

BEADING BACK AND FORTH

UPENDING TEMPORALITY THROUGH KNOWLEDGE
TRANSMISSION

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ABSTRACT

Knowing glass beads as active agents – as beings – proffers forms of analysis untethered from linear temporality and immersed in story. Analytical frameworks steeped in Western philosophical traditions dictate limited understandings of art made by Indigenous peoples within the study of art histories, and as displayed and collected by museums and galleries. Despite museological conventions that reproduce entrenched processes of objectification and linear classifications, appreciating Indigenous beadwork through relational and dialogical epistemologies has gained traction within the study of Indigenous arts in Canada. In support of future generations of Indigenous makers in the prairie region, this analysis upends conventional colonial structures of knowledge entrenched in institutions.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous art; Relationality; Kinship; Temporality; Archive; Museology; Beadwork; Prairies.

Curator Felicia Gay, a muskego inninu iskeew from waskiganeek (Cumberland House, SK), maintains that “Story lives within the bead mikis (meegis), in our bodies, in our blood”, when discussing the art of nehiyawak (Cree) artist Ruth Cuthand.¹ This assertion advances a mode for understanding beadwork as having a lifeforce and that can be understood as kin. Through the process of beading and sewing come understandings of the complexities of Indigenous knowing.²

I was taught that recognizing one’s ties to land is vital to honoring enduring kinship ties to our human and more than human relations. In this essay I carry forward the responsibility that comes with such understandings in a discussion of beadwork from Canada’s Flatlands or prairie region. As a woman of mixed ancestry, my connection to the land that is today known as Treaty Four territory in Saskatchewan, Canada is a complicated one. My matriarchal family are members of Dakhóta and Lakhóta Oyate, who struggled to make a home in the Qu’Appelle valley in the late nineteenth century, while settler branches of my family who arrived in this same area experienced privilege.³

Indigenous glass beadwork from the Flatlands has recently found great traction in galleries in this central region and beyond. A proliferation of exhibitions, including the national traveling exhibition, *Radical Stitch* (2022–2024), necessitates a reconsideration of conceptualizations of beading within conventional institutional settings. The conventional white cube galleries where Indigenous beadwork is now often displayed typically reinforces an objectification of art and conjures naturalized discourses of possession.⁴ Objects hung on a wall or kept in a vault, narrowly appreciated aesthetically through a Western art lens, reproduce certain ways of seeing Indigenous arts that negate decolonial change. And while situating Indigenous arts within discourses of stasis and possession has been contested for more than twenty years by Indigenous curators and art historians in Canada and the USA, objectification has

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Felicia Gay, ‘*Beads in the Blood*’. *Ruth Cuthand*, curatorial wall panel statement, Kenderdine Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, January 22 – April 10, 2021, np. I want to thank the many Aunties from the Flatlands I am so fortunate to know. Many of the ideas found in this essay have emerged over the years from our visits, panels, and beading circles.

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I wish to thank [Katherine Boyer](#), [Ruth Cuthand](#), and [Carrie Allison](#), artists featured in this essay, for their generosity in sharing their stories, their time, and their labor. I aimed to write in ways that would hopefully share some understandings of the Indigenous Flatlands, an area known as the Prairies or the Grasslands. The beading included here also shares stories that bring to life the interconnected ways Indigenous beadworkers sew together the past, present, and future of this territory.

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I currently reside on Anishinaabeg aki, or unceded Algonquin territory, where Carleton University is located. I am an uninvited visitor from Treaty Four territory in Saskatchewan.

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Bill Brown (ed.), *Things*, Chicago 2004, 471; Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties. Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Chicago 2004, 362; Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories. On the Materiality of Images*, London 2004, xi; 222.

not disappeared.⁵ Knowing and appreciating Indigenous beadwork differently requires an openness to new ways of seeing and understanding that unsettles and complicates paradigmatic art historical systems, curatorial habits, and museological practices of collecting.

By intervening in the confining webbing that entangles understandings of Indigenous beadwork from the Canadian Prairies, I offer a close analysis of beaded art by Métis artist Katherine Boyer, nehiyawak and Scottish artist Ruth Cuthand, and nehiyawak artist Carrie Allison, who each maintain active art practices with ancestral connections to nehiyawak and Métis stories of the prairie homelands. As is the case with many Indigenous beaders on the Flatlands, these three artists are each part of a dynamic artistic movement that can be better understood within a multi-temporal frame of *being-in-time*, a fitting term advanced by Queer-settler scholar Mark Rifkin.⁶ I borrow from Rifkin's conception of multiple temporalities in my understandings of how knowledge transmission and process defy linearity. Multi-temporality shifts the confining categorizations often associated with "traditional" or "contemporary" practices and acknowledges the ongoing innovation and adaptation of art as kin. This inquiry considers how situating Indigenous beadwork differently upends conventional archival and display practices, and activates story, both visual and embodied, as part of a decolonizing discourse.

