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Indigenous Beadwork: Drawing Together Images from Indigenous Literature

An Alternative Epistemology

Abstract

During the fall of 2022, I participated in an independent study in Indigenous Literatures at Mount Allison University. An important part of this study was examining different themes and images emphasized in the literature I read. I decided to express the knowledge I had gained through a beadwork project on a faux leather file holder (See image 1). Beading has been a way for me to feel more connected to my Indigeneity, and I am very honoured to be able to wear my beads and practice the art of beadwork as a Mi'kmaw woman. This artistic piece brings together some important themes and images from four Indigenous-authored texts: Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, Alicia Elliot's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, Thompson Highways, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and Thomas King's *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. Together, these images tie together themes of Indigenous pride, love, resilience, community, and respect. The connectivity between the multiple books is reinforced by bringing these images together.

Keywords: Indigenous literatures, Beadwork, Community

Introduction

Before introducing my work, I would first like to introduce myself. I am a Mi'kmaw woman from Listuguj First Nation, and I grew up outside a community in a nearby town. Due to the contributing factors resulting from colonization, I felt very disconnected from my culture as a young person. I have since grown and learned more about myself and my culture, with the support of my family and mentors. Expressing myself creatively has contributed greatly to my development as an individual. Beadwork, as a means of representing myself artistically, has been increasingly important during my young adult life. In examining this piece, you may notice that beads are not always where 'they are supposed to be.' Lines may be crooked, and some beads may seem out of place. Through my learning, I have had to come to terms with not being 'perfect.' I have concluded that I am still learning, and I hope to forever be in a state of 'learning'. My artwork does not aim for 'perfect,' but is an attempt to decolonize some of the ways we study literature and express our learning.

In the fall of 2022, I had the unique opportunity of completing an independent study in Indigenous Literatures. I was able to select my readings, craft projects, and decide on how I would be graded. I knew that, as much as possible, I wanted to take a step away from some of the projects typically done in English courses. In working to deconstruct and decolonize some of these rigid rules around how to analyze literature, I decided to express what I had learned through beadwork. This piece of beadwork represents images and themes found in the following four Indigenous-authored texts: Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, Alicia Elliot's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, Thompson Highways, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, as well as Thomas King's *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. The piece is meant to encourage the contemplation of the colliding themes and images each narrative explores. Furthermore, this piece celebrates these amazing Indigenous authors and their contributions to decolonization, amongst many other contributions. I hope this piece inspires people to read these novels and to contemplate them deeply, as each has a unique message for the readers. Together these images tie together themes of Indigenous pride, love, resilience, community, and respect.

Image 1



Lirette, Isabella (2022) [Indigenous Beadwork on faux leather case] Photographed by Isabella Lirette April 10th, 2023.

Image 2



Lirette, Isabella (2022) [Indigenous Beadwork on faux leather case, close-up image of beaded buffalo and flame] Photographed by Isabella Lirette April 10th, 2023.

Image 3



Lirette, Isabella (2022) [Indigenous Beadwork on faux leather case, close-up image of beaded night sky and feather] Photographed by Isabella Lirette April 10th, 2023.

Image 4



Lirette, Isabella (2022) [Indigenous Beadwork on faux leather case, close-up of smaller beaded buffalo and white seed bead lining] Photographed by Isabella Lirette April 10th, 2023.

Explanatory Text

The Marrow Thieves by author Cherie Dimaline (2017) contributed significantly to the development of the artwork on the left side of the piece. Dimaline's novel follows a group of Indigenous youth, along with two elders, as they attempt to evade capture by colonial agents for their unique ability to dream. (Dimaline, 2017, p. 88-89). Some of the key themes that stood out to me in this novel were love and community. The buffalos featured in images 2 and 4 are intended to represent the love shared by a married couple in *The Marrow Thieves*. Miig and Isaac each had a tattoo of a buffalo referred to as their "marriage tattoo" (p. 99). Though Miig thought Isaac was dead, their reunion is made possible when the main character encounters Isaac and recognizes the tattoo (p. 229). Their separation during this time is represented through the hidden buffalo featured under the flap of the file holder (Image 4). Though separated, the image of the buffalo was a reminder of their love that prevailed even in this futuristic depiction of colonization (Dimaline, 2017).

The Marrow Thieves also includes a strong sense of community, which I represented through the image of the flame (see Image 2). Fire features prominently as a force that draws the group together (2017). When the main character Frenchie is alone in the woods, he notes how he is not strong enough to build his fire (Dimaline, 2017, p. 12). When he is close to death, and the group rescues him, he notes how they all sat around a "roaring fire" (p. 16). The contrast between Frenchie's struggle alone, and the support he finds, is emphasized through the image of the fire. When Miig begins with story time later in the novel, the characters are again gathered around a fire (Dimaline, 2017, p. 22). This instance further reinforces the connectivity between the characters and the community they have built (Dimaline, 2017). The placement of the fire under the buffalo is meant to highlight the connectivity and family that surrounds Miig as the figurehead of the family (Dimaline, 2017). Parallel to these images is the images of the night sky and duck feather (see Image 3).

