

“Why Don’t You Just Drop This Indian Stuff”:  
the Living Legacy of Indigenous Selfhood

By

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## Abstract

This thesis presents a self-reflection on personal narratives and artistic production that focuses upon the clash of North American settlement and colonialism on Indigenous identity and creative production. The prevalence of the post-contact image of the “Imaginary Indian” within popular culture and mass media illustrates the evolving trajectory of impact upon Indigenous identity as posited by western theorists Frantz Fanon, and Indigenous philosophers Vine Deloria Jr., Leroy Little Bear, Anne Waters, and Marie Battiste. My studio work investigates the iconic Indian Head Test Pattern, the Baird Tartan and the Cree Star Blanket. Through their deconstruction and reconstruction, I question and redefine personal cultural markers central to the formation of my identity and my art practice. Symbols, patterns and colours coalesce to disrupt stereotypical perceptions of my mixed-race ancestry while digital technologies are utilized toward engaging a synthesis. Within these interventions, a self-defined dialogue emerges that reflects my lived experience.

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## Dedication

To my mother Elda Osborne, my brother Kenny Baird and my sister Kris Sharpe  
for their love and support.

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# **“Why Don’t You Just Drop This Indian Stuff”: The Legacy of Indigenous Selfhood**

## **Introduction**

During a road trip to New Mexico in 1983, I spent some of my time reading Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. The combined experiences of the inspirational and aesthetic beauty of the Saguaro Desert and the power of Brown’s unsettling account of Indigenous history of the 1800s in the United States, galvanized my desire to know more. His description of forced dislocation and death marches inflicted on Indigenous people by the United States military and settler armed forces shocked me. The vivid images evoked through Brown’s words added layers of history to the landscape I was looking at out the car window. Through time spent visiting people on the Navajo reservation, I started to reflect on the politics that affect my extended family, and how this collective history had an impact on my personal experience as a Cree-Métis artist. Upon returning home to Toronto, I began researching colonialism in Canada. Such was the genesis of my art practice taking up the concepts and ideas related to Indigenous visual language and history.

My personal narrative begins with my childhood dislocation from familiar ancestral territories (close to Edmonton), moving between urban, farm and bush

locations.<sup>1</sup> These geographical movements contributed to my identity as a Cree-Métis artist, which inspires my examination of how my mixed heritage informs my art practice.

Through my interdependent studio production and scholarly inquiry, my thesis research paper and artworks contribute to a discussion of an abstract visual language largely rooted in Cree knowledge and influenced by my life experience. Saulteaux artist, Robert Houle in his essay “Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones” stresses the importance “to use local and temporal narratives, and personal identities, in any critical investigation of current thinking.” He notes, especially “if one wants to examine the re-integration of the individual, culture and environment in an intuitive zone that has been lost to Western civilization.” Houle explains that detaching the artist, and their work, from their cultural history and subjectivity would be similar to denying their right to the “land of their ancestors.”<sup>2</sup> Showing the layered function and politics of re-integrating personal narrative in place of cultural erasure, Houle’s art theory asserts personal as political and the dynamism of culture through art practice.

My acculturated, problematic exposure to the “imaginary Indian” inspires an investigation of stereotypes that have long shaped Indigenous identity.<sup>3</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘bush’ here to articulate the location of family hunting and fishing camps.

<sup>2</sup> Houle, Robert, “The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones” *Land, Spirit and Power*, ed. McMaster, Susan. Rochon, Claire. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian, The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), Introduction IV. Robert F. Berkhofer, in *The White Man’s Indian: Images of American from Columbus to the Present states*, “the original inhabitants of the

often racist, sentimental and inaccurate depictions of Indigenous life and people convey fictions adopted as fact and perpetrated by mass media and at times, educators.<sup>4</sup> As an artist of Cree-Métis ancestry, I seek to address such portrayals in my artwork from a traditionalist perspective.<sup>5</sup> By sharing personal experiences in this critical discussion, I propose the importance of the specificity of identity, which I contend unravels and acts as a counterpoint to dominant narratives conveyed through stereotypes of Indigenous people and what scholars call the imaginary Indian.

While addressing stereotypes through personal narrative, I bring forward my influences grounded in Cree visual language, symbolism and epistemology. Acknowledging my mixed heritage of Cree and Scottish, I similarly explore the Baird tartan considering the metaphors of its abstract form from an Indigenous perspective. My thesis artworks raise challenging questions about mixed heritage artistic production, and I have chosen three selections of imagery as sites of traditionalist intervention: a reworking of the iconic Indian Head Test Pattern; the traditional Baird Tartan and the traditional Cree Star Blanket.

One ever-present household image of my ‘baby boomer’ generation was the Indian Head Test Pattern screened on televisions across Canada. Through

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Western Hemisphere neither called themselves by a single term nor understood themselves as a collectivity, the idea and image of the Indian must be a white conception.” 3.

<sup>4</sup> These stereotypes are formed and disseminated through mass media and popular culture, such as television, Hollywood movies, literature, tourist souvenirs, images on household objects and various kitsch.

<sup>5</sup> The term traditionalist articulates a worldview that includes understanding the interconnectivity and equal relations of all living things.



artistic intervention, I take up this *indian* head and the entire test pattern in a critical visual analysis, wherein my artwork draws from the symbolism of the original design.<sup>6</sup> The Indian Head Test Pattern image was originally used as an industrial device for calibrating television viewing quality for both the broadcaster and the viewer.<sup>7</sup> This graphic of the *indian* warrior looked nothing like my father or the Cree people I witnessed in town picking up supplies during my childhood living in northern Quebec. In this project, the Indian Head Test Pattern stands in symbolically for all the stereotypical images of Indigenous people. Emphatically, I remove the *indian* head image in my appropriated version in my *Test Pattern* series.

Quills, beads and patterns in my *Test Pattern* series act as signifiers of cultural concepts, specifically cultural, ceremonial signifiers embedded in work to recall and speak about the relationship objects have for meaning making in our world and the continuation of cultural knowledge. Such ‘meaning making’ functions mnemonically in examples of abstract designs for example the Wampum Belts and the Medicine Wheel.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I use the little ‘i’ version of indian, as Anishnaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor’s revealing term that encapsulates the simulated, imaginary Indian, one without history, one that represents the absence of Native Americans. Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>7</sup> A familiar sight onscreen during my childhood, the black and white picture of an *indian* warrior in a feathered headdress was the signature image of the test pattern from the 1940s to the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> Wampum belts were made of white and purple Atlantic coast seashells and threaded on string or woven into belts and sashes. Used in sacred treaty agreements, the belt stipulates that neither group will force their laws, traditions, customs or language on each other, but will coexist peacefully. They were also used for engagement and marriage agreements, as well as ceremony and condolence observances. Lois Sherr Dubin, *North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment:*

The second body of work, *The Tartan Series*, engages with my Scottish ancestry and synthesizes elements of the Baird Tartan pattern. Through the deconstruction, re-assemblage and elaboration from Cree and Scottish abstract visual languages I unify colours, patterns and symbols to explore visual possibilities rooted in both my cultural heritages creating a transcultural perspective.<sup>9</sup> The Baird Tartan series raises more questions pertaining to the encoding of Indigenous markers and identity. Is it a necessary cultural imperative to make a choice to create as an Indigenous person even though I am of mixed heritage? Do I feel a responsibility to be part of an ongoing process of reclamation and action? How do visual markers and languages convey mixed heritage?

The circle symbolizes important aspects of an Indigenous worldview whereby the circle represents holism in terms of inclusively, interconnectivity and cycles. The traditional use of a circle design to symbolize holism relates to my third artistic intervention titled the *Cree Star Blanket* (2012). This work draws from the traditional Cree design comprised of a concentric arrangement of diamond shapes around a circle, which functions as a symbol of community and one's

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*From Prehistory to the Present*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 170-171. The Medicine Wheel symbolizes the interconnection of all life, the various cycles of nature, and how life represents a circular journey. The four quadrants, the number four is sacred to the many Indigenous peoples of North America and can represent many things: the four seasons, the four parts of a person (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual); the four kingdoms (animal, mineral, plant and human); the four sacred medicines (sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar and sage).

