Decolonization and Reclamation: The Cultural Significance of Material Exploration

By

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BFA in Visual Arts, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2020

A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2022

Abstract

My artistic practice as a Cree and Osage Two Spirit woman is rooted in an investigation of materials with cultural significance to my Indigenous tribes. Working with these materials across my practice allows me to create painting and sculptural works that combine traditional and contemporary Indigenous art. In this thesis support document, I situate my research and practice within Indigenous art history, which has thrived despite the constant threat from colonial powers, and alongside Indigenous theorists and artists that opened up the way for me. Across my practice, I aim to explore Decolonization and the Reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty and traditions. I hope my work can contribute to other Indigenous artists and people on Turtle Island (The Americas), so that we can one day gain freedom from the shackles of colonialism.

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Acknowledgements

During the writing of this paper and the accompanying Thesis Defence and Exhibition, I have been supported by both my family and faculty at Emily Carr University. Here they are, listed below, in no particular order.

I would like to thank my Mother Jacqui, my Father Paul, my Aunt Denise, my Uncle Daryl, my Uncle Tony, my Brother Kris, my Step Father Dharma, my Step Grandmas Laurie, Yvonne, my Mother-in-law Kayo, and my Father-in-law Anton for always being there for me.

I would like to thank my Stepfather Dharma for always being there to move my pieces and assist in installation.

I would like to thank my Aunty Denise for being my teacher for traditional knowledge from our Cree Nation.

I would like to thank my Aunty Lezli for passing on traditional knowledge from her Blood Tribe.

I would like to thank my cousin Ann for always advocating and helping me at my Lac La Ronge Band office.

I would like to thank Connie Watts for making sure I had materials for my practice and anything else I needed while on campus.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Justin Langlois and Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill for guiding me throughout this Master's Program.

I would like to thank my Cree Band, Lac La Ronge, and my Osage Tribe for funding my education.

Introduction

I want to begin by locating myself and my family for the reader. My Aunty Denise, Uncle Tony, my Mother Jacqui, myself, and my brother are Status Indians and members of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, a Woodland Cree band in Saskatchewan. I am related to the Charles, McKenzie, Roberts, Ratt/Ratte, Halkett, Ross, McLeod, Cook, Sanderson, Mirasty/Merasty/Meraste, Venn/Venne, Bird, Ballantyne, Bell, and Bellgarde family clans from Lac La Ronge. I acquired my status through the Gender Equity Act, because my Grandmother lost her status due to misogynistic laws that stripped status due to gender inequity. I am also an enrolled member of the Osage tribe in Pawhuska, Oklahoma reserve from my dad's side.

Being an Indigenous person and artist in a colonial institution comes with a lot of difficulties, but it also comes with a lot of opportunities to engage with concepts like Decolonization and Reclamation, which I will contextualize below, on a larger scale. I see my art and research as a process of actively creating a space for myself as well as present and future Indigenous people and artists working within an educational institution to freely enact and renew their culture.

My art engages with Decolonization and Reclamation through my use of traditional and what I have termed "Neo-Traditional materials," as well as an intersection of traditional and contemporary Indigenous forms. For example, I include in this document detailed descriptions of my process to illustrate how I work with materials like rawhide and berry pigments, both of which change over time. The pigments are not permanent, they crack and fall off. The rawhide subtly responds to the environment in which it is shown, at times finding new folds and shapes

on its own. In turn, I see these materials as not static or fixed but instead involved in their own process alongside mine. Working with these materials also provides me an opportunity to engage in my own learning that extends beyond the MFA degree. The pigments, for example, have also taught me the importance of seasons, since berries and medicinal plants grow in the summer seasons. The pigment fissures and dissolves back into the earth the same way the plants return to the earth. In addition to seasons, it teaches about the cycle of life as well. However, I also work with materials that are imbued with the context in which I live and work and learn in an urban setting, wherein the berry and plant pigments I work with are freeze dried and packaged and the rawhide I use comes from a commercial store or through gifted scraps. I see my relationship with these materials and what I learn from them and with them as a process of Decolonization and Reclamation.

Decolonization is a large and, in some ways, elusive term and it requires further explanation of what it means from an Indigenous perspective. I am defining my view of Indigenous Decolonization because the meaning and understanding of Decolonization can differ from one place to another as colonization has been different for each country despite similarities. In thinking about the possibility for these differences, I want to quote from Eric Ritskes, an educator, researcher, and editor, who writes in "What is Decolonization and Why Does It Matter,"

> Decolonization is a goal but it is not an endpoint. I like this open-ended beginning because it speaks to two things: that the struggle for decolonization is a journey that is never finished and that, on this journey, uncertainty is not to be feared...I don't mean that decolonization is elusive and constantly deferred – an unattainable 'pipe dream' – but that

> it is a series of what Jeff Corntassel calls ‘everyday acts of resurgence’ which regenerate Indigenous knowledges, epistemologies, and ways of life. These Indigenous knowledges are always adapting, always creating, always moving forward – there is no stopping them, no finality. Decolonization is a tangible unknown (What is Decolonization).

There is no end to Decolonization, because it is unlearning the modes of colonialism along with the resurgence of Indigenous ideologies and methodologies in very specific places. In this way, Decolonization means being open to continually learning about the relationship Indigenous people have to the land.

Decolonization is activated all over the world, and it has resulted in conflict and war, which has eventually led to colonial powers giving control back to the original inhabitants of the land. However, those countries are not finished in their process of Decolonization, because colonial powers have deeply affected the whole world. There is always work to be done in Decolonization because we continue to live with the effects of colonization. According to the United Nations,

> When the United Nations was founded in 1945, some 750 million people, nearly a third of the world's population, lived in Territories that were dependent on colonial Powers. Today, fewer than 2 million people live under colonial rule in the 17 remaining non-self-governing territories. The wave of decolonization, which changed the face of the planet, was born with the UN and represents the world body’s first great success. As a result of decolonization many countries became independent and joined the UN (Decolonization).