I. Beads, Land, Decolonization

Fusing land and sky, labor and promise, ancestors and spirits, movement, home, and sovereignty, *Carry the Horizon with You* [Fig. 1] by Métis Katherine Boyer, from Saskatchewan, who lives in the Métis homeland of Manitoba, utilizes beads, wood, and paracord support to visualize the fluidity of time and Indigenous peoples who once routinely moved throughout the Prairies following the buffalo, tending garden plots, and, later because of the colonial imposition of national borders, crossing the imposed Medicine Line to seek haven. Today, because of colonization, Métis and First Nations peoples live on one side of a border or another. Nation making involves borders – lines inscribed onto land in temporal custom. Yet, the construct that is the Medicine Line or the Canada/US Border speaks to only one of the storylines beaded in this work.

The melding of materials and stories found in *Carry the Horizon with You* reveals a balancing act that Boyer constructs. Utility and functionality serve as an integral part of this complex Métis aesthetic, according to the artist, who notes that the work resonates

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Lee-Ann Martin (ed.), *Making a Noise! Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community*, Banff 2004; Jolene Rickard, *Absorbing or Obscuring the Absence of a Critical Space in the Americas for Indigeneity*. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, in: *RES. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52, 2007, 85–92.

6

Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC 2017.



[Fig. 1]
Katherine Boyer, Carry the Horizon with You, 2020, installation, glass beads on black
stroud, paracord, fir wood, approx. 300 × 300 × 8 cm, Collection of the artist © Permission
of the artist.

with her “experience of queering and Queer worldmaking” in the heteronormative settler nation.⁷ The horizon is always evident on the land, stretching out ahead where earth and sky meet, where stories of creation connect with twenty-first-century stories of resilience. Trips to the hardware store and the bead store service the imagined and expansive sense of home built into this sculptural work.

The beaded strap held level with nylon paracord recalls the history of the tumpline used by the Métis to carry heavy loads long distances. Each bead sewn by Boyer into this functional strap contains intergenerational stories of movement and innovation. The symmetrical floral designs evoke reciprocal relationships with native plants, the adaptation of stylized designs derived from Boyer’s archival research and artistic innovations. The work demonstrates the recognition of difficult labors that come with caring responsibly for the land and for relations in the past, the present, and carrying into the future.

Decolonization is an implicit narrative thread throughout Boyer’s beading, as it is in the beaded works by Cuthand and Allison included in this analysis. Each of their arts practices relies on engagements with archival collections in museums – that is, beadwork caught within the confining organizational structures that restrain relational ways of knowing. Glass beads, which arrived in the eastern region of North America as early as 1820, were eventually traded in the prairie region as part of the fur trade and served a key role in ceremonies of exchange.⁸ This made them ready objects for commodity and collecting.⁹ In Cuthand’s recent solo exhibition, *Beads in the Blood. Ruth Cuthand, a Survey*, curated by Felicia Gay in 2020, Gay reinforces a discourse around Cuthand’s beadwork concerning lifeforce, that repositions beads and ways of seeing beads, explaining in her curatorial statement that “Cuthand believes the bead is alive...”¹⁰ Such concepts challenge the ways in which beading has long been collected and housed in archival vaults. Trapped within colonial structures of time and Western ways of knowing art, and considered within a discourse of material culture, beaded works found in ethnographic collections often continue to be treated as relics of the past rather than as relations, who when visited, often share their stories. Beadwork made today can also be ensnared

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Katherine Boyer, *How the Sky Carries the Sun*, artist statement, Art Gallery of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, February 2022, np.

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Joel Monture, *The Complete Guide to Traditional Native American Beadwork*, New York 1993, 2–5; Marsha Bol, *The Art and Tradition of Beadwork*, Layton, UT 2018, 336.

9

Carmen Robertson, Land and Beaded Identity. Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland, in: *RACAR. Revue d’art canadienne. Canadian Art Review* 42/2, 2017, 13–29 (July 3, 2023).

10

Gay, *Beads in the Blood*, np.

within confining misunderstandings that bely the dynamics forged between the beader and the beads, caught up within concepts related to material culture and craft.

Decolonization remains a site for vigorous debate in academia today in ways that far exceed the parameters of this essay, though I contend that anticolonial and decolonizing narratives shift theoretical and practical formulations of Indigenous beadwork by situating them within Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, and for the purposes of this analysis help to explain how Indigenous ways of knowing are woven into beading practices. Lakhóta scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn remind scholars of the need to speak frankly about colonial histories and the need to rethink concepts of temporality: “The connectedness of the past to present to future remains a circle of lessons and insights that can give us both the consciousness and conscience to heal ourselves.”¹¹ This acknowledgment of “temporal sovereignty” is tied directly to story.¹²

As noted, Rifkin’s *Beyond Settler Time* unpacks distinctions between “Native and non-native experiences of time [...] to facilitate possibilities for temporal sovereignty” to reconceive of notions of time by articulating forms of “being-in-time” that do not take settler formations as a standard for thinking through historicity or the present.¹³ Still, the robust complexities of colonial systems entrenched in art institutions have largely served as barriers toward fully configuring discourses surrounding Indigenous beadwork, for example, displayed within galleries and collected and preserved in archival collections. Linear time frames tend to defang colonial practices because of the naturalized pervasiveness in museology and within the academic discipline of art history.