<sup>9</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo, in *Local Histories Global Designs, Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14-16. Mignolo describes when elements of two or more worldviews combine to produce a new way of understanding lived experience as transculturation.

identity within a culture. The meaning of a circle relates to what Wendat scholar Georges Sioui describes as the positioning of the individual in a sacred circle of relationships among all living beings.<sup>10</sup> According to ideas from Leroy Little Bear this relational worldview means that “knowing comes through relationship and observation,” I consider the dynamism and motion of relationships as an important consideration towards Cree-Métis visual approaches.<sup>11</sup>

Using digital technology, to construct patterns and layer images in my work titled *Cree Star Blanket* I continue the ever-changing methods to take up these cultural markers. I propose these digital works have an aesthetic lineage that reaches back to ancient geometric Indigenous imagery painted on buffalo hides subsequently translated to the colonial practice of quilt making, adapted yet again by Indigenous cultures as gifts to be awarded to recipients on special occasions.<sup>12</sup> Such encourages the difficult and essential discussion of colonization and transformation; how the Cree imagery became a domestic

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<sup>10</sup> Georges E. Sioui, *Huron-Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle*. Trans. by Jane Brierley. Rev. ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 21. Sioui, *For an Amerindian Autohistory*, 8-15.

<sup>11</sup> Leroy Little Bear, “Jagged Worldviews Colliding” *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2009), 78.

<sup>12</sup> See R. G. Robertson, *Rotting Face: Smallpox and the American Indian* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2001), 19, with footnote to Herman J. Viola, *After Columbus* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1990), 98. Robertson explains the often-untold story of devastating side of the gift giving of blankets for Indigenous peoples. The colonial policy of the military and government agents to give blankets infected European diseases of smallpox, typhoid fever, etc. were deliberate attempts to contaminate and decimate Indigenous nations. Blankets are significant markers of cultural codes that embody a full range of nuances and realities recognized within the history of Indigenous culture. The blanket acts as a powerful canvas for recalling personal joys and sorrows, collective stories and histories that must be remembered.

colonial craft of quilt making that was then appropriated back by Indigenous peoples to be created and given as gifts of rites of passage.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the element that relates all three artworks is that they are patterns. The headdress used as part of the Indian Head Test Pattern design and the Tartan, both often presented now, as decorative tropes were long ago an indicator of genealogy. The headdress a signifier of the Indigenous Plains nations and the tartan signifies belonging to a clan. The Cree Star Blanket work celebrates my own Cree background and is a traditionalist working of a centrally important symbol of life and the relationships of all living things.

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<sup>13</sup> See Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, "The Role of Sioux Women in the Production of Ceremonial Objects: The Case of the Star Quilt," in *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (Washington, D.C. : University Press of America, 1983), 124. The Star Blanket is an eight point radiating star quilt design. The projecting design recalls the circles of eagle feather bonnets, the rays of the sun, and the Morning Star - all of which are found on painted buffalo robes from the past.

## **Chapter 1: “Why Don’t You Drop This Indian Stuff?”**

During a conversation with my mother in June 2012 about my thesis, she exclaimed, “Why don’t you just drop this ‘Indian’ stuff?”<sup>14</sup> Her remark shocked me into understanding the importance of telling my story. It was a “physical moment”, with an impact similar to the experience that Fanon speaks of as ‘a fractured body’, when the words of the white child rips his body to pieces.<sup>15</sup> In my case, the words of my mother, (and often others, too) impose their scrutiny on the validity of my Indigenous ancestry. This external questioning of my Indigenous heritage compels me to hold tightly to this ‘Indian stuff.’ Through an exploration of the contradictions and complexities associated with my Cree and Scottish heritage, I seek to examine critically my history and artistic practice as a way of defining the visual markers and visual language informed by my ancestry. I cannot and will not ‘just drop this Indian stuff.’

### **Theoretical Framework for Cree-Métis Practice**

Drawing from a wealth of scholarly writing theorizing on Indigeneity and ways of knowing and being, my analysis engages texts pertinent to issues of Indigenous identity and mixed heritage. I investigate the complexity of such

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<sup>14</sup> I would like to emphasize that these words were from a mother concerned and frustrated for her daughter who was at this time was having difficulty with her thesis. She was trying to protect me. Through discussion stimulating more honesty about these complex feelings, I was also able to tell her that her words were exceedingly important in actually supporting my thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness” *Black Skin, White Masks*, (1952) (trans. Charles Lam Markmann) (London: MacGibbon & Kee.1968), 324.

subject matter through artworks and topics including land and territory, government policy, colonialism, and Indigenous epistemology, all from Indigenous perspectives.<sup>16</sup> This analysis begins with the question “who and what defines mixed ancestry” and many times in my life as Cree-Métis, the answer to that question has been government policy.<sup>17</sup>

For Indigenous people understanding the place one comes from contributes to a sense of identity and belonging. Vine Deloria Jr. describes how the deep connection that Indigenous people have to land and territory informs identity.<sup>18</sup> Problematic issues regarding land and identity arise when federal assimilative and illegal disenfranchisement policies impose not only geographical relocation but also create divisions through categories of identity, for example status Indian, non-status Indian, treaty Indians and Métis. Assimilative policies determined that many Indigenous people’s connection to ancestral territories lived on only through memory or imagined ideals.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Discussions include scholarly views of Indigenous cultures from other continents and not necessarily just Indigenous.

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Weaver focuses on culture as a facet Indigenous Identity “What is it and Who Really has it?” Spring 2001, Vol. 25. 240-255.

<sup>18</sup> Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red*, (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1973), 1.

<sup>19</sup> These policies include the *Indian Act* of 1876 is federal law that governed and continues to govern matters pertaining to Indigenous peoples of Canada. Highly invasive and paternalistic, it continues to give government authorization to regulate and administer in the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities. Ranging from overarching political control, such as imposing governing structures on Aboriginal communities (band councils) to controlling the rights of Indians to practice their culture and traditions. It also enabled the government to determine the land base (reserves), and even to define who qualifies as Indian in the form of Indian status.

Indeed, defining mixed heritage identity in the wake of colonialism reveals complex layers of cultural distortions. Fanon investigates how dominant colonial society puts forth and distributes wrongful images that even Indigenous people use to define themselves.<sup>20</sup> He notes that a dominant colonial presence is not satisfied simply with conquest but must also destroy the history and culture of the people as he asserts “Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding people in its grip or emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the paths of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it”.<sup>21</sup> Clarifying and restoring distortions of Indigenous imagery and cultural stereotypes through art practice entails drawing from lived experience and specificity of identity.

Cultural stereotypes are prominent in fine art canons, including the work of artists, Paul Kane, Edward Curtis and Frederick Verner.<sup>22</sup> According to historian Daniel Frances, Kane and Verner revealed their professional contributions to the fabrication of the myth of the “Imaginary Indian.” Rather than documentations, Kane added his own interpretations of surroundings, settings, landscapes as well as clothing and artifacts to his paintings, manipulating these representations to

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<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 210.

<sup>21</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Kane was praised for his accuracy from the context of his own culture. We now know his works were romantic creations and his primary objective was to create a record of the ‘noble savage’ which he saw as a vanishing race. Edward Curtis was an American ethnographer and photographer who often took profile portraits of Indians that were false: having them wearing headdresses from nations they did not belong.

become “Indian for most non-Native Canadians who knew no other.”<sup>23</sup> Praised in his own time for accurately portraying the ‘noble savage’ from a vanishing race, Kane was actually painting a defamatory fiction.

Frederick Verner, a nineteenth century Canadian artist, depicted fantastic characterizations of Indigenous peoples in his renowned buffalo paintings, although it was questionable whether he ever witnessed such a buffalo (bison) in the wild.<sup>24</sup> Both artists ignored evidence of Indigenous exchange with settler society and the cultural dynamism that followed. Their authoritative reach influenced popular culture, resulting in speculative caricatures of Indigenous people decorating the covers of sheet music during the 1900s and later came to life as characters in American comic narratives when Western-themed comics gained popularity following World War II. The image of the *indian* with the headdress became a pervasive generic vehicle for advertising and also a post World War II visual reference that appeared on fabric patterns, blankets, wall paper, clothing, toys, television commercials and Halloween costumes.<sup>25</sup>

The process of dispelling cultural distortions such as representations of Indigenous cultures as lost or relegated to the past, requires reclamation, revision

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Francis’s *The Imaginary Indian* referencing details from Joan Murray’s *The Last Buffalo: The Story of Frederick’s Arthur Verner, Painter of the Canadian West*, (Toronto: Pagurian Press 1964), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian*, 174.



and transposition of problematic stereotypical imagery.<sup>26</sup> Drawing from customary, traditional practices and knowledge, including the use of old and new materials and media, contributes to the dynamism of Indigenous cultures. I emphasize the approach to materials and media as an integral part of interrogating such distortions and developing a Cree-Métis visual language.

