Caribou-being beyond the Boreal

by

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- Abstract -

Through ways of forming and reforming via unstitching and restitching, ***Caribou-being beyond the Boreal*** imagines new futures born from Denesųłiné love and ways of knowing. This work tells a story of Caribou reciprocity, inter-connectedness, and transformation. Stitchwork as a methodology, informed and strengthened by story work, opens a possibility of the Dene and Caribou interspecies-ness that has inspired this research creation. Woven together are Denesųłiné oral histories and family stories that investigate what it means to be a Caribou-person. ***Caribou-being beyond the Boreal*** considers inter-species-ness and inter-related-ness through material investigation, ancestry, and land-based knowledges. Through methods of rerouting, reconstructing, and reconsidering, this research continues to wrestle with ideas of resistance informed by Albert Marshall's concept of "two-eyed seeing" and the binocularity it describes. Bound through love and memory, and explored through garment construction, this research creation speaks to the embodiment of Indigenous dress as living vessel. ***Caribou-being beyond the Boreal*** reflects Denesųłiné futurisms as a strategy that centres my body as a time machine that carries ancestral knowledges. These material explorations focus the intricacies and complexities of love to land, and the shared ingenuity found in both Denesųłiné and Caribou survival. Through an investigation of self, and the identity of my community as 'The Caribou People', I was led to research this question, 'What if I am Caribou?'

Keywords*: decolonial love, re-construction, re-stitching, garment construction, beadwork, stitchwork, inter-species beingness, Denesųłiné, Caribou-being, Two-Eyed Seeing*

- Mahsi Cho -

There are many not mentioned here who contribute to my wholeness. I am deeply thankful for you all.

To *Etthén (Caribou),* for leading me closer to myself. Mahsi Cho for storytelling with me.

To my *parents*, for your steady love and constant support.

To my *Caribou herd* of great grandparents, grandparents, parents, sister, brothers, nieces, nephews, aunties, uncles, cousins, and friends, for journeying with me. You enrich every inch of my continued migration.

To my *Caribou kin Peter*, for reflecting with me and honoring my journey. I am forever grateful for your offerings and friendship.

To *my hands*, mahsi cho, for remembering how to carve spaces for me to exist.

To *the land*, for holding me.

To my *future Caribou kin*, I hope this shared knowledge helps you to honor your own four feet as you traverse into your brilliant Dene futures.

To *my Ancestors*, for guiding me to my wholeness.

To my mom, *Cecile*, this living document is a testament to your incredible resilience. I walk for you.

Neghanighita. I love you.

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Eguné - dried meat

Eh then' nill glah - The caribou herd is close by.

Etthén - Caribou

Henasni – remember

Mahsi Cho- thank you very much

neghanighita- I love you.

Nuhelotine bet'a yanadhe' tsen horelthel. - Our blood relatives will carry us.

Setsiye - grandfather

Setsuné - grandmother

Yonáthe dé -future

-Introduction-

The limitations imposed by the English language suffocate this written expression of ancestral knowledges living within my body, work, and practice. I dream of learning my mother's tongue to help me understand the land and myself more fully. I scatter Dene words throughout these next pages hoping they tether me closer to my Ancestors. This significant act of Dene *naming* honors collective wisdom.

I address Caribou throughout this writing with a capital 'C' to name my kin and instill its agency. I center the principle of *inter-related-ness* to help stitch myself whole as I traverse new inter-related territories as a Caribou-person. As compared to its 'interrelatedness' alternative, these hyphenations offer a more generous space within this English word to acknowledge my relationship to Caribou. Within this research lies my much larger responsibility to centre Caribou knowledge and collective wisdom with care. Through storying cultural histories and family life experiences, I become accountable to these stories.

I have come to realize that my actions of traversing, bundling, and reconstructing are all integral methods to my own urban Denesųłiné harvesting process. Through the ancestral knowledge embedded in my bones I center my body as my greatest technology. Through the creation of futured objects, my goal is to honour Denesųłiné histories and make offerings to Denesųłiné futures.

Methodologies

CARE-ibou Methodology, Stitch-work as a methodology, Story work as a methodology

Through a decolonial framework that centers Caribou as my methodology, my material exploration becomes a language that tethers agency, care, and interrelatedness with the Caribou. Through an investigation of self and the identity of my community as 'The Caribou People', I chart new territories formulated through *inter-species-ness*.

My material investigations are rooted in utilizing both historical and non-historical materials and practices that challenge(s) and inform(s) identity as I story myself into a wider scope of Dene beingness. It is with this intention that I more deeply consider story work as my theory's foundation. Like sinew, I begin to tether Caribou to human in the hopes of making myself more whole. I grew up with the embedded knowledge of Dene guiding principles, and through my research I am guided by one teaching in particular, '*take only what you need, use all that you take.*'

As a child on visits to Patuanak, I would watch as kin returned from hunting trips down river with wild game tucked away in their hand-built wooden skiffs as grandma waited on shore, knife-in-hand, ready to begin preparing all the goodies that would be consumed or reused. In our culture we are taught that everything is to be utilized from a harvest - the meat for providing food and nutrients, the skin and fur for creating clothing, the antlers for art making, the bones for toolmaking and the hair for embroidery and adornment. On my maternal side, I come from a family of traditional garment makers, beaders, and harvesters who utilize their exceptional skills

to live in relationship with the land. Throughout this writing I embrace my body's wholeness to examine the brilliance of Denesųłiné technologies and ancestral knowledges that are inherently me.

I was born in Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan on November 4th, 1984. My mom explains that I nearly flew into this world while she was hurriedly ushered into and out of the tiny bush plane that would fly us across the channel of lakes carved amongst the Churchill River system while on route to the nearest hospital in Île-à-la-Crosse. I spent the first year of my life in my mother's home community of Patuanak, Saskatchewan. And later my family relocated to the small rural farming community of Choiceland, Saskatchewan where my dad accepted a teaching position.

Patuanak is located west of the Shagwenaw Rapids on the Churchill River in Saskatchewan which is Treaty 10 territory. Patuanak makes up one of fifteen sites of English River First Nation territory. There is a single gravel road that connects Patuanak with the La Plonge reserve and the town of Beauval; but in summer the other primary means of travel is by boat via the waters of the Churchill River system.

Figure 1

(Aerial view of Patuanak and the Churchill River system, n.d.)