Decolonizing efforts also acknowledge the use of story as method. Sylx literary scholar Jo-anne Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiiem), Waikato – Ngāti Mahuta, Te Ahiwaru scholar Jenny Lee-Morgan, and Garrwa and Barunggam scholar Jason De Santolo build on Archibald’s earlier methodological framework coined storywork, reflecting the ongoing ways that story informs pedagogy inside and outside the academy.¹⁴ Storywork applied to visual stories, such as those held by beaded artworks, informs and directs knowledge transmission, activating conceptions inherent in the

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Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, *The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief*, in: *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8/2, 1998, 60–82, here 72.

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Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 4.

13

Ibid., 4; 25.

14

Jo-anne Archibald, Q’um Q’um Xiiem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo (eds.), *Decolonizing Research. Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, London 2019; Jo-anne Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork. Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*, Vancouver 2008, 5.

process and practice of beading. Utilizing the term “storying” as a verb, I argue, further captures the efforts to theorize the complex dynamics of narrative in this context. A beading circle, for example, or a sewing circle may serve as a catalyst for storying, where narrative threads related to knowledge transmission blend, bringing together temporal threads. A curated exhibition or an engaged group of students responding to a performative example of Indigenous art making also take part in the storying of knowledge. Interconnected with other ways of knowing, in the context of making art, the shifting of story from noun to verb, serves as a pedagogical agent. Storying activates relational understandings between living beings, in space and time, informed by the past, in ways that shape our present, and in the best of cases, helps to transform our futures.

Storying invigorates relational understandings between all living beings. Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice positions story and stories beyond passive intergenerational stories long described as “tales” or “legends” within settler discourse. Heath Justice explains that kinship, like storying, “is best thought of as a verb [...] that link[s] the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships”.¹⁵ Kinship obligations reflect articulations of the dynamics of interrelated forces also manifest in Indigenous languages and other cultural expressions. I resist sketching an oversimplification of complex Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies here to avoid homogenized or monolithic conceptions of pan-Indigenous ways of knowing because kinship, as a translated concept, does not easily give up the complex interconnections particular to Indigenous languages. Shifting understandings of time and place in concert with kinship ties plays a pivotal role here in relation to art created by Boyer, Cuthand, and Allison, and I defer to Heath Justice who cautions that generalizations are “essential to the survival of imperialism, as complications breed uncertainty in the infallibility of authoritative truth claims”.¹⁶

While scholarship contests conventional conceptualizations of archives, institutional collections mostly continue to reproduce structures that privilege Western forms of knowledge keeping. In *Duress*, historian Ann Laura Stoler assigns the conflicted and weighty term “duress” to how archival practices exert pressure on ingrained features of colonial histories of the present. Arguing that the connectivity of persistent colonial effects that “bear on the present” often escape scrutiny, Stoler challenges critics to ferret out these naturalized systems resistant to change.¹⁷ The underly-

¹⁵
Daniel Heath Justice, ‘Go Away Water!’ Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative, in: *Reasoning Together. The Native Critics Collection*, Norman, OK 2008, 147–168, here 150–151.

¹⁶
Ibid., 155.

¹⁷
Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Durham, NC 2016, 5.

ing structures of archives, naturalized within the practices of museums and libraries, do not easily give up their scripted temporal systems; maintained through “their durable, if sometimes intangible constraints and confinements” that cannot be easily unpicked.¹⁸ Unlearning as a concept has gained traction in a number of disciplines. For example, photography scholar Ariella Aisha Azoulay proposes unlearning as a process of disengaging from inherited systems of colonial imperialism that continue to shape present practices.¹⁹ Unlearning processes and structures that reproduce concepts of stasis and possession in institutional archives is productive work, to be sure. These structural constraints impact understandings of Indigenous arts, also. The cataloging of Indigenous arts within institutional archives is complicated by enduring biases. Unlearning is only one aspect of the conceptual labor required, however, to understand beadwork differently and to account for Indigenous ways of knowing.

Conventional museum documentation surrounding Indigenous beadwork focuses mostly on ethnographically organized cultural groups and linear time periods attributed to the piece. Seldom is the maker or the significance of the work included in the archival record. Provenance, while important, tends to focus on information related to the collector or donor when the maker is unknown. As with discourses concerning archival practices, scholarly discourses surrounding art institutions include formulations for change. Art historian Ruth Phillips promotes policies of collaboration, hybridization, and experimentation in her call to Indigenizing Canadian museums.²⁰ Ho Chunk curator and scholar Amy Lonetree outlines new models for exhibitionary practice of Indigenous art histories in American institutions that promote collaborative processes.²¹ Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls for Action, released in 2015, also includes specific directives for systemic change to museums, art institutions, and archives to work with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.²² The work of this directive progresses slowly.

Indigenous curators lead the way in rethinking how interconnected ways of knowing include relational ways of knowing. The

¹⁸

Ibid., 7.

¹⁹

Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*, London 2019, 11–12.

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Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces. Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, Montreal/Kingston, ON 2011.

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Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums. Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Chapel Hill, NC 2012.