My approach comes from lived experience and participation, for example working with basket makers at Walpole Island I gained an understanding of gathering, teachings and techniques of working with sweetgrass, rooted in a worldview that respects the life of materials.<sup>27</sup> Anne Waters' argues for the reclamation of both tangible and intangible markers of identity by Indigenous

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<sup>26</sup> Stereotypical imagery depict *indians* as lazy (on welfare), drunks, they live on reserves, do not pay taxes, or they are rich from oil or casinos money and not *real indians* as they no longer or look or behave like the indians from the past who hunted buffalo, rode horses bareback or wore headdresses.

<sup>27</sup> Sweetgrass is considered one of the four traditional 'medicines', the others being tobacco, sage and cedar. It is a tall, wild grass, growing in areas of the northwestern U.S. and southern Canada and propagates itself by extending its roots, known as rhizomes, to sprout new plants. It has been suggested that because of its innate ability to extend and regenerate itself, sweetgrass plants may be among the oldest living organisms on the planet, perhaps each plant being 100,000+ years old, to tens of millions of years old.

<http://www.ecoseeds.com/sweetgrass.html#anchor542065>, Retrieved December 12, 2012  
Walpole Island, known also as Bkejwanong First Nation is located in Southern Ontario near the border of St. Clair River between Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario. In 1993, for my residency at the Museum of Civilization, I created *A Time Within A Memory* a sweetgrass sculptural work in collaboration with four sweetgrass basket makers from Walpole Island, Sharon Kiyoskh- Burritt, Barbara Kiyoskh, Mavis Kiyoskh and Adele Altman. The women of this reserve played a central role (were essential) in the development of the work. Inherent within the making of this work, many Indigenous values were practiced. The first was the significance of the importance of acting collectively as a community. As previously noted, the importance of community building through sharing and in this case, creating, offered me an opportunity to share in the continuance of Indigenous knowledge based practices and traditional ways of being in the world. By continuing to practice within a community of makers, their traditional and inherited skills and teachings reflected the importance of their actions as being of historical and contemporary relevance to the continued cultural survival of Indigenous identity.

people.<sup>28</sup> Tangible indicators include techniques and knowledge of quill and beadwork in Indigenous art, and the mnemonics of the Medicine Wheel. The intangible indicators encompass a philosophical and cosmological worldview of holism, in which everything is animate and relational to each other.<sup>29</sup> The interruption of these markers in my early life experience propels my investigations of healing through the reclamation of such marker, which I believe informs a Cree-Métis visual language.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Anne, Waters, "Ontology of Identity and Interstitial Being", *American Indian Thought* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2004), 156.

<sup>29</sup> For example see Leroy Little Bear's "Jagged Worlds Colliding" *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, edited by Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 78. Leroy Little Bear explains that Blackfoot ontology and epistemology emphasize balance, renewal, and sustainability of life in the midst of constant motion and 'flux' perpetuated in creation and the cosmos.

<sup>30</sup> See Marie Battiste, *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009) Intro xvi. Marie Battiste addresses the need for healing colonized indigenous peoples through the process of imagining post-colonial visions.

## Chapter 2: Connection to the Land

During my time at Walpole Island in southern Ontario, I learned the art of sweetgrass basketry, which included learning how to identify sweetgrass, where the grass grows, what time in the summer is best for picking and how to pick it, taking care not to remove its roots to promote continued growth. This approach to making things exemplifies the interconnection to specific time, place and the maker's knowledge of each, an epistemology in itself. The transfer of this knowledge and skill between makers reveals a complex relationship between Indigenous artists to place and land.<sup>31</sup> Leroy Little Bear states that Indigenous people have a connection to a sense of place – the land. He maintains that this connection exists due to the continuous passing of knowledge in oral form by Indigenous people living on original lands and much of this knowledge was and continues to be relayed and communicated in the form of symbols such as the circle.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Deloria argues in his book *Red Earth White Lies, Native Americans and The Myth of Scientific Fact* that a personal connection to lands of origin is a significant and distinctive cultural marker that manifests as Indigenous identity.<sup>33</sup> Ways of being in the world, including both internal and external

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<sup>31</sup> By using the word 'maker' here, I seek to conflate the terms artist and crafts person into this one word to subvert commonly perceived hierarchy between craft and fine art.

<sup>32</sup> Leroy Little Bear, "Jagged Worlds Colliding" *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, edited by Marie Battiste. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 78.

<sup>33</sup> Vine Deloria, *Red Earth White Lies, Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*, (New York: Scribner, 1995), 155.

markers, are the result of having a conscious or subconscious awareness of an ancestry that is interdependent with a geographical sense of place. The symbols and abstract designs in my work act as signifiers, and operate as cartographies of me, and my ancestry through the traditional meaning and metaphors in the designs.<sup>34</sup>

Like many people in colonized spaces, I am the product of both an Indigenous and imperial histories. The importance of my ancestral sense of place in relation to my identity inspires an examination of the intangible markers of my Scottish ancestry in the same way that I would my Indigenous background. The traditional clan tartans of Scotland also reference a visual language of heritage with a geographical sense of place. In the context of Canada's colonial history the symbolism in basket, bead and quill designs prevailed through a contested history that I also connect to my art approach by retracing my personal narrative and family heritage.

Indeed, directly and indirectly, my artistic identity is the result of an ongoing process of self-interrogation regarding definitions and associated meanings of 'place'. The impact of the *Indian Act* of 1876 figures prominently in definitions of Indigenous identity and place even today. Through instituting the *Indian Act*, the Canadian government acted as an agent of Great Britain.

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<sup>34</sup> See Deborah Doxtator, *Basket, Bead and Quill*, (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1996) 15. Doxtator describes the continued use of 'traditional' techniques, materials and designs as contemporary markers that carry knowledge, and also provide a sense of identity for individuals and communities.

According to Bonita Lawrence, the *Indian Act's* classificatory system produced “ways of thinking” which are embedded in “every attempt to change it.”<sup>35</sup> In Canada (and the United States), federal government regulations determined recognition as a status Indian, which in turn dictated location, mobility and rights. For example, strict parameters existed for regulations regarding Indian status for women.<sup>36</sup> Until 1985 Indigenous, women and their children lost their “Indian Status” if they married a non-Indigenous man. The loss of status included loss of rights, including the right to live on reserve.<sup>37</sup>

The existential question “who am I?” arises from a pervading awareness of how this parliamentary mission sought to legislate Indigenous peoples into the general Canadian population. This mandated construction and erasure of identity shaped me as an individual and artist. As the result of marrying a Scottish man, my grandmother lost her Indian Status, which in turn forfeited the status of her descendents. My grandmother and her children were forced to attend government mandated residential boarding schools resulting in their loss of language, cultural and spiritual ways and the dehumanization of their lived experience.<sup>38</sup> Such assimilative forces shifted sense of belonging and this

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<sup>35</sup> Bonita Lawrence, “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview.” *Hypatia*. 18:2, 3.1 (2003), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Hilary Weaver, “What is it and who really has it?” 240.

<sup>37</sup> See Bill C-31 enacted in 1985 to amend the *Indian Act* ending gender discrimination against women.

<sup>38</sup> The residential school system operating from the 1880s until the late 1990s, was an extensive educational system set up by the Canadian government and administered by churches with the intent of indoctrinating Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian and Christian ways of living. Children were forcibly separated from their families, forbidden to acknowledge their Native

includes belonging to a place and space. As discussed earlier, a connection to land is integral to Indigenous philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

### **Cultural Identity in Flux**

Leroy Little Bear speaks of this flux as interrelationships of place and space as a more important referent than time. Our world is in “constant motion, moving changing.” One has to look at the whole,” he contends “to begin to see cyclical or repetitive patterns.”<sup>40</sup> The symbolism, geometric designs and abstracted images in basket, quill and beadwork encompass visual languages encoded with vast knowledge often related to land and place. Deborah Doxtator explains the relevance of traditional materials and techniques in artworks by Indigenous artists in the exhibition catalog *Basket, Bead and Quill*.<sup>41</sup> I was one of the artists in this group exhibition, and Doxtator’s writings on the function of the visual languages in basket, bead and quillwork articulate the meaning and knowledge contributing towards my Cree-Métis-Scottish visual negotiations.