The United Nations’ self-congratulatory understanding of Decolonization claims that countries being colonized were dependent on colonial powers when, in reality, these powers only colonize

and expand their territory, because they actually depend on the countries they try to colonize. Therefore, colonial powers have always been more reliant on the countries they attempt to colonize rather than the other way around. Colonial powers work through invasion, oppression of a land's original inhabitants, and extreme resource extraction. The countries they deem to need "help" have always been self-sufficient and self-dependent with significant resources, and that is exactly what draws colonial powers to gain control of these countries. Moreover, it's important to note that according to this article, Canada and America are not considered to be under colonial rule. This shows how skewed the UN's views on Decolonization are, and how propaganda on Turtle Island (The Americas) attempts to deny the fact that this land has been under foreign occupation for hundreds of years.

Indigenous theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith shares an important perspective in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, as she explains Decolonization in a way that speaks to me: "Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (20). For me, Decolonization has always meant challenging the powers that be on several levels by unlearning the brainwashing that has been administered through education, government, and law enforcement. My unlearning of that brainwashing involves replacing the structures of control, enclosure, and dispossession that are presented as 'common sense' with Indigenous methodologies, ideologies, practices, and beliefs, while engaging with Cree and Osage culture in any way I can. This is my process of Decolonization.

With that said, Decolonization can be confused with a wish to return to the past, which risks simplifying things too easily because we also have current ideologies and methodologies that could, for instance, slow down the environmental damage inflicted by colonial powers. Smith further explains this by saying,

> A constant reworking of our understandings of the impact of imperialism and colonialism is an important aspect of indigenous cultural politics and forms the basis of an indigenous language of critique. Within this critique there have been two major strands. One draws upon a notion of authenticity, of a time before colonization in which we were intact as indigenous peoples. We had absolute authority over our lives; we were born into and lived in a universe which was entirely of our making. We did not ask, need or want to be 'discovered' by Europe. The second strand of the language of critique demands that we have an analysis of how we were colonized, of what that has meant in terms of our immediate past and what it means for our present and future. The two strands intersect but what is particularly significant in indigenous discourses is that solutions are posed from a combination of the time before, colonized time, and the time before that, pre-colonized time. Decolonization encapsulates both sets of ideas (23, 24).

Smith talks about how important Indigenous critique of colonization is and the complications of how that has shaped our current world. Indigenous people never asked to be colonized by Europe, but Decolonization is not simply a process of returning to the past. Rather, Indigenous people along with their ideologies and methodologies exist in all timelines: past, present, and future. Smith also describes how these timelines are key to understanding how colonization has affected Indigenous people in all time periods. Smith describes a time, before colonization, when

we were intact as Indigenous people, and how there were political systems that were taken and warped into “democracy.” These political systems worked because they were well grounded and followed properly over many millennia. I appreciate the way in which Smith encapsulates how Decolonization is just as much about the future and the now as it about the past, and I find myself exploring these notions across my practice.

My practice centers on exploring the ways in which Decolonization can be communicated through material compositions and processes. My material explorations also allow me to cultivate a relationship with the land by learning about plant knowledge and how to harmonize with mother nature, both of which are essential to Decolonization. That is why I choose to work with plant pigments to make paints; learning further about plant knowledge strengthens the process of connection I am going through by moving to my homelands in Saskatchewan.

I work within a practice situated alongside both contemporary and traditional methods, which relates to my research question: How have my processes of Decolonization and Reclamation guided me on a journey back to my traditional territories? It is important for me to reconnect to materials like rawhide so that I can find both unique and culturally grounded ways of working with materials. To this end, I also wanted to find a replacement material for European traditional canvas or linen to paint on, and I found that I liked using rawhide to paint on after trying rocks, leather, satin, feathers, fur, plants, and silk. All these material explorations were important, not just because they allowed me to engage with culturally grounded ways of working, but because all of these materials have a history of being painted on by Indigenous cultures. It is also important to add that I choose to work with berry and plant pigments to make

paint not only because they allowed me to work in culturally grounded ways, but also specifically because of the teachings my Aunty Denise gave me. I try to create interesting ways of making by rooting processes in both traditional and contemporary approaches then intuitively assembling the materials into a final work.

Reclamation and Reconnection have also meant connecting with family to learn from them directly. Every summer, I would visit my Aunty Denise in Regina, Saskatchewan, and we would go out into country fields, away from the city, to pick sweetgrass and sage. With each visit, she would impart many teachings of these sacred plant medicines as well as introduce me to berries like the saskatoon berry and chokecherry. She taught me the importance of berries for traditional feasts after sweat lodges, and how they would help to hydrate and nourish you, which is necessary after attending a sweat lodge. Aunty Denise also has a very close friend, Lezli, who I consider an Aunty, even though we are not related. She is from the Blackfoot Tribe, and she has also taught me many sacred medicine teachings in addition to entering multiple sweat lodges with me to help with all the aspects of the sweat lodge ceremony. Both Aunty Denise and Lezli also taught me the art of beading and sewing. They showed me several different techniques of beading, which is another important aspect of my art and why I incorporate both beading and sewing.

I have visited my reserve in Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan, a few times: the first time was while visiting my Aunty Denise, we took a road trip from Regina to Lac La Ronge, and I got to meet many Great Uncles, Great Aunts, Uncles, Aunts, and Cousins. I have never been to my Osage reservation in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, but I would love to visit and connect with family there one day soon. I have had access to Lezli and Aunty Denise as traditional Elders but my

disconnect to Lac La Ronge and Pawhuska has affected how I had access to learning other areas of traditional ways.

However, my family and I have found our own ways of learning together. When my parents chose to live in Los Angeles for the first eight years of my life, on the traditional territories of the Chumash, Tongva, and Kizh people, my Aunty Denise sent a letter with sage and sweetgrass as well as a letter with instructions on how to smudge. My mom read the letter, and she taught me how to smudge as far back as I can remember, around the age of two. This is something I looked forward to very much. Every time my mom and I smudged, we prayed and fanned the burning medicine together in unison; it was a beautiful way to reconnect, and it is the first time I ever came into contact with medicine teachings. The smell of smudging has so many memories for me, and this was also one of the first times my mom connected to medicine teachings as well. We had our first Decolonial moment together by engaging in a smudging ceremony, and I know we both will cherish those memories forever.

