations.

Exploration.

Found.

Understanding.

Land.

Ecology.

Systems Thinking.

Webs of Relations.

Materiality.

Stories.

Integration.

Repetition.

A Way of Knowing.

A journey.

# The Living River

When I was a boy, my father and I fished this stream. There were many fish. Now there are no more fish that return here. They are many reasons why but I think it is mostly because the people don't understand the river. I have never forgotten the words that my father spoke to me one day when we were fishing here. He said that the river is a living thing and if you listen, he will speak to you.

*I am a living river. I am the arteries of your body. I channel the life giving rain that falls upon the land and carry that water to the organs and extremities of the land. Like the arteries of your body, I bring nourishment to all who live on my banks. Great runs of salmon course through me. I help to irrigate the land where the berries grow and where you grow your fruits and vegetables. I water your animals. I give you water to drink and to run cities and industries. Without my life giving waters your civilizations would not grow.*

*This is true for the Indian as it is true for the white man. Today I transport your logs to your sawmills, your ore to your smelters, your finished goods to your markets. I am like the veins of the body as well, removing the waste products of your civilization, your personal waste and your industrial affluent, the runoff from the flooding. Long ago when there were few of you on my banks I could do these things well. The native people in their villages and the first settlers in their towns could let the waste of their small communities*



*drain into me. As the number grew on my banks, you placed more and more demands upon me.*

*Today there are many of you making demands on me. Some of my arteries are blocked with dams and culverts and then the Salmon don't find their way to the spawning beds. You have poured your waste and chemicals into some of my veins. Now the living creatures that make their homes there are sick and dying. There are fewer places to drink my pure waters today, but you are still fortunate my many waters continue to endow you with richness of resources for your pleasure, your commerce and for the natural beauty and diversity I provide.*

*You are fortunate but you must be careful not all my arteries are clogged and polluted. Many remain clean and pure. You can still delight in my waterfalls and trout pools. You can still run my coursing rapids or walk by my peaceful rills. I can still bear the weight of your log booms and carry your waste products, but I can no longer do these things without your help. If you do not help me, I can no longer take care of you. As I nurtured you, you must nurture me.*

These are the words the river would speak, if we would listen today. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My Grandfather Dr. Earl Claxton Sr. told the story of The Living River and Arthur Holbrook Productions Inc produced the video for the British Columbia Heritage Rivers Board.

## Note to Reader

The circle of conversation in First Nations spiritual knowledge.

*The movement of power is not hierarchical, as from the teacher (the top) down to the student (the bottom). I picture the movement of power as flowing between concentric circles. The inner circles may represent the words, knowledge itself that expands and moves as it is taught to and shared with others. The circles may represent the individuals, family, community, nature, nation, and the spiritual realm that are influenced and in turn influence this power. I call this knowledge-as-power movement cultural reciprocity grounded in respect and responsibility. Respect is essential. Everyone has a place within the circle. Their place, their role is honored and respected. All also have a particular cultural responsibility to their place, their role: the storyteller-teachers to share their knowledge with others; the listener-learners to make meaning from the storyteller's words and to put this meaning into everyday practice, thereby continuing the action of reciprocity. (Archibald qtd. in Ridington, Ridington 151)*

Oral histories. A model to share knowledge. A cultural responsibility. My narrative. The form of a Coast Salish oral history. A story. Many stories. Voices from my community,

scholars ... personal. Formed connections. Circular, fragmented, and repetitive at times.  
Shared ideas about a connection to place. Operating in different ways. Interplay.

*Seeing the interplay between system dynamics and the individuals is a dance of discovery that requires several iterations between the whole and its parts. We expand our vision to see the whole, then narrow our gaze to peer intently into individual moments. With each iteration, we see more of the whole, and gain a new understanding about the individual elements.*

(Wheatley, Leadership 143)

Stories that peer intently into individual moments. Gaps between iterations. A new story.  
A gained understanding of the whole. Responsibility. The storyteller – teacher to share knowledge. The listener – learner to make meaning out of the storyteller's words.  
Connections.

*... there is a continuous communication not only between living things and their environment, but among all things living in that environment. An intricate web of interaction connects all life into one vast, self maintaining system. Each part is related to every other part and we are all a part of the whole, part of Supernature. (Watson qtd. in Suzuki, McConnell, and Mason 49)*

Web of interaction. Layers. Hybrid. Place in between. Fine arts. Current sustainable research. First Nation philosophies. Western approaches. A Story of understanding materiality. A story of understanding stories. Threads side by side. One thing. Many things. A part. A whole.