Given that both Indigenous and Scottish symbolism currently inform my art practice, I examine how the Baird Scottish tartan of my family history relates to

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heritage or to speak their own languages. These schools were notorious for physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse. The education consisted of scholarly teachings up to grade five and manual labor training. Often called “cultural genocide” the residential school system resulted in a devastating loss of culture and language as well as a loss connection with land and family that reverberated for generations.

<sup>39</sup>See Vine Deloria, in *God Is Red* asserts the importance of geographic place identity for America’s Indigenous peoples.

<sup>40</sup> Leroy Little Bear, *Jagged World Views Colliding*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Deborah Doxtator, *Basket, Bead and Quill*, 11-21.

commodification and cultural identity. Originally, tartan designs had no names or symbolic meaning but by the early nineteenth century, the idea that tartans represented actual connections to many Scottish clans became solidified.<sup>42</sup> In the same way that the manufactured *indian* warrior in a headdress came to signify a version of Indigenous identity, the Tartan came to represent Scottish identity. Both are examples of commemorative colonial images that did not begin as colonial at all.

By creating digital prints, I reference and reinterpret Indian Head Test Pattern and Baird Scottish Tartan comprised of abstract ritual designs representing metaphors of natural cycles. These digital works, inclusive of both sides of my ancestry, also exemplify the Indigenous tradition of striving to be adaptive and make use of available technologies. This new work represents the negotiation of colonial images from their commemorative status and their reconstruction and reactivation as spiritual symbols of my cultural identity.

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<sup>42</sup>See Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1983), 15-41. Roper provides a thorough and critical thesis on the construction and manufacturing of the Scottish tartans.

## Chapter 3: Identity, Cultural Production and Politics of Self-Hood

### An Empirical Arts Based Approach

Rooted in an empirical arts-based scholarly methodology as theorized by Graeme Sullivan, my studio research encompasses multiple inquiries including political, art and material history. Sullivan argues that creative and cultural inquiry undertaken by artists, manifests as distinct and significant forms of research using qualitative, historical and reflexive techniques of investigation.<sup>43</sup>

The methods of art making that I employ include digital image media, beadwork, embroidery and installation-work. My qualitative research methodology includes a subjective assessment of my personal history with the intention of creating new knowledge and artistic processes. In addition, my research takes up the portrayal of *indians* in media to examine how these interpretations inform and delineate Indigenous culture. I embarked on research about Cree and Scottish visual languages using an Indigenous philosophical approach mentioned earlier in this paper. The work is born of efforts to simultaneously determine and negotiate the shape, contours and implications of my own Cree-Métis-Scottish identity and history, while developing a visual language derived from the traditions of my multiple heritages. Through the recollection of my experiences as a child and from the experience of thirty years of art making and practice I seek a retelling through visual and written media.

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<sup>43</sup> See Graeme Sullivan. *Art Practice as Research*, (London: SAGE Books, 2010). Sullivan outlines and discusses empirical arts-based method of scholarly methodology.



This thesis and its accompanying works are autobiographical and reveal my self-reflexive research methodology.

## **Memories of Connection to the Land**

Through my family history, I bear witness to the political and cultural legacy of Indigenous and settler relations in Canada. My Indigenous relatives are members of the Michel Band that originated from lands northwest of what is now Edmonton, Alberta.<sup>44</sup> In 1878, the Michel Band entered Treaty 6 as signed by my great-grandfather, the Chief, Michel Callihoo.<sup>45</sup> The original forty-square mile reserve no longer exists. Its elimination and erasure corresponds to corrupt pressures imposed by the Canadian government on the Michel Band in the early 1900's to surrender and evacuate their lands for the newly arriving settlers from Europe.<sup>46</sup>

I was born in 1954 in Edmonton, Alberta in a community of Cree-Métis relatives. The telling of my family history comes from stories and memories

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<sup>44</sup> Governmental policies in the 1880's during the treaty process took 58 distinct Indigenous Nations in Canada and separated them into numerous bands. Olive Patricia Dickason's *Canada's First Nations A History of Founding Peoples form Earliest Times*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), Intro xi. Michel First Nation. [www.michelfirstnation.net](http://www.michelfirstnation.net). Retrieved March 1, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> See Sharon Venne, "Understanding Treaty 6: An Indigenous Perspective," *Aboriginal Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality, and Respect for Difference*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 173-207. Venne explains Treaty 6 was signed on August 23, 1876 at Fort Carlton in Saskatchewan. The total area of the Treaty stretches from western Alberta, through Saskatchewan and into Manitoba; and includes 50 First Nations. Provisions in the Treaty recognize the notion of the medicine chest (full medical care) as well as the right to education. The numbered treaties, including Treaty 6, were Nation to Nation negotiations. Both parties were to share land, resources, and respect each others' values and beliefs.

<sup>46</sup> In 2012, the landless Michel Band's seven hundred and fifty members are in negotiations with the Canadian government to address issues such as illegal disenfranchisement and the dislocation of their members and the band itself from their traditional territories.

passed through the generations. As I convey these stories in this thesis and in my artwork, I insert myself into the narrative and reinforce my connection and sense of belonging to family members and their place. Going from Canadian colonial history to digging into family narratives, I excavate aspects of myself.

My father's relatives spoke of the traditions and land of my Nicapan/great grandmother Victoria Callihoo and through these stories I know my grandmother and gain a better understanding of myself.<sup>47</sup> Cree scholar Neal McLeod highlights the importance of ancestors by stating simply that "if my great grandmother did not exist, I would not exist," McLeod also infers in this statement the importance of the resonating events and generations that came along since my great grandmother.<sup>48</sup> It is through the telling and retelling of our stories that I know the connectedness to my ancestors. Traditional Indigenous philosophy values the importance of knowing where one comes from, where one has learned and inherited knowledge.

Indigenous people participating in ceremony gain a connection to the material world through the name Elders give babies soon after birth. The 'naming' ceremony marks the beginning of life as a pivotal gesture that identifies belonging to a community. The ceremony introduces both the child and the community to each other, and bestows a life direction for the child. I relate this key ceremonial experience to my own life as Victoria Callihoo gave me a spirit

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<sup>47</sup> Nicapan is the Cree word for great-grandmother.

<sup>48</sup> Neil McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*, (Saskatoon: Purich Publisher, 2007), 5.

name the day she first held me in her arms.<sup>49</sup> The traditional naming ceremony represents 'a way of knowing' that has inspired my path as an artist.

Through passing on life stories from Elders, we gain a part of our own stories and personal histories. According to Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod, oral traditions are "the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation. Oral traditions form the foundation of Indigenous societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory."<sup>50</sup> Stories locate us and provide a sense of belonging related to territory, home and identity.

These inspired narratives propel my professional artistic career as I consistently retrace historical and personal stories. My journey of identity formation and reclamation builds on my esteem for Victoria Callihoo.

Learning about Victoria Callihoo, her character and the transformations of her life experience motivates me to remain true to myself. Her life spanned tumultuous array of changes, from the days of the wild buffalo roaming free to the arrival of a modern culture spurred by technological innovations.<sup>51</sup> She

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<sup>49</sup> Spirit name or often referred to Indian name is an important traditional Cree Naming ceremony. My Spirit name connects to the spirit world and my ancestors. This name also tells me who I am, where I belong, where I am going and where I came from. I only reveal my Spirit name in ceremony.

<sup>50</sup> Hulan, Renée, and Renate Eigenbrod, eds. *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 7.

<sup>51</sup> See Grant MacEwan in *Mighty Women: Stories of Western Canadian Pioneers*, (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1975), 198. MacEwan details that my great-grandmother Victoria Callihoo at the age of 13 went on one of the last buffalo hunts in 1876. The description of the hunt written by her is in the collections of Glenbow Museum archives in Calgary. He remarks that "her life in the most striking way, was like a bridge between buffalo days and modern society; between the travois as

discussion witnessed such groundbreaking changes as the fur system of barter was replaced by a monetary currency and the invention of the telephone. She approved more of the telephone, as she was able to communicate speaking the Cree language. I continue her legacy using modern technology to express Indigenous tradition.<sup>52</sup>

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means of transportation, which she knew when she lived on the Michel Reservation and the unbelievable fast travel she lived to see... between the times when Indians and Metis were numerous enough and strong to have annihilated members of the newcomer race and later years when those native people represent a relatively weak minority. Victoria Callihoo witnessed one of the most spectacular areas of transformation seen in a single lifetime in world history.”