My master's research began with an investigation of my community's big game harvest, and with my recalling of childhood memories of eating moose stew and moose eguné (dried meat) during visits in Patuanak. In remembering and writing this last sentence, a story is conjured about how some of my older cousins drove 16 hours north of Patuanak by snowmobile to hunt Caribou. There is a change from Caribou to moose harvesting in our community and this peaked my research interests and subsequently led me to research the two subspecies of Caribou located in Saskatchewan - the barren ground Caribou herds (Beverly and Qamanirjuaq), and the Woodland Caribou herd. I wanted to spend some time considering these different herds and their changing migration patterns and seasonal movements as well as their declining populations. Through my research of Denesųłiné cultural identity, I was led to the documentation of how northern Denesųłiné groups moved south into the Churchill River area and formed their own cultural identities within the broader scope of Denesųłiné identity. This was directly related to the expansion of interior fur trade happening in the last quarter of the eighteenth century that began drawing some Denesųłiné groups from their traditional homeland along the edge of the barren lands southward and southwestward into the boreal forest. (Jarvenpa, 2024) This research ultimately led me to investigate the main factors affecting both barren ground Caribou herds and

the non-migratory Woodland Caribou herd. These different herds are affected by factors that include climate change, disease/parasites, habitat loss/degradation (industry/extraction/land development), increased predation, and wildfires. ("Dene are Caribou: Caribou are Dene")

Figure 2

(My mother Cecile, great uncle Jonas and Skidoo, n.d.)

My mother, Cecile, mentioned that it had been decades since Patuanak community members had seen *Etthén* (Caribou) pass anywhere near our community. Being at home, dreaming about Caribou, I flipped through my parent's old photo albums. These images are a documentation of their lives in Patuanak and, in these images, I noticed a generous amount of 1970's winter Ski-doo jackets appear.

Through family stories, my family helps me to establish that the first snowmobiles appear in Patuanak around 1960. I relate this information to the story of one of my older cousins who travelled 16 hours by snowmobile to harvest Caribou sometime in the 2000's. This travel parallels Caribou's rerouted migration patterns and positions *Skidoo as a survival mechanism* that helps tether together the profound ingenuity found in both Denesųłiné and Caribou survival.

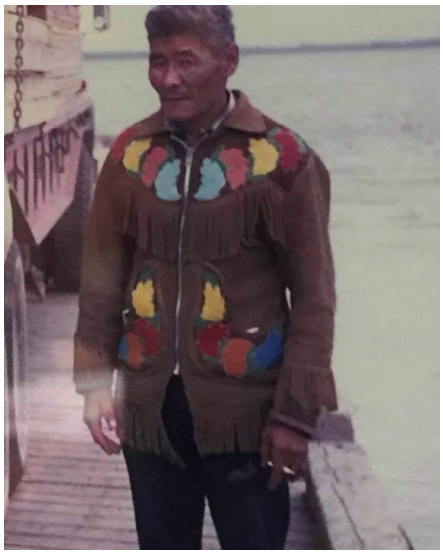
Prior to our community of Patuanak forming in Treaty 10 territory in northern Saskatchewan, my grandparents lived a nomadic lifestyle. They were camping in community along the upper Churchill River system and depended on the Caribou and other large game for survival. This tethering of body to land becomes essential for me to describe the lived stories found in my work. This is important, especially as I am searching for specific materials to help describe them as part of this research journey. In this research, I begin to employ the material tarpaulin to conjure the versatility found in this nomadic beingness. Tarpaulin, also known as tarp, is utilized in many northern Indigenous communities for various utilitarian reasons. I have seen it used to wrap parts of newly harvested animals for transport, as rain shelters for camping, as partitions for wind resistance, and for covering hauls on sleds or taboggans. Tarp is, and has been, woven deeply into our northern culture and continues as a visual reminder of abundance and protection.

The CARE in CARE-ibou Methodology

Figure 3 & 4

(Brown, B. Members of the Dene First Nations from Northwest Territories in Nain, Newfoundland teach people how to cure moosehide, n.d.)

(My grandfather Eugene wearing a moosehide coat made and adorned by my grandmother Christine, n.d.)



My hands are my greatest technology and with them I'll stitch myself into Being

Throughout my work history, and in this master's thesis research, I refer to *Stitch-work*. Different from its non-hyphenated alternative, *stitchwork,* I offer a space between these stitches to consider the labour of love found in this "work". Stitching in my Dene culture isn't considered work at all, but rather a labour of love that has the capacity to adorn, honor, heal and protect. Stitch-work is part of a knowledge system that guides me in my relationships to my Ancestors, to the land, and to my Denesųłiné culture. Stitch-work as a methodology helps me to know that when I hold land-based materials I become directly connected to my Ancestors, and I attribute this connection to the worldview that all things have a living spirit. I reflect on the web of relationality found in stitching and its deep relationship to the land and Denesųłiné knowledge systems. As I bundle caribou hair in my hands to tuft it into animal skin, I'm in awe of my body and its ability to hold and transfer ancestral knowledge. In the moment that I am writing this, I think, "What if I never found stitch-work? How would I have known myself differently?"

Through a deeper consideration of Dene knowledge production, the reconstructing of clothing becomes a decolonizing act that reveals a relational framework. Through a transformative process of forming and reforming materials via unstitching and restitching, assemblage becomes a method that imagines and makes Dene future(s). With these multiple identity-based research interests at play in my research, I began to note the parallels found in both Caribou and Denesųłiné survival, and it is through my body that I begin to stitch together memory, story and lived experiences in search of answering the following research questions:

1. **How can Indigenous story work make me feel more at home in my own body, how does it care for me?**
2. **How might un-stitching and re-constructing materials aid in storying my urban Indigenous identity and speak to innovation and hybridization? How might this hybridization method help explore family narratives that speak to Indigenous futurism?**
3. **What if I am Caribou? What does it mean to survive as Caribou? How is this story told?**

Teachers and Teachings

Caribou Migration

As I reflect to the beginning of this IAMD master's program, I felt the pendulum swing from anxiousness to exhilaration. I felt a calibrated and purposeful reprogramming and unlearning that revealed new rhythmic shifts. At first this felt chaotic and scattered as I frantically tried to insert theoretical frameworks into my current and living work and practice. As I learned to honour myself within academia, my brain began a rewiring process, creating a space for ***duality*** or what I have come to know as "two-eyed seeing", a concept coined by Mi'kmaq Elder, Albert

Marshall. This two-eyed seeing recognizes Indigenous knowledge as a distinct epistemological system that exists parallel to western knowledge. My busy brain twisted and untangled western canon while simultaneously reminding itself of the rich Dene knowledge(s) embedded within my being.

My first semester in the IAMD program was an onslaught of critical theory and I struggled to apply its underpinnings and relationality to my own research interests. As I situated my Indigenous body within this larger educational institution, I began to shift the resistance I was feeling into power. With a feeling of one foot in two worlds, I continued to wrestle with ideas of resistance but was brought back to "two-eyed seeing" and the binocularity it describes. ***Binocularity*** gives us the ability to focus on an object with both eyes to create a single image. (Dawn. (n.d.)) As I rearranged, reassembled, and reimagined the threads (stitching) that bind my work, I learned how overlapping themes and perspectives allowed for a deeper, wider, and more generative field of view, as described in "two-eyed seeing." I realized that, through this process, I was exploring decolonizing frameworks and that this isn't new but rather that I was reseeing it or re-stitching it into my being. I reflect on my research interest of Dene futurisms to better understand my body as a time machine that carries cultural knowledge(s) forward, and with my hands I create art objects that move through time and space into the future. I sit and ponder the parallels in 'Two-Eyed Seeing' and realize there may be a way to plant both my feet more solidly in two worlds.