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action, particular to museums and archives, include Calls 67, 68, 69: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*, 2015, 8 (July 21, 2023).

noted beading exhibition *Radical Stitch*, mounted in 2022 at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, was curated by Métis curators Sherry Farrell Racette and Cathy Mattes, along with Anishinaabe curator Michelle Lavallee, who, for example, resituate practices of beadwork beyond objectified forms of display, even as it enters white cube gallery spaces.²³ Sharing knowledge through stories and through visiting provides a powerful embodiment of multi-generational bodies of knowledge. Mattes, who conceptualizes a methodological curatorial approach based on wakootowin or kinship ties, extends theory into practice along with her co-curators of *Radical Stitch*. Métis Kitchen Table Talk (MKTTT), a term she advances, serves as a culturally responsive methodology that Mattes suggests helps to encourage community members to bead and strategize around the kitchen table (a traditional site for engaged political and social debate), strengthening kinship and community ties among those gathered to shape curatorial directions.²⁴ This method of curation offers clear advantages for reconceptualizing how audiences engage with Prairie beading in gallery spaces.

II. Storying the Land/Storying Relations

As with *Carry the Horizon with You*, Boyer extends the storied connection to the beaded sky in *Sky Vest* [Fig. 2]. The focal point of this sculptural armature is a bespoke beaded vest patterned to fuse a link, according to Boyer, “between my body and the skies of places that have contributed to how I understand myself. These lands contain a resonance that covers generations, and in concert the sky is exclusively for me, is exclusively my perspective, my angle, and orientation.”²⁵ *Sky Vest*, a sculptural installation, displays Boyer’s elevated beaded vest within a skeleton of construction-grade wood that lifts the vest upward, extending understandings of home and kin, body, and story, within a twenty-first-century gallery context.

Locating Métis ways of knowing at the heart of every stitch in the vest is a clear reminder of ongoing innovations that amalgamate diverse clothing traditions as symbols of Métis identity. Boyer reinterprets and reimagines cultural signifiers that convey creative resilience. Embodying the cultural practices of visiting, she visited beaded works created by ancestors in museum collections such as at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, MB and in other archival collections across the Prairies. The added dimension of cloud forma-

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Radical Stitch, MacKenzie Art Gallery, April 30 – September 25, 2022, Regina, SK (September 4, 2023).

²⁴

Cathy Mattes, Wakootowin, Beading and Métis Kitchen Table Talk. Indigenous Knowledge and Strategies for Curating Care, in: Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Lena Fritsch, Birgit Bosold, and Vera Hofmann (eds.), *Radicalizing Care. Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, Vienna 2021, 132–143.

²⁵

Boyer, *How the Sky Carries the Sun*, np.



[Fig. 2]
Katherine Boyer, *The Sky Vest*, 2021, installation, fir construction boards, glass beads on smoked moosehide, stroud cloth, approx. 450 × 500 × 200 cm, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

tions that cover the back and pockets of the vest mark the strength of interconnections at play [Fig. 3]. As part of her artistic process, Boyer studies techniques and patterns, as she looks, listens, and stories ancestral designs and colors into her innovative artwork.

Métis and nehiyawak (Plains Cree) understandings of kinship signal meanings are inherent in interconnected relationships and underpin the artwork included in this essay. Métis Elder Maria Campbell from Saskatchewan beautifully captures the complexities of an ancestral language's contextualization of such a term:

There is a word in my language that speaks to these issues: 'wahkotowin.' Today it is translated to mean kinship, relationship, and family as in human family. But at one time, from our place it meant the whole of creation. And our teaching taught us that all of creation is related and interconnected to all things within it.

Wahkotowin means honor and respecting those relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us.²⁶

The interconnected beaded flowers, berries, and white stems and vines on Boyer's vest function as more than decorative elements; they hold knowledge concerning medicine properties. The beads offer up gifts to make whole the deep and sacred notion of Wâhkôhtowin described by Elder Maria. Honoring beaded designs used by her grandmothers and aunties collected in archives, alongside Boyer's own unique and personal representations of skies tied to place, supported by utility and structure, *Sky Vest* enacts generational knowledge and embodies the ongoing, contemporary struggles to build one's home and a sacred sense of place.

III. Beads as Beings

When Ruth Cuthand first created her beaded *Trading* series in 2008, she sparked new ways to think about Prairie beadwork within a gallery setting, a shift that prompted galleries to exhibit beadwork as art rather than as artifact. Beaded diseases from this and subsequent series can today be found in museum collections throughout North America. The Saskatoon-based artist began the ground-breaking work by observing pathogens in the form of photographs taken through the oculus of the electron microscope. Cuthand included eleven beaded works in the original series to reinforce the destructive movement of diseases. Knowing beads as active agents – as kin

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Maria Campbell, We Need to Return to the Principles of Wahkotowin, in: *Eagle Feather News* 10/11, 2007, 5 (February 19, 2022).



[Fig. 3]
Katherine Boyer, Detail verso, *The Sky Vest*, 2021, installation, fir construction boards, glass beads on smoked moosehide, stroud cloth, approx. 450 × 500 × 200 cm, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

to visit with – opens fresh ways to contemplate beadwork such as this in the gallery. Attentive to intergenerational stories while referencing colonial efforts that have severed ties and supporting stories of resilience, Cuthand’s beaded diseases, mounted on black suede board with a scientific-looking stenciled white label, are both exquisitely beautiful with vibrant colors and shockingly repulsive, considering the devastating genocidal effects that resonated throughout Indigenous populations across Turtle Island.