<sup>52</sup> See Greg Young-Ing. “Perspectives on the Indigenous Tradition/New Technology Interface.” *Indigenous Affairs*, Issue 2: Indigenous Peoples and Information Technology, (Copenhagen: International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2003), 14-17. Young-Ing discusses three examples of how Indigenous people integrate new technology to become part of cultural customs, rather than displace traditional and customary practices.

Figure 1. Victoria Callihoo  
photographed in 1961  
on a buffalo robe at  
the age of 97



Understandably, complex racial and cultural issues affected my identity early in life. Both the tangible external markers of my identity such as hair, skin and eye color and the intangible internal markers such as collective cultural and spiritual values were subverted by societal norms that discouraged conversation about being of Indigenous ancestry.<sup>53</sup> My perspective is that these markers were formed by different histories of place, conscious and otherwise, and created a tension between who I am and who I am expected to be.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Anne Waters, *American Indian Thought*, 156.

<sup>54</sup> Currently, I live in Toronto, Ontario, which is the original Anishnaabe territory of the Mississauga's of New Credit. In my urban geographic location I am still connected to the lands in

## Chapter 4: The Gallop To Exit Installation

Inspired directly by a road trip in 1983, and the installation of the same year, *Gallop Exit To* represents my early work that began my process of research of Indigenous politics, Cree worldview, customary materials and techniques. Exhibited at the Funnel Experimental Theater in Toronto, Ontario, the installation resembled a desert setting for a western movie.<sup>55</sup> In this work, I commented on Hollywood caricatures that stood in for typical Indigenous characters in the Cowboy and Indian movies of the 1950s. Created for an American audience, such clichéd “imaginary *indians*,” such as Tonto of the Lone Ranger television series, depicted the loyal and noble savage stereotype.<sup>56</sup> These representations are void of consciousness towards the injustices inflicted on Indigenous peoples by government officials and settlers during the latter part of the last 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>57</sup>

*Gallop Exit To* reflected the aesthetic uniqueness and political contradictions I observed in the Four Corners area of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah

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Western Canada that were home to my father’s Indigenous ancestors and also the areas near Kirkland lake in Northern Ontario and Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec that were home to the hunting and fishing camp of my mother’s relatives.

<sup>55</sup> The Funnel Experimental Film Theater was a collective of thirty, mostly artists, providing 16mm, 8mm and super 8, film production, distribution and exhibition facilities. It was located on Duncan Street, King Street and Soho Street from 1977 – 1989.

<sup>56</sup> The character of Tonto first made his appearance in a radio series on WXYZ in 1933 and repeatedly in the 1950s in the *The Lone Ranger* on the ABC network. The character of Tonto on was played by Jay Silverheels who was a Canadian Mohawk First Nations actor.

<sup>57</sup> Examples include *The Removal Act* (also known as *The Trail of Tears*), *The Termination Act*, *The General Allotment Act* and *The Reorganization Act*.

and Colorado.<sup>58</sup> From this experience, I began to question and research, particularly the portrayals of Indigenous and prominent colonial stereotypes in popular culture.



Figure 2. *Gallop Exit To*, Rice Krispies©, animal hide, coloured Xerox heat transfers, spray paint, 1983

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<sup>58</sup> The Four Corners is a region of the United States consisting of the southwestern corner of Colorado, northwestern corner of New Mexico, northeastern corner of Arizona and southeastern corner of Utah. The area is part of semi-autonomous First Nations, the largest of which is the Navajo Nation, followed by Hopi, Ute and Zuni tribal reserves and nations.

The most discriminatory, offensive and historically inaccurate were the cowboy and Indian movies of Hollywood.<sup>59</sup> *Gallop Exit To* evoked a set for a Western movie set in the desert, that artificiality amplified in that sand and saguaro cacti were made of Rice Krispies© – a modern mass-produced material, and a food source that is as nutritionally hollow as the stereotypical imaginary *indian*. Bright lighting and fluorescent yellow paint mimicked the constant hot sun of the desert, setting the stage for a series of animal hides hung on the walls. These colorful hides were the canvases adorned with heat transfers of Xeroxed photographs depicting two centuries of the invasion of Indigenous lands and cultures of North America, including symbols and quotes from Native American leaders.

The pelts, realized in neon spray-paint and fabric markers rather than the traditional quills and trade beads, constituted a satire of visual storytelling that augmented the theme of exploring the counterpoint between commemorative and authentic imagery in history.

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<sup>59</sup> There are numerous scholarly texts on the negative, hollow characterizations or evolving images of *indians* in film. To name just a few, Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet's *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in Movies*, (1980), historian John E. O'Connor's, *The White Man's Indian*, *Film & History* 23, No. 1-4, (1993), 17-26 and Michael Hilger's *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Films* (1995). See Angela Aleiss's, *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), Intro xvi





Figure 3. *And Then There Were None*, animal hide, coloured Xerox heat transfers, spray paint, 4' x 4', 1983.

The Hollywood set symbolized the artificiality of the filmmaking industry's interpretation of landscapes integral to Indigenous identity. The immersive experience of this heated installation space with radiators on high, dry wind sounds howling past arrows stuck in the wall, inspired people to rethink their

assumptions about Indigenous people. The viewer was able to interact with the work and, as curator, Carol Podedworny writes, to “experience not only the sensation of the desert but the argument inherent in the work, which was the artificiality of the represented image”.<sup>60</sup>

This installation raised questions about the dominant culture’s perception regarding the depiction of Indigenous people in Hollywood movies while simultaneously revealing the true story of the ravages of Western governmental expansionist policies during the “Indian Wars.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Carol Podedworney, *Stay Here With Us*, The Thunder Bay Art Gallery, (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1986) 4.

<sup>61</sup> The American Indian Wars were a continuous series wars (1622-1924) between the American government, settlers and the Indigenous peoples of America. The wars resulted from the arrival of European colonists who continuously demanded more land, pushing the Indigenous populations westwards.

## Chapter 5: Thesis Works: A Pattern, a Tartan and a Star Blanket

My explorations into issues of cultural representation and efforts towards developing a Cree-Metis-Scottish visual language derived from my life experiences has produced a body of work consisting of three installations: *The Test Pattern Series* (2012), the *Baird Tartan* (2012) and the *Cree Star Blanket* (2013).

A commonality in the visual theme of both the *Test Pattern* and *The Cree Star Blanket* is the circle that represents holism, community and interconnectedness. My traditionalist approach to the *Test Pattern* deconstructs the problematic image by transforming it into a Medicine Wheel.<sup>62</sup> The classic graphic form of a Medicine Wheel is a smaller circle within a larger circle with four quadrants. The circle also acts to symbolically represent the collective identity of Indigenous cultures moving out of colonial structures towards an autonomous path that is of self-determination. Cree-Métis artist Bob Boyer through his visual abstract compositions held a solid understanding of Aboriginal consciousness that addresses both political and cultural issues. According to Lee-Ann Martin, his work “demonstrates his facility in combining successful (Indigenous) geometric compositional techniques with an equally powerful critical narrative of negative colonial practices against Aboriginal peoples.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Seventy Medicine Wheels are located in the northern United States and southern Canada, specifically South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. The majority are in Alberta.

<sup>63</sup> Lee-Ann Martin. *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*, (Regina: Mackenzie Art Gallery, 2008), 37.

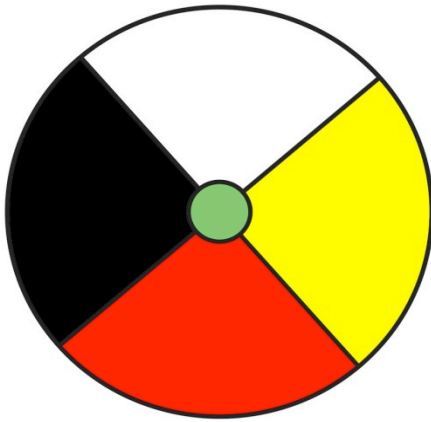


Figure 4. Medicine Wheel

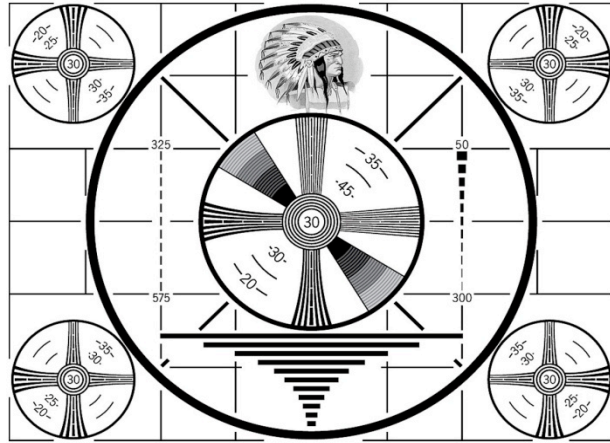


Figure 5. Indian Head Test Pattern



Figure 6. Plains Cree Big Horn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming created in 1200 AD and still used today as a ceremonial site