# Methodologies

I am in the forest. There are things I think about. Ideas that are present. When I am trying to understand the land. When I am thinking about ecology. When I am trying to understand a material to harvest. When I am working with a material. Voices of Armstrong, Leopold, Senge, Capra and Wheatley. They are always there. It is a way to locate myself. A way to act ethically. A land ethic.

*All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).*

*The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.*

(Leopold 203 – 204)

An ethic I try to understand. One that included soils, waters, plants, and animals. I am wanting to embody a way of life. Can a shift in one's view occur? Mine is a story of Coast Salish knowledge of the land, elder's guidance, seasonal harvesting, a concept of respect. Webs of relation.

*Once we recognize that organizations are webs, there is much we can learn about organizational change just from contemplating spider webs.*

*Most of us have had the experience of touching a spider web, feeling its resiliency, noticing how slight pressure in one area jiggles the entire web. If a web breaks and needs repair, the spider doesn't cut out a piece, terminate it, or tear the entire web apart and reorganize it. She reweaves it, using the silken relationships that are already there, creating stronger connections across the weakened spaces. (Wheatley, Leadership 145)*

The web. I am looking forward. I am looking back. I am reweaving it, using the silken relationships that are already there. A story of learning, observing, practicing, and participating. Immersion. Where I come from. Where I am. Understanding stories. Convergence. Nature's design. Capra.

*[ . . . ] Nature's "design" and "technologies" are far superior to human science and technology. They were created and have continually refined over billion of years of evolution, during which the inhabitants of the Earth household flourished and diversified without ever using up their natural capital – the planet's resources and ecosystem services on which the well-being of all living creatures depends. (Capra, Hidden 233)*

Time with nature. I weave a link between nature and myself. A belief - natural resources were once people. A transformation. We now occupy the same space. Becoming community. Emerging: a story that allows the Earths household to flourish. Dualist separation of subject and object, still a struggle.

*The problem is that most of us have spent our lives immersed in analytic knowing, with its dualist separation of subject (“I”) and object (“it”).*

*There is nothing wrong with analytic knowing. It is useful and appropriate for many activities – for example, for interacting with machines. But if it’s our only way of knowing, we tend to apply it to all situations. When we interact with a living system from the analytic stance, problems inevitably arise because the living field ‘doesn’t know itself.’ ‘A field that doesn’t know itself collapses into this little unidimensional subject-object consciousness.’ (Senge et al. 99)*

Unfamiliar becoming familiar. A story where the whole informs the parts. Community not commodity. A living system. Not a mechanical system. A field that knows itself. It teaches me. I am learning. Mutual dependency.

Listen. Conserve. Respect.

*The linkage between human, animals and the spirit world which so characterized the First Nations societies created a complex ethical framework which reinforced the notion of mutual dependency. Humans were not seen as dominant but played a complementary and often subordinate role in the larger ecological system. A key feature here was the concept of reciprocity and the belief that respectful human attitudes*

*towards the resources helped to ensure the availability of future supply.*

*Such an ethic encourages responsible use and supports an imperative of restraint. (Turner 235)*

Choices emerge from careful observation. A story where choice moves beyond self. A cycle. Sensing and observing ecology. A way to be land. Harvest comes. Care. Through understanding ecology, I move to understanding the intricacies of harvesting. I reach an understanding of materiality. Cycle of the supply can continue. A living process.

*[ . . . ] A community is the living process that interacts with the vast and ancient body of intricately connected patterns operating in perfect unison called the land. The land sustains all life and must be protected from depletion in order to insure its health and ability to provide sustenance across generations. (Armstrong)*

Community. Soils. Waters. Plants. Animals.



# Webs of Relations and Webs of Responsibilities

What if designers, artists, architects, and engineers, and all the disciplines that work with choosing and shaping materials, felt a connection to the materials they use in their productions? In an ever-changing world, where industrialization is increasing material options, how can people become more aware of the environmental implications that accompany material choices? Does material choice move beyond an initial preference or need for a certain material quality? Should we not only be asking ourselves if the material is malleable and pliable, and looks right for the job, but whether the material is renewable, sustainable, and local? Can we begin to become aware of the land on which we live, the resources that are present, the rhythms of the seasons, and ideal harvesting processes? How would that change the way that we choose and use materials?

My new understanding of material properties comes from getting close to a First Nations perspective, which is reinforced in a quote from Thomas King, a contemporary Native writer and English professor at the University of Guelph.