In addition to reconnecting through family, I have had the opportunity to reconnect through the Aboriginal Gathering Place (AGP) at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. This has been a great way to learn more about traditional materials, art making, beading, etc. I first learned how to make a rawhide drum from Cree and Metis AGP worker, Michelle Sound. I continued making drums and learning more drum techniques through research, and I have made over ten rawhide drums. When I told Connie Watts from the Nuu- chah-nulth, Gitxsan, and Kwakwaka'wakw nations, who also works at the AGP, she offered to let me teach a drum making workshop. This was an amazing opportunity, as I learned more about drum making, and teaching others how to craft something was extremely joyous for me. Connie has helped my art

practice with my most recent rawhide sculptures as well, by giving me rawhide scraps and a big piece of rawhide to make my sculptures out of.

While working with rawhide in either sculptures or painting I've always thought about the drum and have gone back to those teachings of the drum. The teaching I think about the most when working with rawhide comes from the drum teaching of always putting good thought and prayer into the drum while you're working with rawhide because it's respect to the animal and you want to be putting good energy into it and thinking prayers while you're working with it. That really stuck with me ever since I learned about drum making and that teaching. I try to incorporate that while I'm making art of all kinds to always have good thoughts and to pray if I can, but it can be difficult to do that while making art because I'm also aware that I'm trying to work out the composition and relationships between the materials. I am grateful to the AGP for teaching me how to work with rawhide and piquing my interest in this traditional and sacred material.

Decolonization is important to many Indigenous activists, artists, and theorists as it relates to prioritizing the harmonization between Mother Earth and people. Jarret Martineau, scholar and creator of CBC's *Reclaimed*, and Eric Ritskes delve into the specifics of Indigenous artists also working with these ideas in their writing, "Fugitive indigeneity: Reclaiming the terrain of decolonial struggle through Indigenous art." Martineau and Ritskes articulate how Indigenous art situates itself in a colonial world by saying, "Indigenous art thus occupies a unique space within settler colonialism: both as a site for articulating Indigenous resistance and resurgence, and also as a creative praxis that often reinscribes indigeneity within aesthetic and commodity forms that circulate in the capitalist art market" (I). They describe the complexity of

Indigenous art by taking up multiple modes of critique within our currently flawed systems, and in some ways, I find myself asking the same questions in my own practice. I consider the materials I work with, and in particular, the way I have to source them through purchasing them or relying on receiving them as gifts, as a form of call and response with economic structures and markets.

Martineau and Ritskes also clarify the intricacies around Indigenous art and the political issues being critiqued within the works:

> Against colonial erasure, Indigenous art marks the space of a returned and enduring presence. But this presence is complicated by its fraught relationality to the persistence of settler colonialism, which always threatens to reappropriate, assimilate, subsume/consume and repress Indigenous voicings and visuality, their forms and aesthetics, within its hegemonic logic of domination" (I).

In addition to doing the work of Decolonization, Indigenous people also have to worry about our culture and aesthetics being stolen. The urge to dominate through erasure, stealing, and silencing is the settler colonialism cycle of violence that Indigenous art is always in conversation with, while we are forcefully being dominated by Euro-centric beliefs.

Indigenous artists are more than just resilient. They are radical warriors who present concepts of Indigenous ideologies that contradict the structures of settler colonialism. It is no wonder there is conflict when Indigenous ideologies contradict and oppose settler colonialism in every aspect. However, that conflict does not silence the conversations that are happening and are absolutely necessary for a just future. Martineau and Ritskes explain further, "Indigenous art disrupts colonial hegemony by fracturing the sensible architecture of experience that is

constitutive of the aesthetic regime itself -the normative order, or 'distribution of the sensible' - that frames both political and artistic potentialities, as such" (I-II). This demonstrates how the colonial agenda has devalued everything that is Indigenous through assimilation and the silencing of our voices. Decolonization is often regarded as impossible, because people think it is a return to the past. When people tell us it is impossible, they are silencing the solutions we are offering and declaring our ideologies as fantasies. There are teachings from the past that are important to incorporate now, but it is not about a complete return to the past. Rather, it is about how we can preserve and renew our connection to mother earth and live harmoniously without destroying through extraction. Finding renewable energy and resources to save Mother Earth and therefore save ourselves falls in line with what Decolonization is all about: to live in harmony with the land.

In my work, I am refusing the colonial institution's attempts to persuade me to make art in the aesthetic and conceptual way they want. I refuse to make art for anyone else's aesthetic; I make art I want to see, and whatever happens to the piece, and whether or not it may appear chaotic to a viewer, I see the outcome as the thing that was meant to happen. I believe the value of following the material's own knowledge and working with it rather than against it amounts to an act of Decolonization and in that way, an alternative to colonial methodologies. I want to again reference Martineau and Ritskes here, as they so effectively show how Indigenous methodology can be a successful alternative to current colonial methodologies within artistic practice,

> Indigenous art evokes a fugitive aesthetic that, in its decolonial ruptural forms, refuses the struggle for better or more inclusion and recognition (Coulthard, 2007) and, instead,

> chooses refusal and flight as modes of freedom. Colonial modernity and the colonial state, as Walter Mignolo (in this issue) states, is 'a house we are not interested in inhabiting' (p. 205), echoing Métis activist Mederic McDougall who pointedly stated, 'We do not want to be integrated into a decaying white society. Why enter a house that is burning down?' (cited in, Adams, 1999, p. 74) (IV).

My practice refuses colonial ideologies by incorporating Indigenous ideologies and by rejecting materials like canvas in favour of using rawhide to paint on in a direct dismissal of historical European art materials. Another instance of refusal in my practice is how I decline to use historical European art pigments, and how I use berry and plant pigments native to Saskatchewan instead. I am also refusing the wasteful practices incurred by the mass production instituted by colonizers when I use scrap materials, so I can respect the material and use every bit of it, instead of buying new materials or throwing away scraps.