It is at this point that I look to Leanne Simpson's concept of *radical resurgence* to further examine the role of colonization when referencing the body as a site of resistance within my

research, relating the movement found in rerouted Caribou migration as dispossession. This research is also considering the importance of Caribou to Dene. Simpson writes:

> Resurgence has come to me to represent a radical practice of Indigenous theorizing, writing, organizing, and thinking, one that I believe is entirely consistent with and inherently from Indigenous thought…the epic nature of settler colonialism requires radical responses. Radical resurgence requires a deeply critical reading of settler colonialism and Indigenous response to the current relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. Radical requires us to critically and thoroughly look at the roots of the settler colonial present—capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and anti-Blackness. Radical requires us to name dispossession as the meta-dominating force in our relationship to the Canadian state, and settler colonialism as the system that maintains this expansive dispossession. (2018)

Figure 5

(Aerial view of herd migration, n.d.)

> Caribou migrate largely due to snow and the need for food. The female Caribou and calves from the previous year travel north to the approximate calving grounds in the spring. Large herds of Caribou gather in mid-June after their calving is over to help protect each other. In late July the herds begin to migrate back south. Sometime between October and December the herds move south to the forest where breeding, or rutting season, happens. (“Dene are Caribou: Caribou are Dene”)

> In subarctic Western Canada, there are three caribou herds: the Ahiak, Qamanirjuaq, and Beverly. These animals represent the largest and last great mammal migration on the North American continent. Once numbering in the millions, the Ahiak and Qamanirjuaq herds have been declining in alarming numbers over the last twenty years, while the Beverly herd’s migration routes have contracted so much that they no longer cross into the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. This means that the Déné people of northern Saskatchewan, who depend on caribou for meat and hides, are now forced to travel hundreds of kilometres north into the Northwest Territories and Nunavut to reach the herds. (“Etthén Heldeli”, 2020)

The word survivance, created by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, defines survivance as,

> an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native “survivancy”. (Vizenor, 2008)

Just as the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Barren ground caribou herds are adapting and rerouting I'm reminded of the incredible ingenuity found in Denesųłiné survivance and the tactile ways our lives are tethered to Caribou. I think about the tendons and sinew that make Caribou whole and how it offers its tissue to us so that we can thread together protection for our own bodies. For this research, I begin to reflect on Caribou societies and their protection of one another, like how the scent glands in their ankles act as alert systems to the rest of the herd by emitting an odour.

I am challenged by Simpson's thoughts on radical resurgence, questioning what it looks like within nation-based thought systems? "What do these systems look like once we move past survival into freedom, the freedom that is dependent upon the destruction of settler colonialism" (Simpson, 2018). To further my own research, I reflect on the bones of this research hoping they can be built into future worlds where rich ancestral knowledges continue to persist, resist, and find new alternatives that realize the *radical* within the *resurgence*.

The Fire is research

> In 2023, a record-breaking 3.3 million hectares burned — nearly seven per cent of the province's forests — disturbing more land than the 11 previous fire seasons combined. A recent report by the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute found woodland caribou lost more than five per cent of critical habitat to the wildfires in 2023, with northern herds facing the most severe losses, including nearly 13 per cent in Bistcho Lake range and nearly 14 per cent in the Caribou Mountains. (Foster et al., 2024)

Figure 6

(Slocan Valley Fires, August 2024)

In July of 2024 I arrived at *The Aunte* eager to implement the material creation part of my master's research. *The Aunte*, founded by my dear friend Jaymie Campbell, is a gathering place for Indigenous artists and thinkers located in interior British Columbia on unceded Sinixt, Ktunaxa, Secwèpemc and Syilx territories. I was the first artist for this Indigenous led program. My first few days were spent helping to prepare the space and helping to coordinate the opening celebration. For some it would be a long journey to come and celebrate this magnificent labour of love called *The Aunte*. And, just as quickly as *The Aunte* was about to make her debut, she was denied by the growing number of forest fires in the Slocan valley. Highways were closed and we waited on standby for evacuation alerts and orders. We remained on evacuation alert for 12 days as the red glow enveloped the valley.

> Woodland caribou aren't helpless in the face of fire. My father hypothesizes they've learned to avoid forest fire and will flee from wildfires based on at least three adaptive traits. First, their acute sense of smell can likely pick up the scent of wildfire smoke, pushed by the winds. Second, their bodies are designed for long-distance travel. And third, like us, they possess an intricate memory of the landscape. They somehow know where to go. "Caribou just keep moving, moving, moving," my father says. "It wouldn't be unheard of for them to travel 20, 30 kilometers in a day. And as long as some of the herd know of these pockets of [habitat] they'll keep seeking them out." This is what my dad calls herd memory: knowledge passed down from female caribou to her offspring like an old, weathered map of the land — a family heirloom of sorts. It's why the loss of even one female can be so detrimental to a small herd, he says. (Foster et al., 2024)

As the smoke began to lift, and the air started to return to my laboured lungs, I couldn't help but think about my Caribou kin. As my mind raced back and forth considering what it meant to be a Caribou person, I couldn't help but recognize the parallels of survivance built into our bodies. I thought of matriarchal-led migrations and the archived knowledge of my late grandmother. How the loss of my grandmother was so detrimental to our family's ancestral knowledge system. It seemed silly to consider let alone say out loud, but the thought became verbal in my next call to my primary supervisor, when I asked him, *what if I am Caribou?*

Theory

Storywork Theory

Borrowing from Jo-ann Archibald's theoretical storywork principles, I delve deeper my research through storytelling and these principles.