*While the relationship that native people have with the land certainly has a spiritual aspect to it, it is also a practical matter that balances respect with survival. It is an ethic that can be seen in the decisions and actions of a community and that is contained in the songs that Native people sing and the stories that they tell about the nature of the world and their place in it, about the webs of responsibilities that bind all things. Or, as the*

*Mohawk writer Beth Brant put it, 'We do not worship nature. We are part of it.'* (Truth 113-114)

Over the last two years, I have worked towards understanding my culture. Through that understanding, I have bettered my understanding of the environment. I have spent time on the traditional lands of my ancestors harvesting local material when the seasons make ready the natural fibers. I have listened to the land. I have been guided by the stories of my elders. I have embodied the traditional Coast Salish philosophy of respect. I think that sometimes we are so concerned with moving forward that we forget the success of the past. First Nations cultures have managed a stable co-existence with the environment for millennia, and have much to teach us. Highlighted in the pages to come is a story that illustrates my experience in gaining a first-hand understanding of local materials and ecosystems.

I pull open the door. I walk into a warehouse. I am looking for malleable plastic. Where to begin? I walk down the first aisle. I can hear the sound of my footsteps as my soles brush along the concrete floor, the adhesives section. Gorilla Glue, King Kaulk, System Three. Hummm, this isn't what I am looking for. Mold making supplies, light and dark bronzing powders, silicone putty. I continue to work my way through the aisles. Jars, bottles and jars of epoxies, resins and sealers. The supply is endless. I move through the plastic container section. Bottles, jars, jugs, pails, sprayers, lids, pumps, bags, drums, totes and tanks. I move through the inventory. I find a shelf stacked with plastic sheets. Nonstop choices. Thickness of 0.5, 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0, 4.5, 6.0, 9.0, 12.0, 18.0mm. Sheet sizes of 48" x 96"; 60" x 96"; 72" x 96". Available in a variety of colours. Hummm, Polyester PETG, LEXAN polycarbonate, Acrylite FF acrylic sheets. I know nothing about these products. A small list of material properties and a price. I get help. I am told that PETG is what I need. Okay! \$30.50 per sheet, I buy three.

*There is a simpler way to organize human endeavor. I have declared this for many years and seen it to be true in many places. This simpler way feels new, yet it is the most ancient story there is. It is the ancient story demonstrated to us daily by life, not the life we see on the news with its unending stories of human grief and horror, but what we feel when we're in nature, when we experience a sense of life's deep harmony, beauty, and power. It is the story of how we feel when we see people helping each other, when we feel creative, when we know we're making a difference, when life feels purposeful. (Wheatley, Finding 1)*

I walk into the forest. I am looking to harvest the bark from a cedar tree. I see rows upon rows of trees. Where to begin? I walk down a path. I can hear the sounds of nature as my soles begin to brush along the forest floor. I find myself surrounded by ferns. Bracken fern, deer fern, sword fern. Hummm, I see a cedar in the distance. Grass, sedge, moss. I continue to move through the forest. Groups and clusters of mushrooms and lichen. The supply appears to be endless. I move past fowl bluegrass, lady fern, hanging moss, blue wildrye, indian pipe, douglas fir, and grey sedge. I come to a cedar tree. I understand her story. I pay her with respect. A strip of cedar I receive.

*At one time our economy was primarily based on renewable materials – wood, natural fibers, plant- derived chemicals, and so on. One of our greatest missteps was to replace this economy with one based on nonrenewables such as oil, gas, coal, metals, and minerals. [ . . . ] The smart alternative is to take from the land only what will allow more to grow back. In forestry, this is known as a sustained yield, and basically living on interest, not depleting the capital, of growing stock. [ . . . ] A sustainable society, therefore, depends on not just shifting to renewable resources but carefully managing all of the Earth’s regenerative gifts.*

(Benyus 270 – 271)

I just finished harvesting cedar. I am tired. My hands hurt. I am honestly aware of the process I just completed. The land I visited. The material I received. The effort I made. The time I spent. I roll the soft inner bark into a circle. I tie it. It is ready for drying. I am

connected to nature, the source of my supply. A newfound respect for the material, the land and the connections between. My choices become careful. Waste is not an option. I didn't just complete days of intense but rewarding work to be wasteful. That would be disrespect. I learn the true value of the resource. I become conscious.

*Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land is meant all the things on, over, or in the earth. Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say, cannot love game and hate predators; you cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges; you cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism. (Leopold qtd. in Suzuki, McConnell, and Mason 117)*

I am weaving the cedar. There is no factory or processes for me to understand. There is a need to understand nature's technology. I respect it. It too has limitations. An appreciation grows. From the tree to my hands to the vessel. From the roots and soil to the air. The material is honored. I am careful. The supply isn't endless.

*Care flows naturally if the "self" is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves...Just as we need no morals to make us breathe...[so] if "self" in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care...You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to*

*do it...If reality is like it is experienced by ecological self, our behavior naturally and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics.*

(Naess qtd. in Capra, Web 12)

I take time with it

I touch it

I think about it

I understand it

I harvest it

I appreciate it.

I know it

*When people's cultural identity is closely linked to their ancestral lands they have a high incentive to care for them. [ . . . ] To truly understand changes in ecosystems and habitats it is essential to know them well, to be familiar with minute details such as food habits of animals, the locales of all the different plants, the locations of springs and wet places and all the seasonal patterns of weather, light and animal migrations and plant growth. We cannot all be so intimately knowledgeable about all places, but if we are observant and patient we can come to know such details in a few – the ones where we live and spend our time. The longer we stay in a place, observing its rhythms and intricacies day to day and year to year, the greater our chances of recognizing changes when they occur. With*

*time, we develop strong attachments to our dwelling places and our affection for them encourages us to protect them and look after them.*

(Turner 229 – 230)

Understanding my cultural identity has developed through understanding my ancestral lands. I have incentive to care for the land. To truly appreciate the land upon which I live and all that it encompasses. I must be conscious of the stories that deepen my understanding. The story of the ecosystem, the story of the animals, the story of the local plants and the story of the water, soil and air. We cannot all be so intimately knowledgeable about all places, but if we are observant and patient we can come to know such details in a few – the ones where we live and spend our time. The longer we stay in a place, observing its rhythms and intricacies day to day and year to year, the greater our chances of recognizing changes when they occur. It takes time, but for all of us, sustainability can become part of self. We can all take the time to learn the stories of our land.

# Material Speaking

I am holding raw wool in my hands. I feel something. This is about a feeling. I have no sketches to follow. I divide the raw wool into sections, unsure of the outcome. I feel at ease with not knowing. The softness of the fibers are comforting. There is a connection. I continue to work. I am slowly building layers of fibers – fibers around a resist. My actions are repetitive. They are slow. I continue to lay out the fibers. They soon will weave together. A tacit knowledge, a play. I continue to make. The fibers are ready to be felted. All I need is some soap and hot water. Gently I press the fibers together. The wool has knowledge of its own. It shares that knowledge with me. We are working on an intimate level. My actions are repetitive. They are slow. The wool needs time to interweave her fibers. I give that to her. The transformation. The fibers join. Becoming vessel.

The woolen structure takes form. I hold it in my hands. I have no sketches. It begins to talk. Wool invites cedar, cedar becomes wool, wool becomes cedar. This process isn't about thinking. I listen to the organic shape. A fold in the felt speaks to where a piece of weaving should sit. A circle suggests a knitted edge. A swell, a burl marks a place to rest. A place for materials to gather. Materials share their knowledge. They become whole. They become vessel.



# Seasonal Harvesting

“Wait,” said my Grandfather.

“But, how do I know when it is time to harvest,” I ask.

“Listen to the Saanich Moons. The moon of the frog will begin to speak. The earth will warm. The frogs will wake. They will announce the coming of the spring season,” he replied.

I begin to think...hummm, ok listen to the frogs...

“There will be signs! Next comes the moon of opening hands – blossoming out moon. All living plants will begin to open their hands to the spring sun.”

He pauses.

I ask, “and then it’s time?”

He laughs.

“No. Then you wait. The moons are the first signs that the harvest is coming. You

watch nature. You become familiar with her. She will let you know when she is ready. You just watch.”

A month or so passes.

I have been watching. The cattail and sedge are thriving.

I tell my grandfather.

“If you harvest now, if you do things carefully, if you show respect, good things will come. You each receive. You are gifted materials to work with. The natural resources are approached and harvested in a way that will allow them to enhance their resources in the future.” He pauses. “I want you to think about these things before we harvest.”

Two days go by.

Hmmm. I have been thinking about the words of my grandfather. I have been thinking we really do live in a space of interconnections. A space between landscapes and resources. Frog and blossoms invite sedge and cattail. Sedge and cattail invite me.