The existence and survival of Indigenous art is evidence of the failure of colonial modes and constructs, because the foundation of Turtle Island is based on genocide, and the aim to fully eradicate Indigenous people has failed. We as Indigenous people continue to show our culture through our art and political movements in unison. Indigenous methodologies are so vital in every aspect of our lives because colonial forces continue to try and silence and sensor us. Indigenous refusal of the colonial narrative is necessary to fight for a just future that includes Indigenous methodologies.

Reconnection is important to me at a personal level, but also because my education has revolved around having to explain my own disconnection and displacement from my Cree and Osage culture and constantly explain this to people throughout this program. As the third

generation, my disconnection and displacement is the result of intergenerational trauma. My Nohkum (Grandma in Woodland Cree) lived through cycles of violence when she was put into a residential school and converted to a Christian. This led to her abandoning my mom, aunty, and uncle, and, as a result, they were orphaned, sexually and physically abused, and tortured in a Christian orphanage away from my reservation. The displacement stemmed from being raised off the reservation and having to find other places to call home after this traumatic upbringing. To be really clear here, my disconnection is all due to this, but I do not blame my Nohkum, because it was the cycle of violence that she also went through, when she was put into a residential school and converted to a Christian. As the third generation, I did not experience this directly, but I have been relayed all of this information, and I have experienced it through intergenerational trauma. My family was tortured and had the Indian beat out of them, which caused them to hate their culture and identity. My aunty is the first one who chose to connect to the culture by researching my family, finding our reservation, and learning from our relatives there; I am grateful to be able to learn from her.

I am also grateful to be able to learn through the writing of other Indigenous artists. The artist and author, Lianne Charlie, has helped me understand the implications of being disconnected from land, culture, and place, in her work “Artist's statement: Indigenous collage,” she writes,

> My arts practice started to merge with my academic pursuits a year and a half ago. I had been struggling to figure out the methodology for my PhD project. I was in the company of classmates who were born and raised in their homelands, rooted to their culture, proficient in their language and ways of their ancestors –the backbone of solid, land-and

> community-based research methodologies. Without such knowledge, and far from my source of that kind of knowledge, I was struggling to identify a foundation for my project (2).

I relate to Charlie's struggle, because I am grappling with how to contextualize my work in a colonial institution, and I know the feeling of being a disconnected Indigenous person.

Presenting my work and acknowledging my disconnect in being an urban native, born in the city, has given people the impression I have little to zero knowledge of traditions, but this is far from the truth. My Elders (Aunty Denise and Aunty Lezli) have passed on knowledge to me, and the research I have been doing has been helping me to connect even more. Every Indigenous person has been disconnected to various degrees due to genocide, and colonial policies aimed at removing us from our lands and cultures. You have to actively choose to be a part of the culture, because you are not automatically enriched in the culture from the moment you are born. Even when you have an Elder teaching you, they may have only specific knowledge that they were given. It is only a piece of the puzzle, not the whole picture. Being on a reserve does give you more chances to potentially learn like Charlie's classmates, who were rooted to their culture, proficient in their language and the ways of their ancestors. However, that should not mean that more disconnected Indigenous peoples cannot learn to practice land and community-based research methodologies.

The act of reconnecting is something I will talk about more, as that is a positive focus and connects to one of my biggest themes: Reclamation, which I see as an act of healing to reconnect and rejuvenate practices that were banned. Because I have the choice, I rejuvenate practices my

Mom, Aunty, and Uncle were denied access to on their behalf and on behalf of my ancestors. I honor the sacrifices they made due to the banning of ceremonial practices.

I also find resonance with the way that Njoki Wane explains in their article, "[Re]Claiming my Indigenous knowledge: Challenges, resistance, and opportunities," what Reclamation means to them by saying,

> The politics of reclamation is about taking something old and making it new again. It is about recognizing that culture shifts with time, location, and the social and political challenges that we face as communities. But, perhaps more than anything else, reclamation is about rediscovering the central tenants of our Indigenous cultures and applying them to our present context. Like any other cultural project, our decision to reclaim our Indigenous knowledges can begin with a single moment, a thought, or a particular social challenge (94).

Defining Reclamation has also brought me the opportunity to define another word I use in this thesis paper which is Neo-Traditional. The way the Njoki Wane explains their thought process around culture shifting with time, and taking something old and making it new again is how I think about the word Neo-Traditional. Traditions change over time and with each shifting moment of time comes with the shifting of traditions. Colonialism changed many traditions with the introduction of European trade materials like glass beads, silk, and satin. These items have changed Indigenous regalia on Turtle Island and thus Indigenous regalia has changed with Neo-Traditional materials. Even though these materials have a long history of trade along the silk road, once they were traded on Turtle Island to Indigenous people, they became integrated into regalia alongside leather and rawhide, and this is the reason I describe them as Neo-Traditional.

Influences in Material Practice

Material exploration is crucial to my research and to my efforts to reconnect with my heritage. I also find affinities with many other Indigenous artists working in new ways with traditional materials, specifically rawhide. In working with rawhide, I have found that it has taught me a lot of different things. It is malleable and resilient just like Indigenous people. It provides form and structure that responds to time and touch. The artists I find most exciting am reviewing all work with rawhide in a variety of contemporary and traditional ways. Below, I will discuss the Indigenous artists who have similar concepts, materials, or methods that have inspired me to delve into my own material explorations.