> Jo-ann Archibald describes story as work that educates the heart, the mind, the body, and the spirit. She suggests that stories engage listeners and the storyteller in a respectful relationship of reciprocity that creates and sustains oral cultures. Intrinsic in storytelling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as Indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves. (Smith, 2021, pg 166)

Indigenous origin stories are often considered mythological and disregarded as historical facts within Western academic thought. As Shawn Wilson states, "it's critical to acknowledge that Indigenous communities have always had their own scholars, philosophers and artists. The isolation or separation of multiple existences is a colonial invention - that a scholar is not necessarily an artist is not necessarily a philosopher - we have always had our own learning and teaching methods, and our own ways of knowing the world." (2018, pg. 14)

I had always been Etthén

I'm on the concrete steps of a large city building, the architecture is grand, and we feel so small standing beside the large concrete columns. It feels like an important structure, maybe city hall. I'm walking to my family who are gathered near the entryway and as I approach something feels different. I come up the side staircase, approaching my setsiye (grandfather) from behind and as he turns to see me, the group gives us a moment. I feel an overwhelming sense of comfort this

visit, like the comfort I feel from the smell of wood burning smoke wafting through the cold northern air. In this dream my grandfather and I come to one another knowing we hold the same knowledge…knowing we are both Caribou. - dream knowledge from December 2024

My research for my master's degree fits nicely inside of a space created by the term Research Creation. I had posted a few sneak peaks to my social media account, a detail of my work from the project *Double Coat* (April 2024). Almost immediately my cousin Trisha responded with excitement. She began asking questions about the images and requesting more. I sent her a visual of the beaded 'Skidoo' text piece I was working on as part of this research investigating our inter-related-ness to Caribou. Her enthusiasm grows. "You have my head turning now with the word "Skidoo." Something in the old days maybe? Elans?" she asks. I explain my research to her in non-academic terms, cousin to cousin, and she asks to read my thesis work when it's complete. I hold her response close, "Thank you for doing this."

We continue to talk late into the evening, and I wrap up the conversation with a welcomed request for more story sharing. I wake up to text messages from Trisha's mom, my aunty Marie, and we continue in conversation as she eagerly shares family stories. She remembers when her dad, my grandpa Eugene, hunted Caribou. She continues, "Sometimes woodland caribou would show up in our area. If the people spotted them close by they would go hunt them. **Eh then'nill gla**. That's what they would say." She sends an audio recording to pronounce this for me, and I ask for the direct translation of the part I can't recognize **Nil glah**, meaning ***the herd is close by***. Before our conversation ends, I ask my aunty if she knows the english translation of grandpa's last name. She responds, "*Our traditional last name Edenchanchyonce is the word that describes the little fur in-between the toes on the caribou feet*." (informed by elder Ovide Wolverine)

I’m left in awe reading this, I realize I had always been *Etthén (Caribou).*

Stitch-work as Ceremony

I received my first Indigenous markings in 2019 by artist and now friend, Audie Murray. My journey to find this medicine of skin marking (tattooing) took two years. We sat at Audie’s dining table. She was focused with a steady hand while she was stitching the mark onto my hands. I chose my grandfather’s last name to etch into my knuckles via Dene syllabics to honor the incredible gift of stitchwork that my hands offer me. Syllabics are one of the first known forms of Indigenous written word. As David Kim-Cragg explains,

> According to Cree oral accounts, syllabics were a gift from the spirit world for the benefit of the ᓀᐦᐃᔭᐊᐧᐠ (Nêhiya-wak or those who speak the Cree language). They came into being through aᓀᐦᐃᔭᐤ (Nêhiyaw or Cree person), not a ᐊᔭᒥᐦᐁᐃᐧᔩᓂᐤ (ayamihêwiyiniw or missionary). Indigenous Peoples across the Prairies and into the Anishinaabe territory in the east tell a similar story, although the name of the person and exact circumstances differ depending on where the story is told. The consistent theme is that the symbols came in a vision to an Indigenous person…. Oral histories are passed down in many cultures in a deliberate and sophisticated way to preserve important information over generations. Western academics once dismissed these histories. (2024)

Each prick of Audie’s needle was quite painful. There is an audible flicking sound each time the needle is leveraged against the skin. At times during this tattoo process, the thought of the needle hitting bone becomes visceral and I must distract myself. In other instances, I’m able to focus on

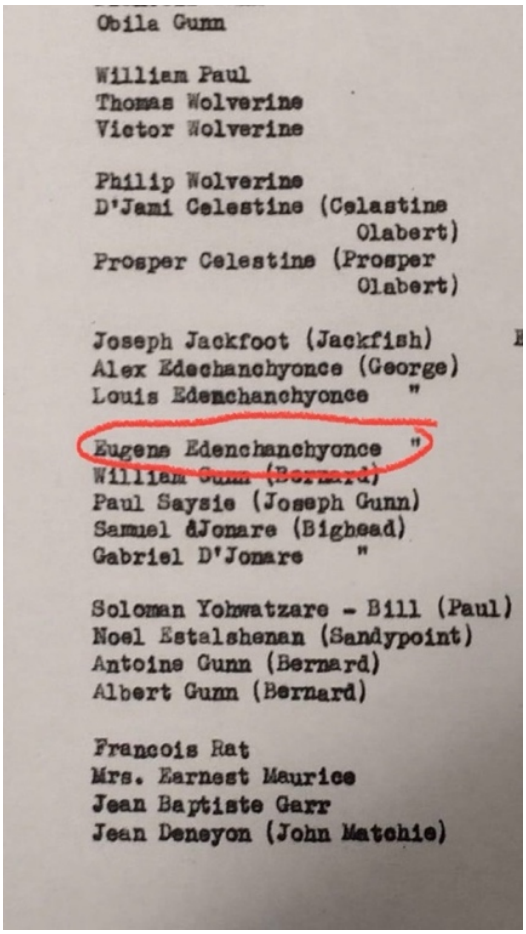
the strength of my Dene Ancestors as I drift in and out of breathing exercises to help manage the pain. This act of adorning my body is my acknowledgement of time immemorial being etched into my spirit. Our bodies remember. Our bodies collectively remember.

Audie asks me about the tattoo, and I explain,

"Prior to our family name on my mom's side being anglicised, my setsiye (grandfather) name was *Edenchanchyonce* (en-choos-a-yoos-ae). This tattoo honors that name and placing it on my knuckles honors my hands and my work." My hands stitch in the same way my grandma stitched for us, her family. I watched her since I was little. When I first picked up beads, I felt her.

Figure 7

(George, D. My grandfather Eugene's traditional last name, n.d.)



Obila Gunn

William Paul
Thomas Wolverine
Victor Wolverine

Philip Wolverine
D'Jami Celestine (Celastine Olabert)
Prosper Celestine (Prosper Olabert)

Joseph Jackfoot (Jackfish)
Alex Edechanchyonce (George)
Louis Edenchanchyonce "

Eugene Edenchanchyonce "
William Gunn (Bernard)
Paul Saysie (Joseph Gunn)
Samuel dJonare (Bighead)
Gabriel D'Jonare "

Soloman Yohwatzare - Bill (Paul)
Noel Estalshenan (Sandypoint)
Antoine Gunn (Bernard)
Albert Gunn (Bernard)

Francois Rat
Mrs. Earnest Maurice
Jean Baptiste Garr
Jean Deneyon (John Matchie)

Figure 8

(*Chiasson, B. My knuckle markings that read Edenchanchyonce in Dene syllabics, Sept 2023*)

Storywork (in the form of Love Letters)

Dear Setsuné (Grandmother),

From a distance there is a blue skiff dancing across the lake towards the shore. Cattails near the wooden dock and grandkids running in the backyard. The sun is beginning to set, and the sky is an ambient orange pink color. My setsuné hears the hum of a boat motor in the distance and slips on her rubber moccasin boot covers. With her filleting knife in hand, she makes her way near the sandy shore where her gutting table stands. She waits in anticipation near water's edge for the boat to arrive. Henasni (I remember) her hands were so big and strong, built for the intense labour of this lifestyle. Her beading thimbles I will never fit...too big for my fingers to fill. Her hands could work that knife with incredible precision…her hands could hold the world. Henasni …I remember her hands.