A week goes by.

We harvest.

The end of summer has come. I have harvested sedge, cattail, cedar, fern fronds and prepared wool. The harvesting process has informed an understanding of interconnected systems. Connections. Natural fibers, soil, water, air. The moon of the frog to the land. Connections visible and invisible.

# Receiving Material from the Tree of Life

I stand on the traditional lands of my ancestors. I am with my mom and dad. This will be the first time they harvest cedar. I am here to share the knowledge. I walk by some stunning old growth trees. The sun is shining through the flora. The landscape opens and there is a beautiful view of the ocean. We continue to travel to lower grounds. Our summer has been hot and dry. I hope the cedar will allow us to harvest its bark. The edge of the forest meets with the beach and the ocean. This is where we will harvest. These trees have received the most moisture over the dry summer. We walk around. I take some time to respect the landscape. I begin to look at the surrounding cedar trees to find one that has an open face with no branches or knots. I find one. I take a moment. I thank the tree for the resources it will provide. I think about my ancestors. I remember the words that were spoken to me the first time I harvested cedar bark. “Ask for your ancestor’s guidance, let them know you need their help, show appreciation to the Tree of Life.”

I make a small horizontal cut near the base of the tree. I work my hands under the tough outer surface until I can feel the wetness of the soft inner bark. This first pull will let me know if the cedar is ready. Holding the edges in my hand, I move my right hand towards my body so the outer bark separates from the tree. I move to my left hand. I repeat this action. I watch the strip move with ease towards the sky. The cedar is ready. The long strip tapers to an end. It falls to the ground. I pick it up and work on splitting the outer bark from the inner. I begin to think about the material. I think about weaving and the cedar’s future form. The bark is a gift to me. The two pieces separate. I roll the soft inner

bark into a circle. I tie it. It is ready for drying. We continue to harvest. I think about the tree. Only one hand width pull from the tree in order to sustain the Cedar's being. I am aware of how much I need for the year, just enough to last me until the next harvest. My hands begin to hurt. They even begin to bleed. This is tough. I continue to harvest. I know this is my only chance. Soon the sap will stop running and will not allow the bark to be removed from the tree. I think about our way of life and all that is included. I think about a shared connection with my parents; a shared connection with the cedar tree; a shared connection to the land; a shared connection to my ancestors and elders.

Appreciation grows.



Mae Sam Spinning Wool.

# Circles and Connections: The Prayer Song and the Spindle Whorl

It is a hot day in the middle of August. We are sitting in an incomplete circle in the basement of an old historic building. I can feel the breeze of the ocean and hear the soft sound of the waves. This is not our first day together. We do not have a long history together either. We have been meeting for a couple of weeks now, working from fleece to skein. We are comfortable. We are eager to work.

We all have some wool in our hands, along with a spindle whorl in the other. In comparison to Mae Sam, an elder from the Tsatlip First Nation, we all look clumsy in our attempts to spin. It is silent. Our focus is on producing. I stop and watch Mae's hands as they work. She has been spinning wool for years. Her focus is not on her own hands but on the hands of everyone in the class.

I watch Mae's hands in order to get a better idea of what I am doing wrong. The Saanich way is learning by listening, observing and practicing. I am still observing and so are a few others in the class. Spinning does not come naturally to me. I notice the Lanolin from the wool is leaving a residue on my fingers as the wool moves through my grasp. I look down at the spindle whorl. I see a man, a woman and a thunderbird traditionally carved into the whorl. I continue to practice. I find a rhythm that works. I watch as the human and the non-human beings on the whorl blur together. I begin to think about circles. I watch as the wool spins onto itself to produce a yarn. The diameter of my yarn wanders

in and out, as the wool produces the length of the yarn. I am okay with that. It makes me proud to be learning a tradition that is so important to my ancestors.

The room stays silent and we all continued to concentrate.

Mae realizes that we were all feeling comfortable with the wool and spindle whorl in our hands. She breaks the silence and her voice fills the room. She tells us that she wants to share a song with us if we are willing to listen. Everyone's eyes shuffle around the room and we are eager to see what happens. Mae is silent for a second. She speaks first. She tells us that she is going to share a traditional Coast Salish Prayer Song. She begins to sing. Her voice carries through the room. My hands stop working and my focus is on her. I feel a calmness move through me. Her voice is soft yet powerful. She seems to embody the song. Her eyes are closed and her body moves with the words. Her thigh becomes the drum as her hand softly beats against it. Her words make me feel connected. I feel connected to her. I did not expect her to sing the prayer song today. I look down at my hands. I take a breath. I pause. I think about the human and the non-human blurring together. I can feel that we are all one. I feel at a loss for words.