The version of *Small Pox* reprinted here [Fig. 4], created in 2011 as part of the *Reserving* series, similarly references the smallpox pandemic in the Americas that Cuthand beaded earlier as part of the *Trading* series, estimated to have killed as many as 55 million people, according to historian and demographer Noble David Cook.²⁷ The epidemiological pathway of *Small Pox* is but one of the powerful narratives captured in the vibrantly beaded pathogen. Yet, genocidal impacts wrought upon communities and cultures with the spread of diseases are balanced by the resilience of Indigenous communities.²⁸ The beads that Cuthand expertly channels reference a millennium of stories of life on the Flatlands, of movement, of visiting, and of innovation. *Small Pox* exemplifies the diverse intersectional stories that resituate beads as beings rather than as objects. As holders of story, they transmit an ongoing myriad of narratives.

Cuthand also includes in the original *Trading* series *Syphilis* [Fig. 5], a sexually transmitted infection thought to have been taken back to Europe, a by-product of the Columbian exchange.²⁹ The medium chosen to represent *Syphilis*, porcupine quills harvested from a living relative or kin, reveals a fundamental sacredness adopted into the beading process used among Prairie beaders. Ancestors from the Flatlands often used this natural and other materials to adorn clothing and other utilitarian belongings. Cuthand eschewed the use of glass beads; instead she plaits naturally dyed porcupine quills in the ancient style, a technology maintained through intergenerational knowledge transmission among Plains Indigenous women. By situating quillwork within a series that is otherwise created using glass beads, Cuthand invites viewers to directly access a rich storied tradition of making and adornment directly linked to kinship ties.

Quills, used for millennia by Indigenous makers, require the application of a slow and painstaking technique associated with harvesting, flattening, and plaiting them. This technological process

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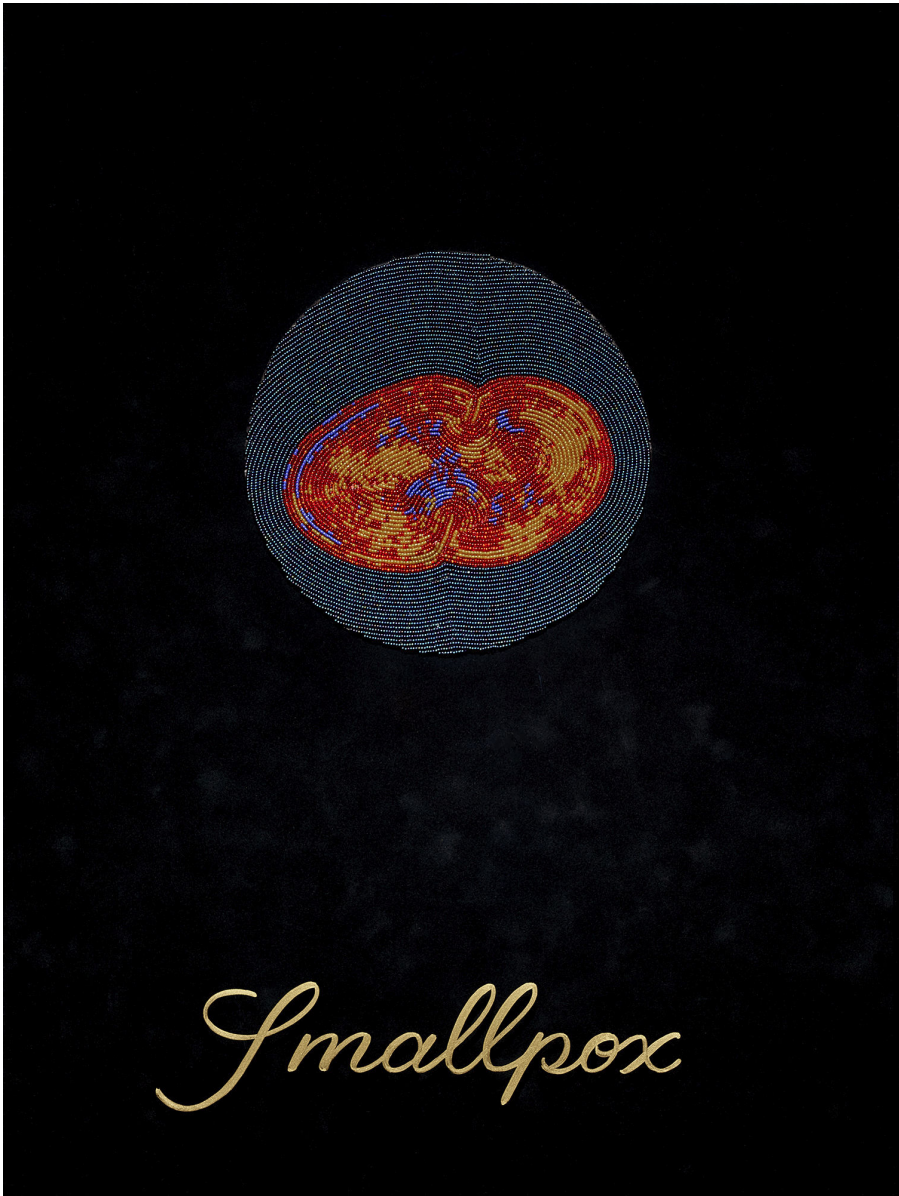
Noble David Cook, *Born to Die. Disease and New World Conquest, 1492–1650*, Cambridge 1998, 12; see also id., *Sickness, Starvation, and Death in Early Hispaniola*, in: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32/3, 2002, 349–386 (February 13, 2024).