In the fall of 2011, for an experimental project at OCADU I created a beaded rosette pattern. Its design comprised of a circle divided in quarters by a stylized cross symbol. I scanned these rosettes into Illustrator and composed a design with one rosette in the centre and four in each corner with other graphic

elements to balance and add depth to the piece. After producing this image, I realized it reminded me of the Indian Head Test Pattern, and subconsciously this image from my childhood had seeped into my experiment. This drew my interest to investigate the politics of the *indian* head image used in the test pattern and its sometimes unconscious impact upon perceptions of my art practice and myself.<sup>64</sup>



Figure 7. First digital experiment, 2011

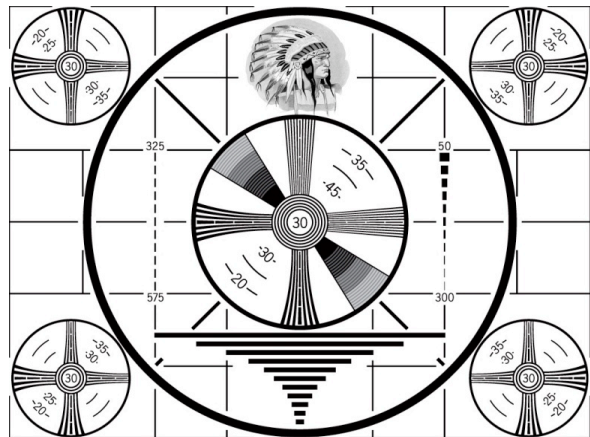


Figure 8. The Indian Head Test Pattern

*Test Pattern* (2011), an earlier work that functioned as a prototype for the *Test Pattern Series*, represents the use of use of digital technologies, layered plexi-glass and graphic transfers of beads and quills to break down the archaic and well-known Indian Head Test Pattern image. I shifted the symbolism



Figure 9. *Test Pattern* 2011, Prototype, plexi with transparencies

of the television test pattern in my own prototype test pattern to understand the visual result of inserting visual cultural markers like quills for example. In my version of this abstraction, I removed the *indian* head and depict a circle within a square. I then placed a photograph of a real image of a beaded rosette and digitally designed quills to convey visual metaphors embedded in these customary materials.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Deborah Doxtator. *Basket, Bead and Quill*, 17. The Indigenous Plains Cree women's quillwork was unique to North America and beads were a trade item. Doxtator also explains Indigenous knowledge and metaphor as visual language in basket, bead and quill work.



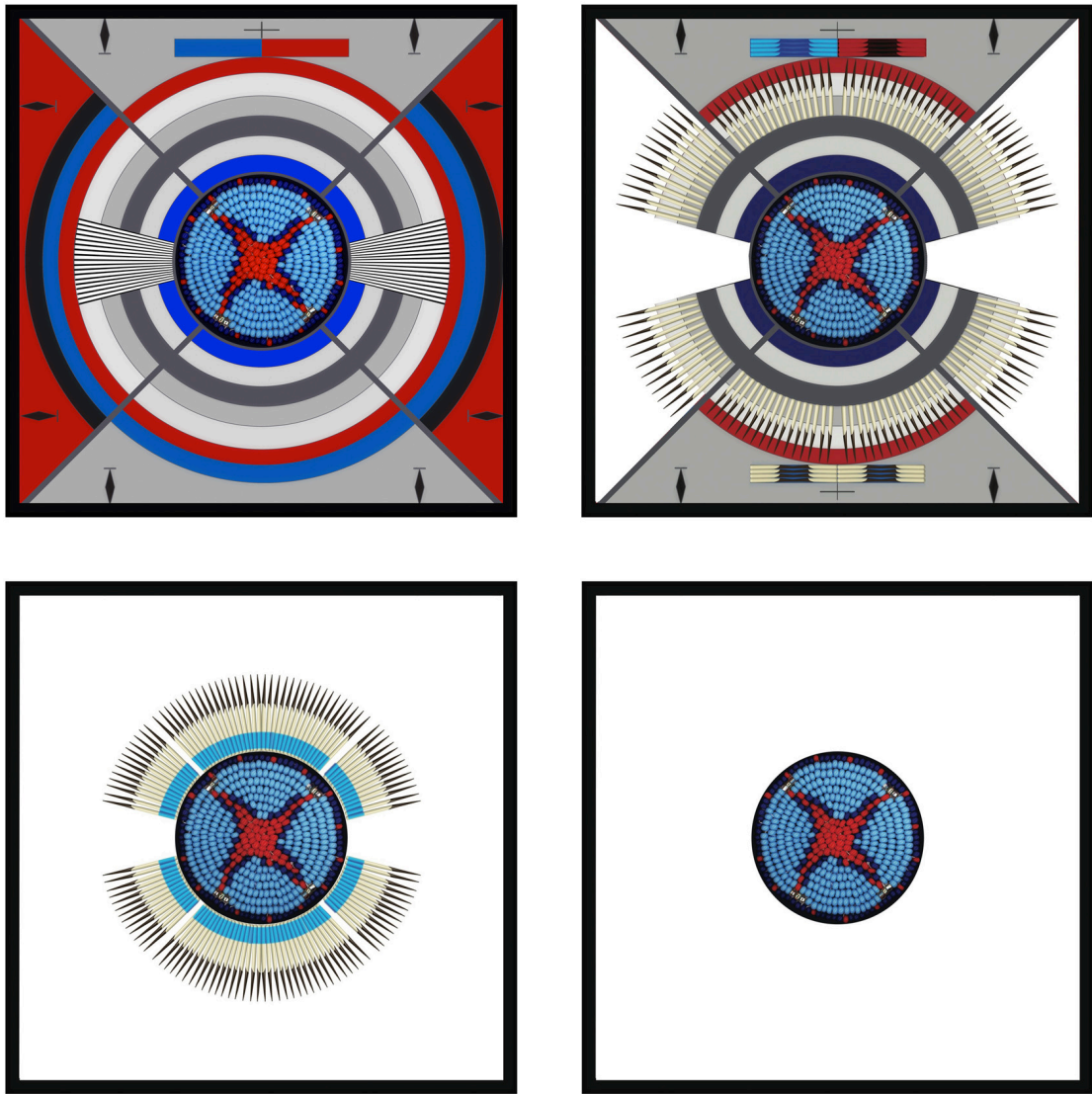


Figure 10. *Test Patterns #1, #2, #3 and #4*, 2011

From the process of making the *Test Pattern* prototype mentioned above came the first of my test pattern series, titled *Test Pattern #1*. This work incorporates a traditional beadwork design created by my sister-in-law, Ojibway artist Jerrilynn Harper. By using her design in my own artwork I acknowledge the

Indigenous women who through their hands continue the tradition of using traded beads to create traditional patterns that have ancient Indigenous significance.<sup>66</sup>

I also want to acknowledge that the patterning and beading in my work link to the domestic arts taught to me by my maternal grandmother. Continuing to employ these early handiwork skills, I work through ideas that, even if deployed in digital or other modes, become final works of art.

With the second and third artworks *Test Pattern #2* and *#3*, I created optical movement in a circular pattern. I used repeated images of porcupine quills. The insertion of this traditional quillwork visually conveys a sense of cyclical movement and the metaphors and meaning that such patterns and designs carry depends on the teachings and understanding of the viewer. Using customary materials, patterns and forms signify the knowledge inherent in the technique and preparation of these materials. Doxtator eloquently acknowledges that the “often collaborative process of gathering and preparing materials and repeating (although never exactly) the patterns of making traditional forms, in and of itself teaches and imparts knowledge.”<sup>67</sup> Specifically, this knowledge comes from an Indigenous perspective and reflects a world worldview where “these objects continue to form an important part of our sense of ourselves as collective beings, connecting us to other people, past, present and future, and to other

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<sup>66</sup> In conversation with Cree Elder Vern Harper, the red beaded image in the center of the blue beaded rosette represents lightning, which comes from the eyes of Thunderbirds, Piyesiw, (pronounced similar to pih-yay-syoo), giant mythological birds who creates thunder by beating their immense wings. April 19, 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Doxtator, Deborah. *Basket, Bead and Quill*, 15.



beings in the natural world.”<sup>68</sup> By adding the quillwork to my version of the test pattern, I am negotiating and developing a Cree-Métis visual language adopting the television test pattern from my childhood and Cree traditional and customary designs.