My Grandfather the Cedar, My Grandmother the Wool. Vessel 7.

# Reweaving the Story

Jan Steinbright's story:<sup>2</sup>

I am holding a birch bark basket in my hands. As my hands mold themselves around the smooth form the bark has taken, I am made aware that what is within my grasp is not just a container that happens to be made of natural materials; not just a space conveniently formed to hold low bush berries in the fall; and not just a 20<sup>th</sup> century market item to help my Athabascan friend who made the basket purchase wood for the winter. I am holding a story in my hands.

The ninety-year-old women basketmaker is also a storyteller, a traditional bearer and preserver of her culture. Just as an Indian story is constructed with words and symbols containing cultural meaning, she made this basket with materials that are intimately linked to her land and her people; each material is awarded a special cultural meaning. This 'story basket' recites words to a song about the seasons when nature makes the birch, willow, and roots ripe and ready for collecting. If I hold the basket up to my ear like a seashell and listen very carefully, I can hear yet another story: one that speaks of the spirit of a people who for thousands of years have lived in harmony with the land in a reciprocal manner; a poem of respect for the land and all that grows in and on it.

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Steinbright was the Project Director for the Institute of Alaska Native Arts.

My hands leave the body of the basket and make their way up to the rim. Spruce root lacing over a willow rod secures the bark into the desired form. As I touch the lacing, I remember going into the woods with the basketmaker and helping her peel the bark from the trees, dig the roots from the forest floor and cut the red willow beside the road. I remember sitting with her by a campfire while she heated the bark to make it easy to fold. I have watched in awe as she deftly peeled the bark from the roots and using her teeth and hands, carefully split the thin wood into exact strips for lacing. And then, working with a treasured handmade awl, she carefully made the holes in the bark that would soon accept the spruce lacings. And I have anguished with her when her desires for young Indians to learn these skills go unfulfilled.

Oh, but how her wise old eyes dance when a young Indian women is sitting besides her eagerly learning, making her basket into a song of hope for the future and the continuance of the Athabascan spirit (3).

My story is a little different...

I am holding an organic vessel in my hands. As my hands mold themselves around the evocative form the natural materials have taken, I am made aware that what is within my grasp is not just a vessel that happens to be made of sustainable resources; not just an object designed with the goal of utility; and not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century market item made for production. I am holding a story in my hands.

I made this vessel with materials that are intimately linked to my land and my people; each material and story is awarded a special cultural meaning. This vessel carries words to a song about the seasons when nature makes ready the cedar for harvesting. Words that echo elder's knowledge of preparing raw wool for spinning. If I hold the basket up to my ear like a seashell and listen carefully, I can hear yet another story: a story that contains symbols of the multiple. I hear a story of respect highlighting an understanding of the land and its relations. Threads of ecology and sustainability are interwoven. New forms and new functions.

My hands move through and around the vessel. Cedar laced through a woolen body unites traditional materials. As I touch the lacing, I shiver at the memories of my ancestors harvesting the bark from the trees. My hands move over the woolen body, an object that is inviting yet a little odd. An organic object that mimics a natural form. My hand then moves to a section of knitted wool that brings me back to the traditions of the Coast Salish people. I think about the traditional material. A mountain goat, a small woolly dog...wool. Holes in the wool will soon accept ideas and thoughts. Space transforms into place. A place of identity and belonging.

Oh, but how my eyes dance when the vessels become a story of hope for the future and the continuance of the Coast Salish spirit.

## Closing Remarks

Indian stories do not begin and end like lines of words that make up a book. Rather, they stop at meaningful points within a circle [ . . . ] [they] stop at meaningful points in the story and start again as one story suggests another. Each story suggests every story. Each story contains an essence shared by all. Each story is both a fragment and an entirety. (Ridington and Hastings qtd. in Ridington and Ridington 162)



My Grandfather the Cedar, My Grandmother the Wool. Vessel 8.



Tsawout Reserve.





My Grandfather the Cedar, My Grandmother the Wool. Vessel 5.





My Grandfather the Cedar, My Grandmother the Wool. Vessel 10.



My Grandfather the Cedar, My Grandmother the Wool. Vessel 11.



Traditional Family Harvesting Grounds on the Tsawout Reserve.

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