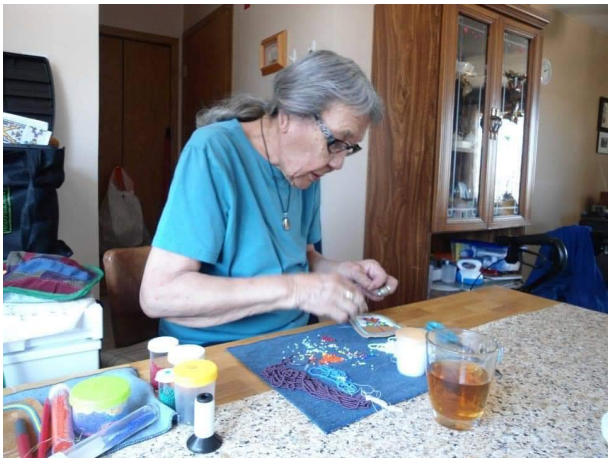
My initial goal for my master's research-creation was to interrupt western canons by formulating resistance within my work, but as I hung my completed coat-dress titled, *Dear Etthén* (December 2023), on a hook in my home studio something else was conjured. *Dear Etthén* opened more space than I imagined, more space for me to dream stitchwork and storywork and caribou inter-related-ness.

When entering my grandparents' home in Patuanak, I would hang my coat on a wall hook behind the back door. From this vantage point I would be in clear view of the living space, and I would be greeted by a small wood-burning stove in front of me. My sensoria would be in overload. My eyes fixating on the eguné (dried meat) hanging from the wood pole above the stove. The smell

of smoked moosehide would be emanating throughout the house. My Grandma would be stitching at her beading table, and at other times she would be visiting family over tea and bannock. I reflect on my urban Indigenous experience and how I've not learned how to skin, flesh, or smoke a hide but watched my setsuné (grandmother) in this important work in building Dene futures. Her memory is like the hide-tanning smoke, drifting into my presence and deeply connecting me to my Ancestors.

Figure 9 & 10

(My late Setsuné Christine George stitching at her table, n.d.)
(My late Setsuné Christine George smoking moose hide, n.d.)



Dear Setsiye (Grandfather),

There are moments that happen during our visits that can't be described in the English language, yet I don't speak Dene. I wish to sink back into your cozy arms setsiye and feel the warmth of your flannel coat wrap around my heart.

I remember the day we buried you, how your body was lowered into the cold winter earth. I remember feeling like I shouldn't cry as much as my other cousins who knew you better. I remember how Aunty Marie ushered me to throw some earth into the land that would hold your spirit. I remember feeling confused, thinking I was undeserving. Henasni (I remember).

I never realized we'd visit again, yet, you have always come to me unexpectedly. In these moments the whole world fades, it makes me emotional even now. Your visits help to ground me, knowing the ground can't contain your spirit.

There is a specific coat that my *setsiye* wore that helps me to recall memories of my late grandpa Eugene. It's a common plaid green flannel chore coat that was so prevalent on our rez, yet the green makes it so specific. This coat is ageless yet speaks directly to a specific time in our collective Dene history. When I think about this coat, I think about the hunters in our community of Patuanak and the stories told to me by my parents of a time before me. In other instances, I think about my older brother Anthony and how much he adored his time hunting with our grandfather.

Figure 11

(My sister Kristina wearing the green plaid chore coat, n.d.)

I return to the photo albums in my parent's house now, as I flipped through these old family photo albums in search of this mint green plaid coat that helps inform my project, I can smell the nostalgia of these square-shaped images. They hold treasured stories of a time before me, one where my family lived in sync with the shifts and bends of the beautiful Churchill River water. To my surprise I find an image of my grandpa's coat. In the image my sister Kristina, maybe 6 years old, has it wrapped around her body as she hugs one of her favorite dolls. In the image she sits in a boat, eyes closed clutching her doll close to her chest with the plaid coat wrapped around her. I sense warmth in my body while looking at this image. I can't help but see how my sister feels protected within this photo. I am transported to the same warmth that I described in dreamworld while hugging my late grandfather. For my research and in building this written/visual experience that I'm calling *Caribou-being beyond the Boreal,* I sit at my sewing machine, relentlessly trying to mimic this plaid coat pattern. This process helps me to sink into thoughts of transformative beingness and

inter-related-ness with the caribou and the land. I think of all the ways in which my research is held through collective beingness.

Figure 12

(*Laiken, B. Installation image of Tarp Coat, April 2025*)

(*Note:* 2024, 84” x 34” x 69”, Tarpaulin, snap closures, wood, smoked hide lace)

At times during this research, I have felt like I was trying desperately to fit circles of Indigenous knowledges into institution’s rigid square boxes. I had considered grad studies for many years but always answered my own thought with, ‘*the colonial project won’t inherit this knowledge also.*’ I

resisted. There is no word for resist in Dene. Perhaps moving forward had been long overdue. There is a Dene word for future *Yonáthe dé*.

I look back to an introductory exercise in my first semester of my masters program which was to create a one-sentence message that would help earth's next inhabitants following a cataclysmic event. My sentence was *Kinship will carry us.* I had called my mom, Cecile, to help translate *Kinship will carry us* into Dene. She struggled to recall the Dene words, but she just so happened to be visiting her brother, my uncle August (Augie as we know him) and he was able to help. Half assured, they still called my aunty Darlene to verify. Aunty then called my uncle Alex to confirm. This elaborate web of Dene authenticating are the effects of language loss due to the Indian Residential School System. As I sat on the other end of my phone, remaining hopeful that my sentence could be translated, I thought about how fortunate I am to witness this collective wisdom at play. I thought about how it's inextricably linked to my own survivance. As a result, a story comes to mind about my kin, that I have mom's permission to share here:

In Indian Residential Schools siblings were separated by gender, brothers and sisters could be trapped together, and yet so they were forced apart. A story was told to me by my Aunty about our relative, and how he helped feed his siblings while at Indian Residential School by trapping squirrels for them to eat. All of this, so that his siblings wouldn't starve from the nutrient poor food they were being fed. I think about the knowledge needed to trap squirrels and the boldness this act required, especially considering the punishment if caught veering too far from the colonial project. I think about the web of communication necessary for their small bodies to gather out of sight to hunt these squirrels, and the skills required to prepare this food with no

access to trapping or cooking tools. I am overwhelmed thinking of all the embedded knowledge in their small bodies, the collective wisdom tethered into their beings.