Brian Jungen is a Dane-zaa sculptor who often usually works by disassembling contemporary products like Nike Air Jordans into masks, such as in his piece, *Warrior 4* (2018). The work I am focusing on differs in material and is titled *The Men of My Family* (2010). It is composed of circular pieces of rawhide that resemble drum cut outs, and it also includes a lacing technique similar to how one laces a drum around a frame. Instead of using a drum frame, he has used car fenders, a chest freezer, and steel to stretch these circular pieces of rawhide onto to. He has said his work draws on his family's ranching and hunting background as well as his Dane-zaa heritage (Brian Jungen). The way that Jungen works has inspired me to work with Indigenous traditional materials and contemporary materials together as well. The dichotomy between traditional and contemporary speaks to each material choice, and makes the viewer work to understand why the artist choose the materials.

I have also gravitated to the art of Shawn Espinosa. Espinosa is an Oglala Lakota Sioux artist and traditional parfleche maker. Parfleche is a traditional envelope, box, or bag made of

rawhide that can be used to carry a variety of different personal items like tools, meats, berries, etc. Parfleche is a French word that came about during the fur trade when French traders saw the container. They combined the word “par” which means to parry or defend and “fleche” meaning arrow, because the containers were sturdy enough to deflect arrows (Parfleche). Each Indigenous tribe that made parfleches have their own original word in their respective language for a parfleche; however, because I am still new to the Cree and Osage languages, I have not yet learned what the original word for parfleche is in my own languages.

Espinosa has said he is primarily a self-taught artist learning through experience and from family. He attended Red Cloud Indian School and graduated in 1997, working as a tour guide at the school after graduation (Shawn Espinosa). In this way, Espinosa had to learn a lot on his own, and I see this as a symptom of colonialism, where traditions are taken away from Indigenous people. For example, the banning of ceremonies made it hard for many Indigenous people to reconnect and is one of the many reasons why we must relearn both ceremony and tradition. I find myself working in a way that is similar to Espinosa in that I try to learn how to work with traditional materials from my family as well. Though this has not always been the case and sometimes I’ve had to learn completely on my own through trying and failing, which some Elders encourage, allowing youth to learn independently and see what works and what does not. Even though Espinosa and I differ, since I grew up in two different cities and he grew up on his reserve, there is still a disconnect due to colonialism that made us both resort to autodidactic methods. We both have strong family connections that can help by showing us examples when learning specific traditional processes. This is how both Espinosa and I are keeping the tradition alive in our own respective ways, and this is also a belief we both share.

Another artist that has left an impression on me is Jeffrey Gibson, who is a Mississippi Choctaw and Cherokee multimedia artist. Gibson created a piece called *Freedom* (2013), in which he has made an extraordinarily large (no listed dimensions) contemporary parfleche box that incorporates a variety of traditional and contemporary materials. The materials used are repurposed tipi poles, rawhide lacing, artificial sinew, buffalo hide, acrylic paint, wool, glass and plastic beads, sterling silver, turquoise, and quartz. He made a travois as well, another Indigenous item given a French name, meaning "to work". The travois was used by Plains people to transport and carry things like large parfleches that contained their belongings when traveling to different areas (Freedom).

The nomadic Plains people (including the Cree and Osage) had multiple camps for different seasons, and parfleches and travois were used in combination together in the same way that Gibson has arranged his piece. In particular, Gibson's work shows a traditional process that both his tribes and my tribes used, as nomads, which carries significance across a number of my works.

Methods of Material Exploration

The works of Jungen, Espinosa, and Gibson have informed my own practice in so many ways, and the affinities I feel with their practices have provided me with a way of understanding material exploration that has driven my thesis work. My thesis work has revolved around explorations with rawhide, berry and plant pigments, fringing, and sewing. I see these material explorations not just as a way of making but in some cases as a key part of the works themselves. For example, I have learned so much about how I can shape rawhide into abstract shapes, braid rawhide, etch/tattoo the rawhide, cut the rawhide into fringe strips, and fold the rawhide to make

it stand up by itself. Or in working with natural pigments, I have learned how mixing ratios of berry/plant pigments can create opaque or translucent effects depending on that ratio on the variety of different material substrates.

The materials I am learning and re-learning to work with have important histories in my culture. I have chosen rawhide as a material because of its place in Cree art history, but also because the material is so malleable and perfect for making sculptures. While I am using a very traditional soaking method, I utilize a contemporary method of abstraction to shape it in ways I have not seen rawhide shaped before. Replacing canvas and linen with a culturally significant material like rawhide is an important part of my Decolonization process, and it is allowing me to learn more about Indigenous art and the history of materials used in this category of art. Below are images of some of these experiments that ultimately informed the creation of my thesis works.

Figure 1.0: *Material Experiment 1*

Figure 1.1: *Material Experiment 2*

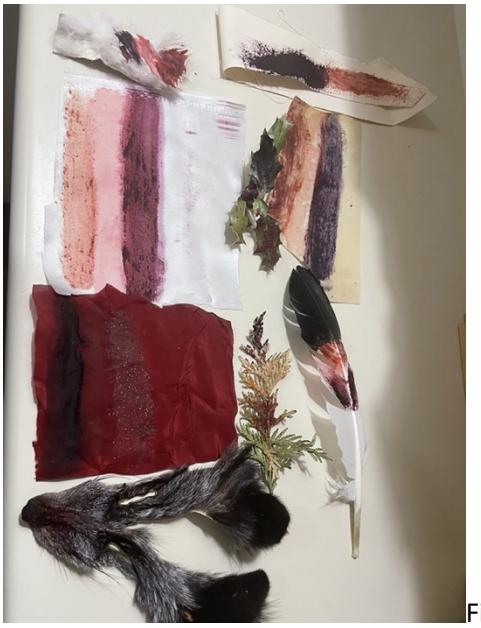

Figure 1.2: *Material Experiment 3*

As shown in figures 1.0 to 1.2, I tested the berry/plant pigments on rocks, leather, broadcloth, canvas, silk, satin, rabbit fur, fox fur, cedar, holly, rawhide, and a turkey feather. I chose a variety of traditional Indigenous materials and Neo-Traditional materials that became a part of Indigenous culture through trade. These experiments helped me develop a relationship to

both the pigments and the materials I choose to paint on. Each material I painted on has a different quality: for example, the fur was quite challenging to paint on yet learning how the pigment saturated the topcoat of fur, but without absorbing it, told me it would be hard to paint figuratively on fur. Choosing fur as a material connects me to the ancestors who would paint patterns on horses. I felt a significant connection to my ancestors as I performed the same motions they once did. The feather was also challenging as it is waterproof, and the paint kept dripping off as it is water based. Feathers were painted by my ancestors as well as being used in many other aspects of life. The connection to my ancestors felt just as strong painting feathers as it did when I was painting fur. The rock swatches were the easiest material to work with as the paint absorbed into the rock and the colour was more opaque. These rock paintings provided many teachings through my exploration of its properties, and I felt a bond with the rocks as well as with my ancestors, having seen many examples of beautiful rock paintings by my ancestors. This material exploration taught me a lot about reconnecting to historically rich materials and was a vital part of my process of Reclamation.