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For an analysis of how disease impacted Indigenous peoples in the prairie region, see: James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains. Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, Regina, SK 2014.

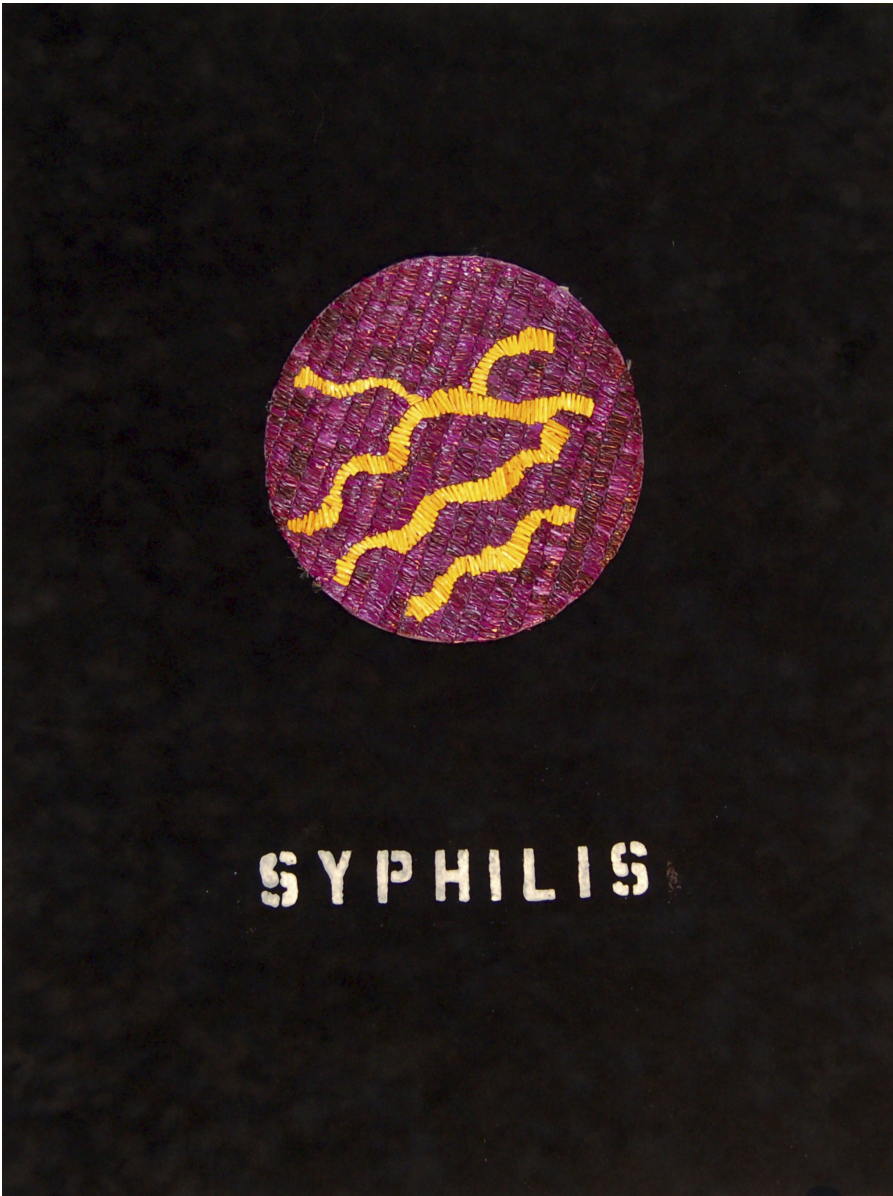
29

David Farhi and Nicolas Dupin, *Origins of Syphilis and Management in the Immunocompetent Patient. Facts and Controversies*, in: *Clinics in Dermatology* 28/5, 2010, 533–538.



[Fig. 4]

Ruth Cuthand, *Smallpox*, 2011, glass beads and acrylic on matboard with rayon flocking and acrylic paint in wood frame with glass glazing, 64 × 49 × 3 cm, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada © National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



[Fig. 5]
Ruth Cuthand, Syphilis, 2009, dyed porcupine quills and acrylic on suedeboard,
61.0 × 45.7 cm, Regina, Saskatchewan Arts Board © Saskatchewan Arts Board, Regina.

was a key aspect of design for Lakhóta women prior to contact as it was associated with sacred stories of Double Woman who appeared in the dream of a young Lakhóta woman on the plains and taught her how to use quills. The quills, harvested from porcupines, and therefore animate, hold stories because of their relational connections with land. Lakhóta and Dakhóta beaders today often mimic the linear, geometric designs of the quills as they pay homage to the gifts shared with them by Double Woman, making evident this form of storying accorded to the beading process.³⁰ While glass beads do not derive directly from land in the way naturally dyed quills do, beads have come to serve as kin in newly forged relationships within many Indigenous communities, and have been bestowed names within Indigenous languages commensurate with the role of story keepers.