In my case, however the reclamation of my identity involves looking at both of the cultures that are part of ancestry and how the tension between the two has created the psychic space for the creation of my tartan paintings.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 11. The original Baird tartan design

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>69</sup> The idea to create my own Baird Tartan arose initially from conversations with teachers and classmates during thesis discussions. There are a number of reasons why I chose to investigate this idea. The first is that my mixed ancestry is central to the claiming of my identity as an Indigenous woman. The Baird part of my ancestry became an appropriate visual and historical argument for the European “other” as it is not only shared on both sides of my lineage but is historically relevant. And yet I know little about this history. Obviously, my father’s father was Scottish and so was my mother’s. I did not know my paternal grandfather Charles Baird, other than that he was from Montana, he worked for my great-grandfather Michel Callihoo and married my grandmother Alice Callihoo in 1912.

The original Baird Tartan, familiar to me since my teen years, speaks to me aesthetically because of its geometric composition and its similarity to abstract Cree quill and beadwork patterns.



Figure 12. Tartan Fabric Work, silk ribbon, embroidery thread, glass seed beads, 2012

I manipulated the Tartan pattern, first by using it as a template from which I digitally created new geometric shapes while preserving the original design comprised of the crisscrossed, horizontal and vertical bands of multiple colours.

The connections and processes visually encoded in the tartan suggest dialogue, multiple meanings, interpretations and perspectives. Where different layered colours cross, they metaphorically allude to the intersections of the different cultures that make up my mixed heritage. I deliberately left the registration line in my digital version of the *Tartan Series* (2012) to reveal how I transformed the original tartan into this piece. The line also acts as a metaphor of the perceptible and imperceptible (and perhaps irreconcilable differences) that relates to my mixed heritage.

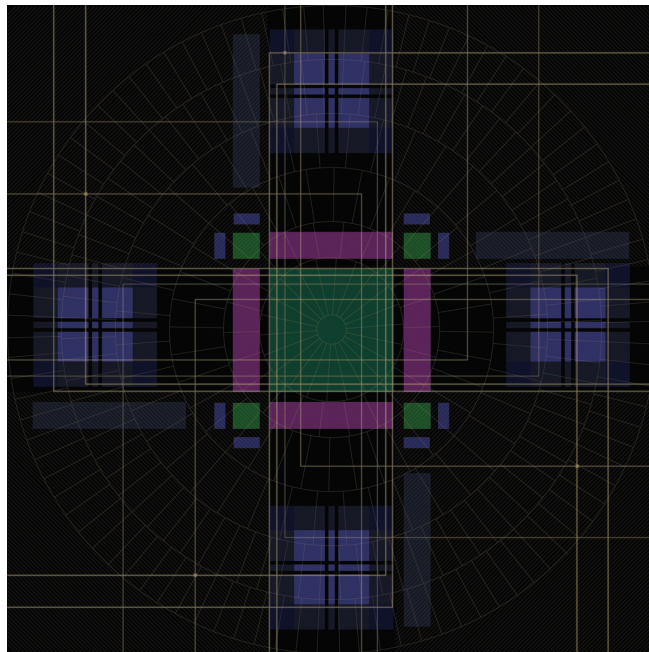


Figure 13. *Tartan Series #1*, Digital media work on canvas, 38" by 38" square.

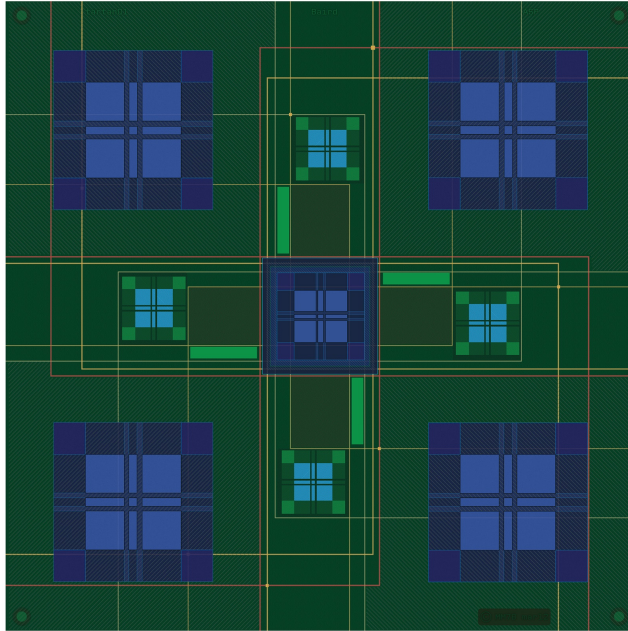


Figure 14. *Tartan Series #2*, Digital media work on canvas, 38" by 38" square.

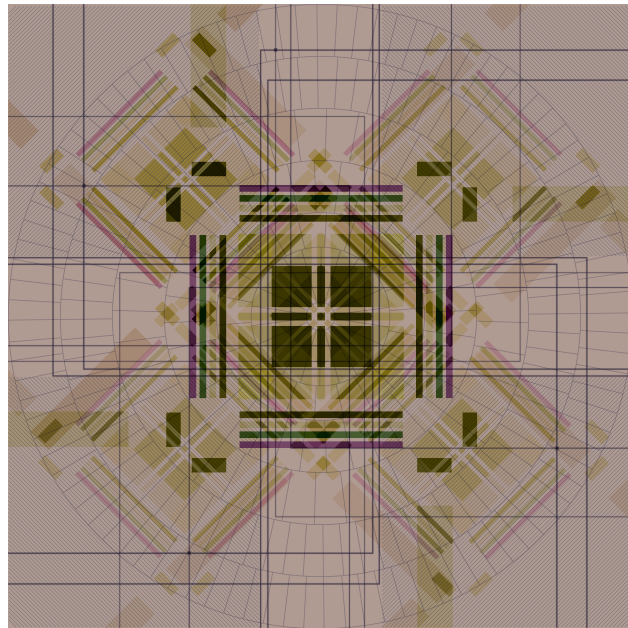


Figure 15. *Tartan Series #3*, Digital media work on canvas, 38" by 38" square.

The *Cree Star Blanket* work references the Morning Star quilts, which are deeply significant in the cultural practices of the Plains Cree people.<sup>70</sup> As mentioned earlier, in Native American communities, blankets are given away and received to honor relationships in the life of the individual and the life of the community. Made of individual diamonds of fabric to create an eight-pointed star design that dates back to before contact, Star blankets fulfill different functions that include wrapping the dead, given at births, marriages, and graduations. They are placed on Sweat Lodges, young men and women wrap themselves while on a Vision Quest, and they are always an important part of a Give-Away.<sup>71</sup> Today, contemporary tradition Star quilts are even given away at basketball tournaments. Team members give star quilts to others participating in the tournament, including the announcers, referees, coaches and players from other teams. Showing how an ancient tradition of creating goodwill and community continues today.

My Cree Star Blanket design through choice of colours and intersecting lines serve as an encoded cultural message system, preserving ancient and traditional knowledge through relationships that travel through simple design elements in both horizontal and vertical layers. By choosing the Star Blanket design as a visual reference, while also including the colours adapted from the Baird Tartan.

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<sup>70</sup> Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, 124.

<sup>71</sup> A Give-Away, the giving of gifts to participants in a ceremony is part of many Indigenous cultures. It is an enactment of a core Indigenous value, the practice of generosity.



Cree artist Wally Dion, recently used the Star Blanket as a metaphor for Cree Identity. His 2007 sculptural work *Star Blanket 11*, created out of recycled computer circuitry boards speaks to the shared but distinct systems between the Indigenous worldview and contemporary consumer culture of the present. He also offers an updated interpretation of the idea of a 'blanket' as a material means to symbolically represent living relationships in communication.