Figure 1.3: *Material Experiment 4*

Figure 1.4: *Material Experiment 5*

Figure 1.5: *Material Experiment 6*

As shown in figures 1.3 to 1.5, I further experimented with swatches on my three favorite materials from the previous swatch experiments: rawhide, leather, and satin. These were the prequel to making my work for the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) State of Practice (SOP) show. I chose these three materials because I liked how the absorption of paint produced a saturated colour that was very rich. The rawhide's absorption of the paint gave it a fascinating effect which prompted me to explore further. Rawhide was used for so many things by my ancestors, and it was a way to honor and respect animals by using every part of an animal that was hunted. In addition to being culturally significant to my Cree and Osage heritage, rawhide has become a key part of my practice, because I am entranced by how many forms and shapes it can become. The process of soaking and drying rawhide allows me to feel the tactile connection to the animal that my ancestors had, as I connect to land through learning about the animals and plants that live in Saskatchewan.

As previously mentioned, I have been taught how to traditionally trade with the earth for sage and sweetgrass with a tobacco offering to mother earth. However, I have not been taught to hunt yet (my uncle is going to teach me to trap). As a result, I have either bought moose or deer rawhide or been gifted it. The same goes for the freeze dried saskatoon berry powder, strawberry powder, choke berry powder, wheatgrass powder, and echinacea powder. While they are all Indigenous to Saskatchewan, they are not accessible all year long, and I do not know how to make these plant powders in a traditional way. I see using berry and plant pigments as a form of decolonial research. I am learning about the plants native to Saskatchewan, and now I can have a sense of food sovereignty. Learning about the natural foods that my people used, not only for food but for craft as well, is important to my own Decolonization and the learning of important aspects of my culture that were taken from me. They've taught me about pigments and how I can paint with them and they've taught me how important they are to my culture.

In this way, being able to decolonize, research, and learn about these plants both online, from my aunt, and other family members allows me to engage in reclaiming and reconnecting because being displaced has been hard. Thinking about Mother Earth and plant connections to people on different nation's homelands has led me to my own lands on traditional Cree territory. While I consider myself as being displaced while living in Los Angeles and living in Vancouver, my recent move to Saskatchewan is a way to finally reconnect physically to my homeland. Thinking about my displacement and learning about the plants that are native to my homeland has been important to my process of Decolonization, my reclaiming of traditional knowledges, and my assertion of food sovereignty. These are superfoods and have numerous health benefits and healing properties so they are a necessity in every way. If I had direct access to these foods, I

would be able to eat healthier and live more closely to the way my ancestors lived, which is also an important aspect of Decolonization for me.

In addition to working with rawhide and natural pigments, I have also experimented with fringe in much of my work. This came as a result of learning how to bead with Aunty Denise and Lezli, during which they also showed me various ways to use fringe with beads and leather. Lezli showed me examples of regalia for pow wows and showed me videos of her friends who did fancy shawl dancing. I became entranced by the way the fringe on the shawl swung in the air with the dancer's hand movements. This sense of movement became a very important part of my work. There are tons of other examples of fringe in regalia, but the fancy shawl dancing has the longest fringe I have seen swaying with the dancers, and that inspired me to use very long fringe for the pieces in figures 1.6-1.8. I have chosen materials with an integral history to many Indigenous tribes such as leather and rawhide. As I discussed above, satin and silk have a newer history that was introduced with trade, but it has been incorporated into regalia, just like glass beads were when trade happened between European settlers and Indigenous people. The Milwaukee public museum details the satin and silk trade on Turtle Island:

The silk ribbons used in native ribbon work were brought by French traders to the Great Lakes region in the later part of the 18th century. After the French Revolution, extravagant clothing decorated by ribbons quickly went out of style in Europe and the unwanted ribbons were exported to the Americas. In addition to the silk ribbons, tribes in the Great Lakes area traded for metal knives and cookware, bells, small mirrors, glass and brass beads, guns, alcohol, and wool blankets (History of American Indian Ribbonwork).

The French traded many materials to my Woodland Cree tribe, and these added to Neo-Traditional forms of fashion and art that are now an important part of regalia and contemporary art. Researching how this history has shaped our current Indigenous lives is critical in my own practice, because I feel so inspired by how creatively my ancestors used materials that were new to them and how they formed Neo-Traditions with their art. Specifically, researching about my Cree and Osage cultures is a form of Reclamation of knowledge given how our people, and the knowledge they hold within them, have been scattered across Turtle Island. This research has helped me to understand the importance of revitalizing materials like rawhide with historical significance in art and beyond.

As my experimentation grew, I began to create larger artworks that brought together many of the material and formal experiments. In the works I will discuss below, it is important to note that I found new insights into my practice through the gesture of reconnecting – literally bringing together different materials and different material practices that also allow me to work with traditional knowledge and practices.