Farrell Racette productively describes a process of “Indigenization” that occurred in the Métis homelands, where Métis women began to integrate and synthesize trade goods such as glass beads and fabrics into their knowledge system.³¹ This process has also taken place in other Indigenous communities. Drawing on nehiyawak scholar Keith Goulet’s analysis of lifeforce that “recognizes the capacity to give life and enhance survival as important aspects of the animacy”, she demonstrates a practice that occurs in Indigenous communities across the plains and extends beyond beads.³² Sharing a conversation with kisêyiniw or Elder Louis Bird in 2003, Farrell Racette explains how relationality has also been extended to trade goods. Woolen stroud cloth, made in England and traded along with glass beads, came to be called manitouwayan in Cree language, according to Elder Bird, who breaks down the term to reveal its complex meaning: “manitou”, having an inner spirit energy, and “wayan”, an application of the term skin because of the ability of this wool to absorb moisture.³³ The storied presence of both stroud cloth and glass beads reaches back but also illustrates the ongoing adaptation of new technologies that activate current processes of making, visiting, and sharing.

Cuthand’s plaited quillwork and beaded diseases have spurred a reconceptualization of beadwork as viewers experience the aesthetic impact of this work beyond the confining and often stereo-

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Janet Berlo, Creativity and Cosmopolitanism. Women’s Enduring Traditions, in: *Identity by Design. Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses* (exh. cat. Washington, D.C., Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian), ed. by Emil Her Many Horses, New York 2007, 97–148, here 102.

31

Sherry Farrell Racette, My Grandmothers Loved to Trade. The Indigenization of European Trade Goods in Historic and Contemporary Art, in: *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 20, 2008, 69–81.

32

Ibid., 71.

33

Ibid.

typical narratives of craft or Western concepts of beauty.³⁴ Recognizing beads as kin, as beings and as story keepers aligns with the ways Indigenous peoples on the Prairies (and beyond) understand quills and have come to *know* beads. The beads defy objectifying cultures of display in galleries and because the beads are alive, this understanding also runs counter to the conventions that classified beadworks held in permanent collections, as static objects confined to cabinet drawers.

IV. Kinship. Land and Water

Honoring kin, in 2018, nehiyawak artist Carrie Allison beaded *Heart River* [Fig. 6], by sewing four strands of iridescent blue glass beads, that follow the undulating path of a northern Alberta river, and mounted it on a gallery wall. Tracing the flow of the river contends with more than geographic locators. The importance of water, territory, kin, and the flow of the river, in tune with the heartbeat of Mother nature, is conjured by this meandering collection of beads [Fig. 7]. The beads are keepers of story of family, of movement and migration, and of intergenerational knowledge transmission. “This work is an honouring,” explains Allison, “this act is for the river.”³⁵ The animacy of beads in this monumental undertaking are more fully revealed by the pathways of the beads that activate the timeless flow of water.

As the Heart River is part of Carrie Allison’s Cree grandmother’s home territory in northern Alberta, the beadwork forms an affective response to Allison’s intergenerational connections with it. While the artist spent much of her life on Canada’s east coast, her trips back to visit family inspired this beading project meant to embody place and stories. She achieves this through the process of beading. Learning her family history, visiting with the land, experiencing the sights, sounds, smells, the plant medicines, stories, and the slow process of beading, the concept of Wâhkôhtowin flows through *Heart River*. Using iridescent beads that sparkle like the watery kin it represents, Allison evokes the lifeforce of the river and the eleven-meter-long course of sewn beads mounted on a stark white gallery wall.

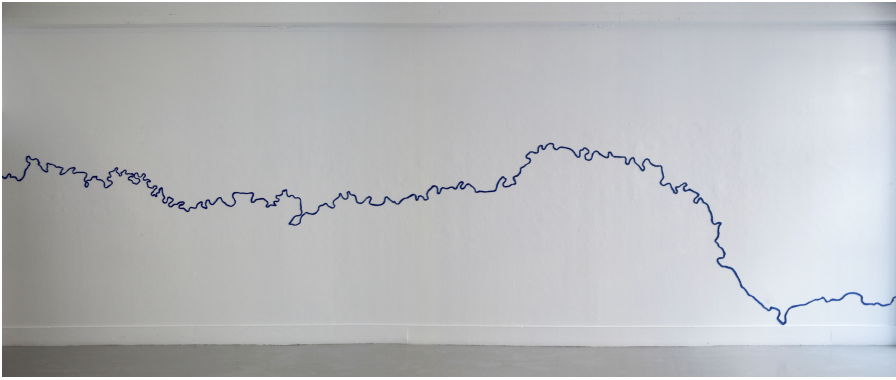
That rivers support and shape kinship ties is further confirmed by Tahltan performance artist Peter Morin, in discussing his 2013 performance, *this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land*. Morin explains that for the Tahltan, their traditional territory is, “shaped and transformed by the movement of the Sti-