A message alert dings on my phone with a translation from my uncle, *nuhelotine bet'a yanadhe' tsen horelthel*. In English the words become, *our blood relatives will carry us*. I focus more intently on the part where *kinship* becomes blood relatives and realize I'm being led to something beyond me.

Exhibition

A reminder of the Research question(s):

Research question: ***How can Indigenous storywork make me feel more at home in my own body, how does it care for me?***

Figure 13

(*Laiken, B. Installation image of Dear Etthén, April 2025*)

(*Note*: 2023, Vintage coat, caribou hair, pony hide, tarp, artificial sinew, grandmother's beadwork, high visibility tape, embroidery thread, metal components)

Throughout this project's creation, *Dear Etthén***,** I hold my family's stories close to my body as a protective act of the century's old knowledge and repositioned language as powerful tools of reclamation. *Etthén* translates into *Caribou* in our Dene dialect. Through language, I consider the ways in which colonization relentlessly attempts to sever my relationship to myself and the land. Colonization doesn't realize that ancestral knowledge is embedded in my being. Like many of my past projects involving ancestral knowledge systems, I called my mother to help better connect me to myself. As I sat with her on the phone, summoning myself to repeat the Dene words so awkwardly spilling from my mouth I refocused my frustration to center resurgence.

Figure 14

Hand embroidered Etthén on upcycled Skidoo coat.

Indigenous dress practices continue to be a tool that build Indigenous future(s) since time immemorial. I consider how my body protects, holds, and carries Indigenous knowledge, like a medicine bundle. It becomes clearer that the tarpaulin material I have been so interested in my research on Dene Futures over this first semester might be ushering me towards giving Tarp a new function. I begin by honoring the strong woven qualities of Tarp by weaving into its already woven body. Like the sinew that runs through Caribou's body, each fold of tarpaulin becomes a wholeness by offering stability and strength. Like a needle through moosehide, I use my hands to weave a geometric motif through Tarp using high visibility tape. The tape affords awareness and reflects the light to offer a sheen like beads. The geometric motif is inspired by my grandmother's beaded designs. With these marks, I am weaving past and future, I am weaving Dene and Caribou, I am weaving family together.

I choose blue tarpaulin for these two reasons: it's prominence in the north and how this prominence makes blue tarpaulin into a Dene aesthetic, and our Denesųłiné relationship to water, more specifically, to the Churchill River system that continues to care for our Denesųłiné bodies. I consider the mobility of this Tarp work as it can be bound and transported to offer itself elsewhere. Tarp is not static, and its shape is forever transforming given the malleable weave that fills and shapes the tarpaulin skirt. The more it is handled the less stiff it becomes. It is nomadic and tent-like, resembling a land-based Denesųłiné lifestyle that shifts and moves. This movement echoes the need for movement to hunt caribou. It is my childhood memories and family stories bound together to describe a home that can be carried because it should be carried.

As I stitched together story, memory, and land in this work I'm calling *Dear Etthén,* I return to the word *Etthén* accepting that I will never fully comprehend the power of this Dene name. My tongue struggles to speak Dene. Indigenous languages extend far beyond the pages of books, and even further beyond Western Research, and I attempt to set my bitterness aside to stitch these wounds shut in the blue Tarp and the Skidoo jacket. *Dear Etthén* connects Tarp to Skidoo in the formation of a wearable work to describe the movement found in both Denesųłiné and Caribou survival. As I tuft Caribou's hair throughout this first version of the coat-dress, I reflect on the literal tethering of land to body and envision the powerful transformation that Leanne Simpson's radical resurgence has to offer. I think about how despite colonial dispossession, Caribou continue to weave and find new migration patterns like the innovative ways in which the Denesųłiné continue to harvest Caribou as a means of survival. I ground myself back in Stitch-work to disrupt and resist colonial violence by describing my body as a vessel that carries rich ancestral knowledges forward. My knowledge cannot be dispossessed.

Research Question: **How might un-stitching and re-constructing materials aid in storying my urban Indigenous identity and speak to innovation and hybridization? How might this hybridization method help explore family narratives that speak to Indigenous futurism?**

CARE-ibou

> After killing a caribou, we cut it up right there and haul it back to the tents. From there it is the women's job. We skin it with a knife and use an ax to cut the bones. I'd bring the caribou back to our camp with a dog team. If I make a kill, I share it with the others in the camp. If I get nothing, other successful hunters share with me. (2024, pg. 29)

Figure 15

Installation image of 'CARE-ibou'

CARE-ibou follows after *Dear Etthén. CARE-ibou*'s teachings were profound as I added repair and care into Stitch-work methodology as a strategy to create a new work steeped in relationality, connectivity, and land-based love. This work began as a reflective message to the audience, *take only what you need*. This work also presented me with a provocation of *how do I care for Caribou or does the caribou want me to care for it*? I maneuver through land-based acts of love and reciprocity to centre collectiveness.

Figure 16

Detail image of 'CARE-ibou'

Through my exploration of a new creative process, mould-making, I shaped Caribou's hoof using hydrocal plaster. I then covered the shaped plaster using pony hide and Caribou's hair to render Caribou's hoof more realistically. Three quarters of the way through this process, I fell short of my materials. I decide to fill this void by carefully adhering embroidery threads to imitate Caribou's exposed flesh and muscle. The beauty of this exposed wound aims to story the

love found in the collective act of harvesting Caribou's body and reinforces the Dene teaching '*take only what you need'*.

> A woman has a knife to take the hide off and a moose leg bone scraper to take the flesh off. A caribou leg bone is too small. After taking the hide off, the woman would work the hide for two or three days. The she would stretch the hide on a pole frame and scrape the hair off with a bone scraper. This tool is made from a split caribou bone. (2024, pg. 19)

Figure 17 & 18

Transformation as method (work in progress)
Caribou hair text stitched into IKEA bag (detail)

For this Stitch-work called *CARE-ibou*, I reshape the woven thread that read IKEA into Dene syllabics that translate to *land*. My choice of utilizing an IKEA bag was to reinforce the Denesųłiné principle, *take only what you need,* by weighing it against capitalist strategies of

consumerism and profit. I use caribou hair bundles to shape the letters that reiterate this Denesųłiné principle. This centers a Denesųłiné worldview. As I mentioned previously, **my hands are my greatest technology and with them I'll carve myself into Being.** With my hands, in stitchwork and storywork methodology, I'm exploring how my body is an innovative technology that anchors my lived urban experience and futures my Denesųłiné beingness. My work honours Dene histories of survival and contributes to Dene futures by reimaging Dene tools and how those specific tools build Dene futures.