Figure 1.6: *Untitled 1*

For my painting, *Untitled 1* (Figure 1.6), I sewed two large pieces of leather and satin together, and I laced the two rawhide pieces to the leather. Both sewing and lacing are common techniques to make regalia out of rawhide and leather. Having all three different materials attached together is a similar process to making a quilt, which reminded me of the process I've seen in many online tutorials of making a star quilt blanket that is sewn from cloth shaped into diamonds that form a star pattern. In my artworks, I try to work with the material in the shapes and forms that I find them in, and most materials I used are scrap pieces that I would only slightly shape so I could attach pieces more seamlessly. In other cases, I built it in rough rectangles that already possessed their own unique shape and pattern. I found myself attaching

geometrical shape scraps to make a distinctive looking patchwork painting that referenced the process of star quilt blanket making.

In creating my larger artworks, I often work between traditional and non-traditional techniques in order to both reconnect with my heritage and find my own path. For example, Indigenous people have shaped rawhide by stretching it over a material like wood to make canoes, various types of bags, and a variety of other useful vessels, and I use a non-traditional technique to shape each section of rawhide by soaking and shaping it with clips then letting it dry how I've configured it.

Another important use of rawhide is in making hand drums. To make a traditional hand drum, you soak a circular piece of rawhide and shape it, lace it onto a circular wooden frame, then let it dry overnight. I used synthetic sinew to lace the rawhide to itself, so it was a continuous circular sculpture. I used the sinew to attach rawhide to the brass rings, as seen in figure 1.7 below, and I also used the sinew to suspend the rings on the branches. I added brass and glass beads as well as leather fringe to the sinew attached to the rawhide at the top of the ring. I echoed that fringe on top of the sculpture at the bottom where the sinew anchors the rawhide in the ring, and the long fringe sways below.

Figure 1.7: *Untitled 2*

In *Untitled 2* (Figure 1.7), the brass ring I am using can be used as a base for dream catchers, but, more traditionally, branches are utilized for a dreamcatcher ring base. In these untitled works (Figures 1.7 & 1.8), I am referencing both dream catchers, dream shields, and the commodification of these traditional and sacred items, because they are sold and mass produced and available for anyone to buy. I also found the brass ring very useful for adding a lot more fringe to the sculptures while allowing for certain types of movement. For example, I found the natural spinning that happened on the ring and the sculpture allowed for them to spin independently of each other; this added a feeling of movement similar to the dancer's shawl I previously described.

Figure 1.8: *Untitled 3*

My paint of choice for the rawhide in *Untitled 3* (Figure 1.8) is one I derived from natural pigments: I used cranberry powder, strawberry powder, chokeberry powder, saskatoon berry powder, echinacea powder, and wheatgrass powder. I chose these powders because the plants are Indigenous to the land where my Cree Band Lac La Ronge is located. Additionally, I choose them because of the significance of food sovereignty and how important these berries and plants were/are for the survival and health of my Cree ancestors.

The thicker paint created from the powders is not archival and has been crumbling off since the application of it. I find this interesting because this work becomes a time-based work in

that it has a shelf life, since the pigment crumbled off as it dried and continues to crumble off a little bit anytime it is handled.

The translucence of the berry and plant pigments in the untitled works seen above (Figures 1.6-1.8) have the ability to refract light through the sculptures, which allows for a slight glowing effect that is most noticeable in the natural sunlight. While I would have ideally shown the rawhide works in a forest, I did not want to be limited in showing only the documentation of their installation for the purposes of my thesis exhibition. Encountering the materiality itself is important to these works. The rawhide has a translucent aspect to it naturally, and the light pink berry colours are naturally translucent. At the same time, having the thicker globs of paint on the inside, while having some of the rawhide not painted next to the plops, plays with the light and refracts interestingly as well. You can also see the colours on the outside shining through to the inside where there is no paint, and then where the plops land completely blocks that light coming through.

Preparation for Thesis Exhibition

In this section, I will be detailing my thesis work and exhibition and discussing further developing and experimenting within my work. In particular, my thesis work developed around deeper explorations into rawhide and fringe.


Figure 1.9: *Untitled 4*


Figure 2.0: *Untitled 5*

Figure 2.1: *Untitled 6*

As shown in Figures 1.9 to 2.1, I experimented with different materials that could be used for fringe in combination with the rawhide sculptures. I used caribou and rabbit fur, beads, and horse hair for the fringe. I used my extra rawhide scraps for this. I learned that almost any material can be turned into fringe, and I am entranced by all types of fringe, especially material that is significant to my culture. Again, I have used historically significant materials that my ancestors used, and may have used, to make fringe for fashion and art. There are many archived pieces of clothing with fringe, however there are many that have decomposed over time since leather does not last forever. I imagine how my ancestors could have experimented with various types of fringe that were never archived, whether due to the passage of time or colonial erasure.

Figure 2.2: *Untitled 7 (Phase 1)*

Figure 2.3: *Untitled 7 (Phase 2)*

Figures 2.2 and 2.3 show a piece I made to further develop my exploration of rawhide and fringe. For *Untitled 7*, I draped the rawhide on a chair to shape it. This connection to my personal domestic space was interesting to me in that it allowed me to bring that world into contact with this traditional material. Rawhide can be transformed by being soaked, which then allows it to further warp from moisture levels in the air, which also happens with drums--sometimes they'll sound different because of the moisture level in the air, and the same goes with my pieces. Untitled 7 also allowed me to explore what other materials I can make fringe out of, what kind of marks and textures I can make with the pigments, and how I can experiment with lighting. I used turkey and goose feathers, rabbit fur strips, and horse hair for the fringe. I also

wire wrapped certain areas of this piece with copper and steel wire. Combining these materials worked well with the back lighting I was experimenting with in this installation. The way each type of fringe casts shadows also taught me the aesthetically pleasing nature of layering fringe.