By choosing the Star Blanket as a visual, Dion references the importance of his connection to his Cree community, valuing roles and responsibilities within relationships that reach back to the beginning of time, as we know it through our Original Indigenous teachings. Through the symbolic and encoded wisdom of his ancestors, he claims a direct view towards the future continuing the tradition of 're-living' the Original teachings through this cultural symbol, which offers home, community and belonging. Thus, claiming directly and clearly his relationship and identity an Indigenous artist is fluid and no longer subject to definition or limitations of the past.<sup>72</sup>

My adaptation of the Cree Star Blanket design, the television Test Pattern and the Scottish tartan demonstrated the value of both tangible and intangible visual markers of culture. Interpreted through the artistic process, the "Medicine Wheel" image in the television Test Pattern emerged to mark a Cree perspective on the image I so often viewed on a black and white television during my

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<sup>72</sup> My familiarity of Wally Dion's *Starblanket* series was through the Mackenzie Art Gallery website during my research on Starblankets.

childhood. In my thesis, I posit that through the assimilative policies, the church and state systematically buried symbols related to customary Cree practices. Cultural appropriation supplanted the Cree significance of symbols with consumer interests. The act of artistic intervention contributes to ongoing visual traditions.

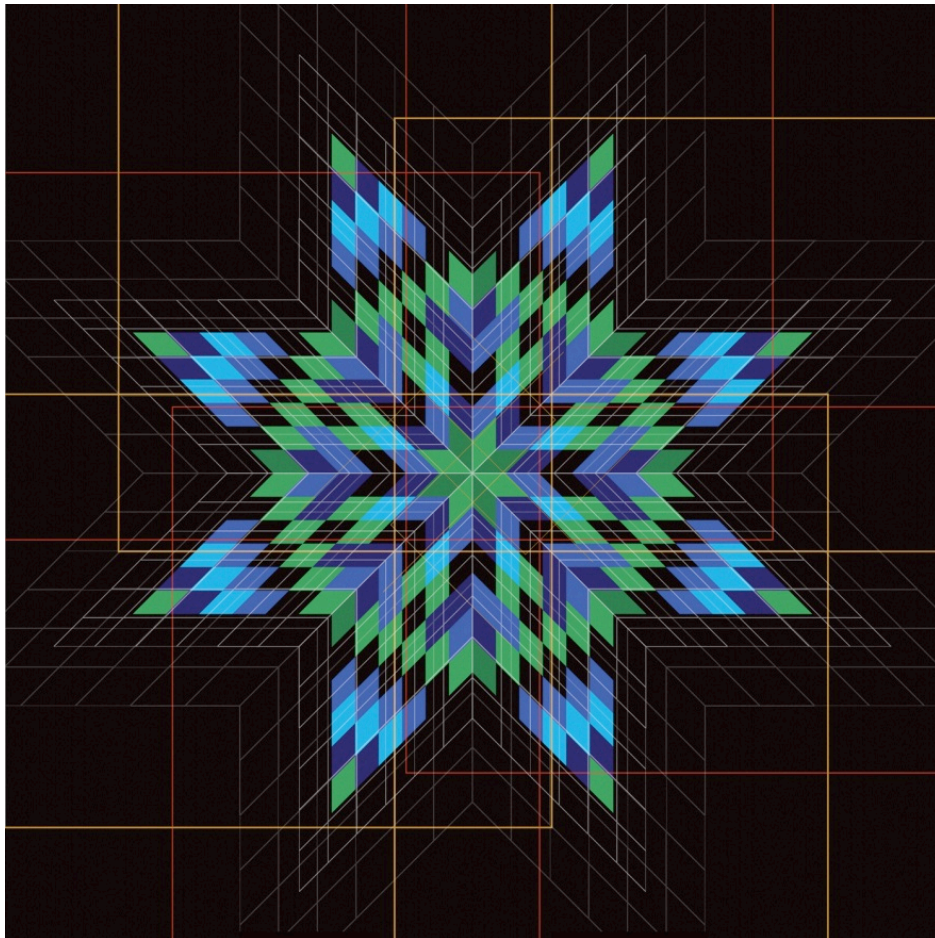


Figure 14. *Cree Star Blanket*, digital media work on canvas, 2013

## Conclusion

The artworks made as part of this thesis project engage with such issues as identity, symbols, stereotypes, colonialism, and mnemonic. Neither defensive nor reactionary, the work calls for resistance to persistent stereotypes. The artwork takes up a range of aesthetics to work through the meaning making of abstract visual language. Change is not possible without discourse and the research and artwork of this thesis contribute to Indigenous art theory and art historical discourse. Specifically, this project, in significant ways the literature, art history emphasizes the pressing discussion of Indigenous abstract visual language.<sup>73</sup> In the art historical canon, for example art theorists took up the topic of this imagery as “primitive” or “minor” artwork in the context of its *adaptation* by Modernist painters.<sup>74</sup>

Through the twinned critical and artistic processes taking up Cree considerations of materials and techniques, I am conscious of my use of tangible markers signaling Indigenous cultures. Sociologist Erving Goffman describes identity as a performance in the theatrical setting of existence. He adds that through this performance that people give meaning to themselves, to others and

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<sup>73</sup> Recent anthologies of art criticism and art writing from an Indigenous perspective includes *Manifestions: New Native Art Criticism* (2011), the exhibition catalogue for the exhibition *Close Encounters* (2010), and also the recent column titled “Close Reading” written by Richard William Hill in Fuse magazine, which features frank criticism on Indigenous art.

<sup>74</sup> See W. Jackson Rushing, “Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism” *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism*, (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995), 283. Rushing describes one of the premier abstract expressionists Jackson Pollack sourced technique and imagery adapted from Indigenous myths, symbols, totems and mask associated with rituals.



to their situation.<sup>75</sup> The effect of the constant burden placed on Indigenous people to explain history and identity cannot be underestimated nor can the ongoing effects of such legislation as the *Indian Act*. These related conditions can be seen as constituting the metaphorical building of a stage upon which the performance of postcoloniality takes place.

Through my artistic process, I realize that my work has led me to understand my identity as transforming and not static. I am aware of myself in time and space, and my power to be my changing self. Indeed, Stuart Hall, describes a kind of movement within identity as “a production that is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation.”<sup>76</sup> My artwork processes exemplify visual investigations that reflect on my changing self.

My adaptation of the Cree Star Blanket design, the television Test Pattern and the Scottish tartan demonstrates the importance of both the tangible and intangible visual markers of culture. Interpreted through the artistic process, the “Medicine Wheel” image in the television Test Pattern emerged to mark a Cree perspective on the image I so often viewed on a black and white television during my childhood. In my thesis, I posit that the combination of cultural appropriation, church and state policies systematically buried symbols related to customary

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<sup>75</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York, Doubleday, 1959), Introduction 12.

<sup>76</sup> Stuart Hall. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Chrisman. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 392.

Cree practices. The act of artistic intervention contributes to ongoing visual traditions and my work is a humble contribution to an ongoing vital and restorative conversation.

My work began as an exercise in a graduate class and the retrieval of a memory from childhood. My investigations of The Indian Head Test Pattern was powerful, for example the circular designs reminded me of the Medicine Wheel, this aspect interested me and motivated this exploration. As a teaching device, the Medicine Wheel visually evokes an Indigenous philosophy of the world. Upon reflection, the circular image may have been persistent in my consciousness from an ancestral memory or a general understanding of the symbol and design. The removal of the Indian trope and deconstruction of the image revealed the universality of the symbol as a Medicine Wheel.

The *Baird Tartan* series addressed questions regarding both sides of my ancestry. Experimenting with tartan design through digital technology I successfully translated layers as visual metaphors for my multiple heritage, rather than fragments, I overlaid each to become one. I layered, duplicated and rotated designs to recognize and signify my multiple histories and in this way, the visual results manifest as traces of my ancestries.

My Cree Star Blanket exemplifies a Cree geometric pattern transposed into the realm of fine art through digital manipulation. I seek to restore this star blanket image to a celebratory object as opposed to a commemorative or

commodified one. However, in these artworks the sewing process of quilts I replace with digital technology. This shift in technique demonstrates dynamism and adaptability that have always been a part of the Cree-Métis visual language.<sup>77</sup>

As an artist, I am often struggling with stereotypical racist prejudiced attitudes from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals that question the legitimacy of my allegiance to Indigenous heritage. A thorough look into the history of racial profiling in art through painting, art, music and other practices has convinced me that, more than ever, there is a need to be a producer of images reflective of lived experiences. In drawing from personal narratives and specificity of identity I have sought to challenge the destructive legacy of colonialist thinking and the effects and legacy of the pejorative visual depictions of Indigenous peoples and their cultural forms. My work contributes to an important conversation about the pressing and difficult issues of identity, power and culture. This conversation is offered in the hopes of understanding and transformation. This is a conversation that must be ongoing.

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