Research Question: **What if I am caribou? What does it mean to survive as Caribou? How is this story told?**

The theme of transformation spurred by catastrophe is prevalent in many Indigenous origin stories. For some Indigenous nations, the world has undergone more than one transformation, causing life to be unbalanced through various transformation. What some may consider 'inanimate' objects turned into animals or people and vice versa. Through the care of cosmological relationships between the people and spiritual entities life became rebalanced. I look to my own community of Patuanak as I refer to an origin story about a wolf turned man, his name was Erakali (or Edekali). Erakali was said to possess extraordinary strength, speed, and cunning as well as potent *inkonze*, that is, cosmological or sacred power obtained in dreams from the animals he hunted. Erakali was not just regarded as a mythical figure but rather as an actual Denesųłiné person who was an ancestor of people in Patuanak. (Jarvenpa,2024)

It becomes vitally important for me to center our non-human kin, Caribou, to address the ways in which colonialism operationalizes itself to center human-only thought and agency. Throughout

my research, and this next work, *Double Coat*, I was guided by Vanessa Watt's 'Place-thought'. Place-thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking, and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts. (Watts, 2024)

It was at this point in my research that I began shifting away from the term 'hybridity' to 'inter-relatedness' to describe the 'being' of both human and Caribou rather than the 'combing/mixing-of'. It reconsiders how the inter-species *beingness* changes the way I tell these stories and how centering Caribou agency can simultaneously chart the joyful love stories of my family and community.

Double Coat

Figure 19

(Laiken, B. Installation image of Double Coat, April 2025)

(*Note:* 2024, Vintage coats, caribou hair, caribou hide, wool, tarpaulin, vintage and antique beads, semi-precious gemstones, genuine pearls, tarp, embroidery thread, wood)

The birth of the material investigation called Double *Coat*, was an exciting one. This follows both Dear *Etthén* and *CARE-ibou* and began with the purchase of a caribou hide from a friend. This hide comes from Boreal Caribou in northern Ontario. There was a specific hide that caught my eye. It was a stunning unsmoked cream-colored hide approximately four-square feet in size that had a galaxy of small holes running through the spine of it. Immediately after receiving it in the mail, I unfolded the beautiful skin that was so neatly packed and held it up to the window to inspect what some may consider ‘damaged’ material. Most makers look at holes in the hide as an unfixable problem. Instead, the thinly scraped hide glowed from the natural light behind it as if a

universe of filtered light emerged. I continued with an immense curiosity to unearth the why's and how's what I understood as tiny portals. Stitchwork as a methodology opens up possibilities. Naturally, I turned to the harvesters of this hide, and was quickly informed that these small, scattered holes were the markings left behind during the hide scraping process. These portals emerged as a result caused from the removal of warbles, the parasitic larvae of the warble fly. I learned of the relationship of the caribou to the adult fly that lays eggs on the hairs of the caribou's legs and lower body. The eggs hatch into larvae, the larvae penetrate the skin, and travel under the skin to the caribou's back. The warbles grow there until early summer then break through the skin and drop to the ground.

For *Double Coat*, I reassemble two vintage skidoo jackets to create a quadrupedal form, four legs with four missing hooves to describe the beginning steps of prepping the animal skin. This step leads to the animal skin being dehaired and defleshed. Without knowing it at the time I have metaphorically referenced Caribou's body through mimicking it through this double skidoo coat. Caribou have a fuzzy layer that sits on their skin, and this keeps them dry as they traverse rivers and snow filled valleys. In addition, they have an outer layer of hollow hairs that are able to trap air in each strand. This helps insulate them during cold winters. Bound through the love that stitchwork suggests, I adorned Caribou's Double Coat's with embroidery threads, beads, and pearls to mimic the parasite embedded within its skin. This stitchwork describes and amplifies Caribou's incredible resiliency and adaptation to this infectious disease. Warble fly is a name given to the genus *Hypoderma* which are large parasitic flies that can affect cattle and deer. (iNaturalist Canada. (n.d.)) In northern Canada, this parasite can affect the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Barren ground caribou herds that live in northern Saskatchewan, Alberta,

Manitoba, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. Warble flies impact the wellbeing of a caribou by affecting their behaviour, physical condition, and pregnancy rates, but rarely do Caribou die from this insidious disease. For Double Coat, I was interested in acknowledging a tension within the work that speaks to how Indigenous bodies and lands are in perpetual resistance to colonial violence. Just as the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Barren ground caribou herds are adapting to climate change and surviving parasites such as the warble fly, I am reminded of the incredible resilience and adaptation of the Denesųłiné. I am inspired by our ingenuity, and knowledges that are born from land and that continue to persist even in the face of colonial extraction, dispossession, and exploitation. My research opens up a space for Dene resistance and resilience to be alongside of Caribou resistance and resilience. This is an important consideration, and result, when practicing stitch-work as a methodology for creating, and contributing to Dene futures.

Figure 20

Parasitic flesh mimicked using beads, threads, and wool (detail)

This is how Stitch-work honours the warble fly larvae. I insert a zipper down the spine of the animal to reveal the parasitic flesh within. I want to honor its story of Caribou survival by making visible the warble fly larvae imbedded within its body. This body that carries an invader for miles, crossing territories and tundra. This work tells a story of Caribou reciprocity, inter-connectedness, and transformation. Stitch-work as a methodology, informed and strengthened by story work, opens up a possibility of the Dene and Caribou interspecies-ness that has inspired this research creation. I think about the transitioning of a human coat to an animal skin in *Double Coat* and am reminded our Denesųłiné origin story of Erakali.

Research Question: **What if I am caribou? What does it mean to survive as Caribou? How is this story told?**

This exhibition, and written master's thesis, is called: Caribou-being beyond the Boreal

> You cannot remove the Denesųłiné from the landscape. We are part of the ecosystem, along with the fish, water, rocks and animals. We are guardians, we watch over the land because the land watches over us. We have formed a relationship with the land and water over thousands of years. Land and water are the essence of Denesųłiné culture. (The Athabasca Denesųłiné Traditional Council, 2020)

There are many contributing factors to the decline of caribou populations to communities in more recent years. For this section of the written research, I focus on extraction. Within the work titled, *Caribou-being beyond the Boreal*, stitch-work is linking capitalism to genocide. The erasure of Caribou from Denesųłiné territories is the erasure of both Caribou and Denesųłiné sovereignty. This erasure is a reinforcement of a settler-colonial presence on the land, in our creative practices, and affects our ability to be present to Dene Futures. It negates centuries old knowledge that has survived violent dispossession because of the colonial project. The land remembers. Caribou also remembers.