Figure 2.4: *Untitled 8 (Angle 1)*

Figure 2.5: *Untitled 8 (Angle 2)*

For *Untitled 8* (Figures 2.4 and 2.5), I used scrap rawhide, which forced me to work with the material in yet another new way. The scrap came from someone from one of the drum workshops in the AGP, when their drum split. Someone put their energy and work and all their effort into making that drum and it was left behind as a scrap, but I was offered to use it from the scrap pile. The idea of using the scrap pieces was interesting to me in that the material could be read either as scrap or as just a different form of the material. Incorporating it into my work also gave the rawhide new life and demonstrated respect for the animal that can now be appreciated again. Through this process, I also experimented with different methods of sculpting the rawhide. I braided strands, tied knots, and laced broken pieces of the rawhide drum along with rawhide

scraps. I also experimented further with wire wrapping in combination with the rawhide. I used copper and steel wire again here. Using contemporary materials in the construction of this piece shows how Indigenous art is not limited by medium, and affirms that Indigenous people can work with traditional or Neo-Traditional materials. This piece was meant to be a dichotomy between contemporary and traditional approaches, while displaying the animorphic qualities wires possess when combined with the hide of an animal such as rawhide.

Figure 2.6: *Untitled 9 (Angle 1)*

Figure 2.7: *Untitled 9 (Angle 2)*

Figure 2.8: *Untitled 10 (Angle 1)*

For the sculptures in Figures 2.6 to 2.8, I tried a different method of soaking the rawhide. I sprayed the rawhide with water in specific areas, so I could fold it while maintaining the structural integrity of the material, allowing it stand on its own. After installing the works several times, I learned that these pieces can have trouble standing up, depending on the moisture in the air, as they tend to warp and that can make the level of the bottom uneven. Making this piece taught me to be more patient and calmer while working, so that I can let the work decide what it will be. I learned to let go of being a perfectionist, because what is meant to be will be and that is how this piece came to be.

Again, I am using berry and plant pigments to paint these pieces. I shaped geometrical patterns inspired by the abstract geometry of historical Cree and Osage parfleche works. The folding technique I used for this piece was inspired by the processes of making a parfleche box. Instead of being floppy and unable to stand, after soaking it all at once, shaping and spraying in sections gave it increased structural stability.

Figure 2.9: Untitled 10, (Angle 2)

Figure 3.0: Untitled 9, (Angle 3)

Figure 3.1: MFA 2022 Thesis Exhibition

In my thesis exhibition pictured above (Figure 3.1), I installed a collection of my rawhide works in order to showcase the importance of rawhide to Indigenous culture, as well as to my own journey of Decolonization and Reclamation. This exhibition also displays the progression of my rawhide works as I experimented with different processes and approaches.

The contrast of the white cube setting and the natural rawhide tan tones, berry purples/pinks, and shades of plant greens of my works contradict one another. Placing my rawhide works, which are already in conversation with and engaged in a process of Decolonization and Reclamation, in this space transforms this white cube gallery in the colonial institution, Emily Carr University of Art and Design. The more such a place holds space for Indigenous processes, the further that institution holds opportunities to engage with the idea of Decolonization. Colonial institutions require a lot of work in processes of decolonizing, so that is

why it is important for Indigenous art to be shown in white cubes all over Turtle Island, because even the white cube is on Indigenous land. Painting the walls white and blank does not make it neutral, in fact it only draws attention to European principles.

By placing my art in this space, I am advocating for more inclusion of Indigenous art in gallery spaces on Turtle Island. The Reclamation of the white cube and subsequent claiming of it as an Indigenous space on Indigenous land is necessary in asserting the right of Indigenous land sovereignty. This is the power of Indigenous art in a white cube gallery space, as that Reclamation is an act of Decolonization. While my art is installed there, the institution becomes an Indigenous space rather than a colonial space.

Conclusion

The existence and survival of Indigenous art is evidence of the failure of colonial modes and constructs, because the foundation of Turtle Island is based on genocide, and the aim to fully eradicate Indigenous people has failed. We as Indigenous people continue to show our culture through our art and political movements in unison. Indigenous methodologies are so vital in every aspect of our lives because colonial forces continue to try and silence and censor us. Indigenous refusal of the colonial narrative is necessary to fight for a just future that includes Indigenous methodologies.

Being an Indigenous person and artist in a colonial institution comes with many challenges such as balancing the demands of said institution with my own spiritual and cultural practices. However, I believe it is a necessary struggle so that I can continue fighting for Decolonization and Reclamation. People's misconceptions are an opportunity to explain to those interested in Indigenous issues why it is necessary to champion Indigenous sovereignty. This

explanation, through art and research, can expand genres for myself and other contemporary Indigenous people and artists, as well as those to come. Creating an understanding between Indigenous people and everyone that lives on Turtle Island is vital for the economic, decolonial, and environmental change we so desperately need for humanity and the earth to endure. After experimenting with various natural and processed materials, my practice has evolved around rawhide, berry pigments, and the many ways I can sculpt and paint with both. While I have created many works that I am proud of, I am just beginning my work with rawhide and pigments, and I look forward to developing even further the way I work with these materials in the future.

My ideology as an Indigenous Two Spirit woman from the Woodland Cree and Osage tribes and a dual citizen of America and Canada is shaped by my identity and experiences. These circumstances have led me to conclude that Indigenous Sovereignty is the best way forward for Turtle Island. While I am naturally inclined towards this conclusion, I truly believe these movements are beneficial for everyone. My work and the processes it has gone through are decolonial, and I make these pieces to educate and inform people on Decolonization and Reclamation.

Returning to my thesis question, how have my processes of Decolonization and Reclamation guided me on a journey back to my traditional territories? Engaging in Cree and Osage formal qualities like fringe, parfleche folding, and geometric designs has been important to my process of Decolonization and Reclamation. It has also been a great source of cultural pride for me to learn about these formal qualities. I can finally engage in my culture more, as I am educating myself on a variety of cultural aesthetics, ideologies, and methodologies. Now that I know Cree and Osage designs as well as uses of fringe, I can literally adorn myself in my

culture and immerse myself in it more. I did not feel as though I could engage with my culture as much when I was not educating myself on these subjects, because Turtle Island's school systems do not provide adequate education on Indigenous topics. Now that I know more, I can be proud of who I am, where I come from, and who my family is. A journey that began on a spiritual and theoretical level has become a physical journey that has brought me literally closer to home since I have moved to my traditional Cree territories. This has been my journey of reconnection.

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