³⁴

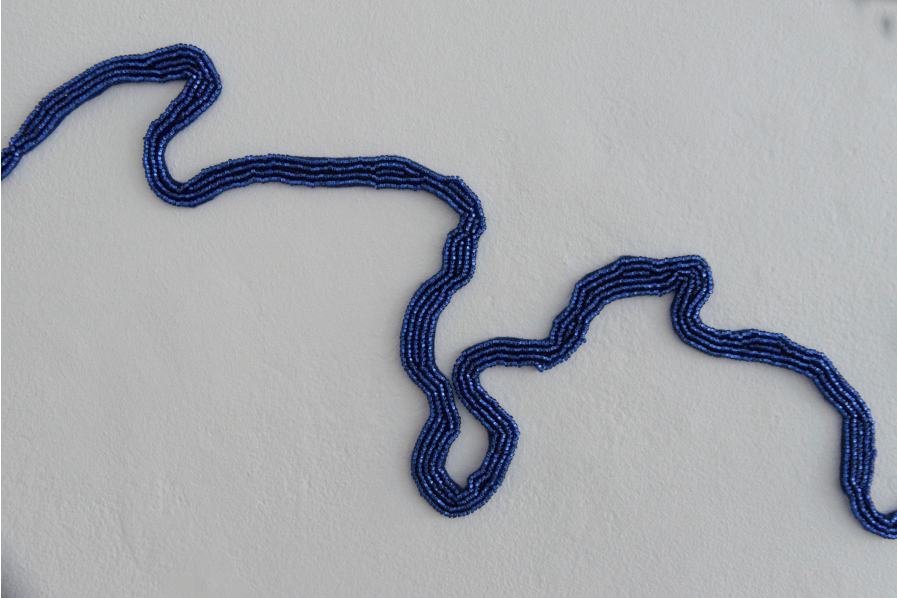
For further images of beaded artworks from this series by Ruth Cuthand, see the artist’s [website](#) (January 5, 2024).

³⁵

Quoted in Carmen Robertson, Kinship. The Way in Which We Relate to Each Other, in: *Carrie Allison. Wâhkôhtowin* (exh. cat. Sackville, NB, Owen’s Art Gallery, Mount Allison University), Sackville, NB 2019, 9–13, here 9.



[Fig. 6]
Carrie Allison, Heart River, 2018, installation, glass beads on blue felt, 11 m long, Collection
of the artist © Permission of the artist.



[Fig. 7]
Detail of Carrie Allison, Heart River, 2018, installation, glass beads on blue felt, 11 m long,
Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

kine River”.³⁶ Allison’s active shaping of Heart River’s GPS-plotted pathway visualizes ongoing relational interconnections encompassed in the process, substantiating the role of beads as story keepers. The inexorable force of the water, channeled through the beads, uncovers the complications of fitting a work into a conventional exhibitionary structure.

V. Beading and Multi-temporality

Conveying a sense of balance, artworks discussed above carry with them a storied past, present, and future that reinforces decolonial discourses around Indigenous histories that posit multi-temporal formulations. Like Boyer’s beaded structures, Cuthand’s evocative beaded diseases and pathogens embody a range of stories about colonial histories while also holding stories of healing and communal action. Meanwhile, Allison’s beaded *Heart River* evokes stories of resilience and enduring kinship ties. Storying land and water, kinship and resilience, these proffer opportunities for a reimagination of narratives through both cyclical forms of being-in-time and kin ties. The noted works suggest productive ways to consider artworks beyond a static formulation of conventional Western objectification and linear timelines by embracing multi-temporal forms of sovereignty resistant to naturalized colonial structures foundational to institutional archives and to the discipline of art history.

Small changes and partial solutions adapted and appended to institutional policies of colonial archives, of collections and displays, do not respectfully or responsibly honor the stories kept by the beads. Reordering ways of seeing in galleries and archives that contain beadwork to reflect cultural understandings requires more than a tweaking of colonial practices, to be sure. Such a decolonizing effort demands a turning away from the confines of colonialism’s conceptual web. The discipline of art history, too, despite some positive realignments, continues to value Eurocentric conventions, including a cliquey adherence to canons of art. It is my hope that conceiving of beadwork through a lens of Indigenous relational epistemologies will contribute to activating narrative forms specific to Indigenous artists.

Carry the Horizon with You, Sky Vest, Small Pox, Syphilis, and Heart River serve as ready examples of beadwork that resist confining classifications imposed by settler institutions in order to shift and presage ways of seeing through Indigenous relational paradigms. Embodying storying processes exceeds the parameters of settler temporal frameworks. Visiting with the Indigenous Prairie beadwork discussed in this analysis reveals spaces of multiple temporalities and complex storying. The future is the main concern of storied beadwork.

³⁶

Peter Morin, This Is What Happens When We Perform the Memory of the Land, in: Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (eds.), *Arts of Engagement. Taking Aesthetic Action in and beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Waterloo, ON 2016, 67–92, here 77.

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