The right side of the piece features images representing themes of resilience and pride inspired by *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, and *The Marrow Thieves*. The night sky at the top right of

the piece (see Image 3) was inspired by the beginning of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* by author Tomson Highway. Highway's novel follows two Cree brothers' horrendous experiences at a residential school and how these experiences directly affect their lives and their relationship to their home, family, and culture (1999). The image of stars is first introduced in Highway's text as being the place from which children fall from and the location in which the ancestors stay (1999, p. 19). The night sky reappears throughout the novel as both a witness to the atrocities of residential schools and prominently as a source of hope and an avenue of resilience (Highway, 1999). When the brothers are at the residential school, the night sky reveals a horrendous assault faced by one of the brothers by the priest (p. 77). The night sky here is figured as being somewhat removed, as it is coming through a window (p. 77). However, when the brothers arrive back home, they are described as being at "[...] the very centre of a perfect sphere, a giant bubble of [the] night air, and glass-smooth lake, and stars" (Highway, 1999, p. 89). Here the night sky figures as both a witness and as a testament to the brothers' resilience as they navigate how to cope with their horrendous experiences (1999).

Underneath the night sky is the image of the duck feather, which is representative of the theme of pride. This image was first motivated by a section in Thomas King's novel *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. King's novel examines the power of storytelling, and he proposes that "[t]he truth about stories is that [is] all we are" (2003, p. 2). Through this theology, King characterizes stories as powerful and as "the cornerstones of our culture" (p. 95). In one chapter King tells the story of the coyote and the ducks (p. 122-127). King describes how through his trickster ways; the coyote takes all of the beautiful duck's shiny feathers until they appear as they do to us today (p. 122-127). King relates all this back to the attempts at assimilation and colonization (p. 120). He states, "After some five hundred years of vigorous encouragement to assimilate and disappear, we [are] still here" (King, 2003, 128). Along with a lot of hard work and hardship, pride in all our feathers is an important theme to draw away from this story. The image of the feather also features prominently as a symbol of pride in *The Marrow Thieves*. Towards the end of the novel, the youth begin to draw together teachings which they name "Miigwanang- feathers" (Dimaline,

2017, p. 214). The placement of these two images was intentional as I wanted to demonstrate the pride, represented by the feather, that happens underneath the night sky.

Visible under the flap of the file holder (see Image 4) is a line of white beads inspired by a narrative in Alicia Elliot's collection of essays, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* (Elliot, 2021, p. 71). Elliot's pieces draw together parts of her upbringing and experiences as an Indigenous woman (2021). Elliot described how her family struggled to contain head lice for much of her childhood and attributes a great deal to this poverty struggle (p. 86). She described how difficult the process of getting rid of lice is and that they "[...] barely had enough money to pay for our normal loads at the laundromat" (p. 87). Elliot additionally emphasizes the child welfare system that did not seek to aid struggling families, such as her own (Elliot, 2021 p. 88). Through this very heavy and difficult situation, she and her sister, at nine and eleven would sit down at night and work to get lice out of each other's hair (Elliot, 2021, p. 82). Although her battle was filled with hardship, her resilience, and the intimacy that she shared with her siblings, are represented here.

The individual images in my piece are drawn together by two gold lines that span the entire faux leather holder (see Image 1). These lines are meant to convey themes of love and respect, which were inspired by Elliot's collection of essays. She outlines how respect is featured in her adulthood and her relationship with her non-Indigenous boyfriend. She figures her relationship to be like the Two-Row Wampum belt, "[...] parallel but never touching [...]" [i]t is a treaty based on peace and friendship, anchored in a deep respect for each culture's distinct differences" (Elliot, 2021, p. 120). The gold lines that never cross represent this harmonious and mutually respectful relationship. These lines, which represent respect and love, tie together the other themes of resilience, pride, and community together.

Concluding Remarks

In working to conclude this piece, I think it is important to note the potential limitations in my work. All these authors are from northern turtle island (what we now call Canada). This was not an intentional choice, but one that nonetheless prompts some very interesting questions. I

would like to recognize that the findings in my research could have been different by the inclusion of other Indigenous authors. More research into the effect of enforcing borders on turtle island, and how this affects Indigenous literature, would have to be conducted.

It may be ambitious of me to hope that every person who sees my work goes on to read each text mentioned in this piece. I do truly hope, however, that you have been touched by at least one of these images and that you go on to read the book that YOU need to read. The production

of this piece has taught me a lot about my individuality and my experience as a lifelong learner. I believe literature, and especially Indigenous literature, is extremely powerful and important. These novels, texts, words, and images are valuable tools in constructing a better society. Though I may have only shined a light on four of these novels, I do hope you take up the flashlight and go looking for more.

"That's what I hope Indigenous people feel when they read my work. Love" (Elliott, 2021, p. 30)

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