Woodland Caribou are known as an umbrella species because they help ensure the survival of the boreal forest. Their nutrient rich droppings help nourish the forest floors and they serve as prey for many carnivores such as bears, wolves, eagles, wolverines and lynxes. (David Suzuki, 2025)

Over the latter half of the last century, Caribou populations in Canada have suffered steady losses due to loss of habitat from rapid industrial expansion including oil and gas, forestry, coal mining, and oil sands mining. Boreal caribou are sensitive to activities associated with oil and

gas exploration and extraction, particularly the cutting of seismic lines through the forests in which the caribou live. Today, many of the 15 remaining herds in Alberta are on the decline, near extirpation, or local extinction. (Foster et al., 2024) Human disturbance through the industrial development of oil, gas, timber, and peat in Alberta has resulted in loss and fragmentation of caribou habitat. ("Caribou: Mountain and Woodland.", 2025)

Figure 21

Caribou-being beyond the Boreal (video still)

As I continue my master's research, I reflect on another Dene story. Elder Jimmy Deranger's testimony powerfully communicated the extent and significance of the area that Dënesųłiné people consider their homeland and territories, and the deep connection the Dene have always had to it:

> So that land is a huge, huge land, and it was Dënesųłıné land. And the Dënesųłıné people then, wherever they were, when people died, that's where they buried them, on the land . . . the Elders were saying that the land was made with Dene blood. And so, we asked how? They said, "wherever the Dene were traveling, wherever they died, they buried the people, and that blood went back into the land." That's how the Dene land is recognized today. Because it was made by Dene blood wherever the blood went back into the land, all over the land. And [the Elders] were saying that the Dene people, the caribou, and the wolf are one person. And that's how the Dene people recognize themselves today in Dene lands. That's why they have a strong attachment to the land. (Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation et al., 2023)

I think about what is means to be a Caribou-person honouring the inter-species-ness as I create the video performance work ***Caribou-being beyond the Boreal.*** For so long I felt outside my community, outside of extended family relationships, outside my mother's tongue. Stitch-work helps me to transform this. Now, this research helps me to reconsider the earths vibrations as I extend my body as part of Caribou territory. I wonder in acknowledgement of my own caribou-ness, *how does the ground feel different with four feet on the ground? How do I feel differently?*

I felt guided to retrace my own migration patterns and returned home to the boreal's cold winter in Choiceland, Saskatchewan during what humans call 'Christmas holidays'. As I flew across the prairies, overtop of the demarcations of farmland, I think how Sky has witnessed dispossession and displacement from above. Sky who has witnessed the building and shaping of these capitalist building blocks. I think about how Caribou bodies are an extension of land and how deeply their

bodies have felt this capitalist violence. I think about how my Caribou family must have felt experiencing these transgressions to body and homelands, and how they continue to persist, resist, and return. Caribou can travel up to 4800 kilometres a year, and every year barren-ground herds return to the same calving grounds to give birth. Their bodies remember. My body remembers.

My brother Anthony and I pack up our tools to make this performance artwork and drive north. We head towards our childhood farm north of Choiceland. We ponder the ways and sites we want to capture with the drone footage knowing that we have limited time. We arrive to an area surrounded by farming homesteads. At first, we are hesitant to let our Indigenous bodies be known to this location for fear of what one may call racial repercussions of 'natives' trespassing. This is a very real awareness. No sooner than later, a local farmer approaches us and offers up "his land" for our filming needs. We both breathe a sigh of relief. Now racing against the clock, and due to my forgetfulness, my sister Kristina drives the twenty minutes north to meet us with the drone cable that I forgot to pack. My sister becomes Anthony's eyes as he multitasks learning to maneuver the drone for the first time. For the performance, I walk out to the middle of the snowy field and begin to trudge through the knee-high snow, towing a hand-made sled that my dad so graciously built for this performance. I have only one try given the drone's limited battery charge. I begin my Caribou Walk after piercing holes in the fake blood bags that were resting in the sled. These bags are filled with dyed water, made to mimic Caribou's blood. I draw out the Dene word for *Caribou* in the snow, using my body as the drawing tool and the fake blood as ink.

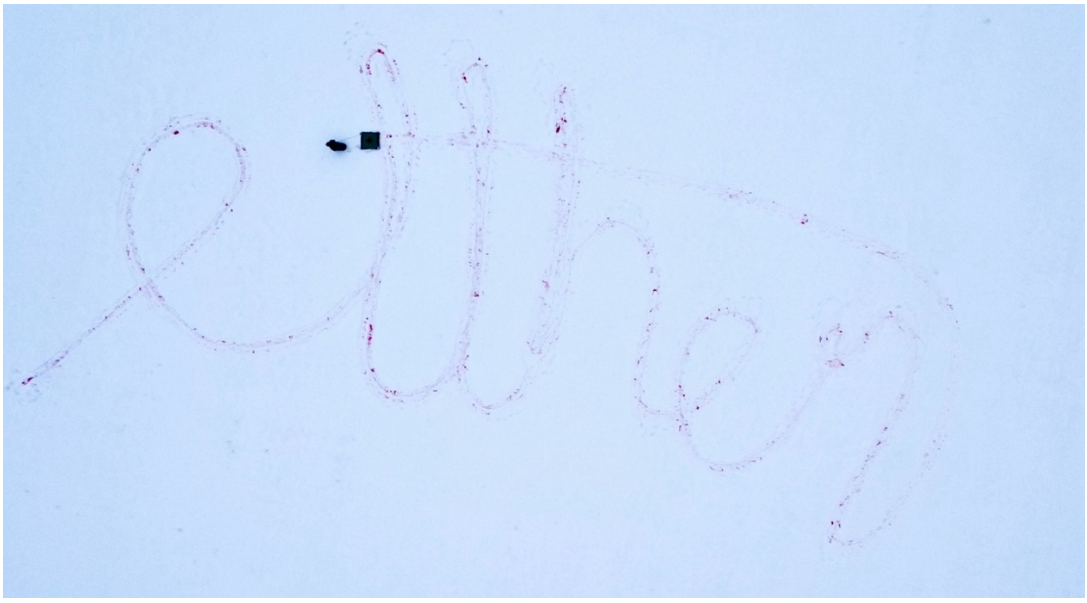
> Caribou have been around since the ice age and have evolved to withstand cold winter environments. Their bodies, for instance, are compact, with short tails and ears, to reduce the amount of heat that can escape. Their short muzzles are also able to warm and cool air as they breathe in and out, helping them regulate their body temperatures. (David Suzuki, 2025)

I begin my walk and immediately realize the intense labour required to complete this action. My breathing labours. My anxiety builds feeling the pressure of limited time. My body can only move so fast and the sled that I'm dragging gathers snow through its meshed underbelly making it more difficult to pull. At the completion of the second letter my siblings yell out "you're at fifty percent!" I rally to complete what I started and continue. I'm counting letter four, letter five, then six. My lungs feel like they are bleeding. The sixth and final letter is drawn, and I announce to my siblings "I'm going to cross the t's and then die!"

The cold air is piercing my lungs, and my body is sweating. The exhaustion is intense. I barely complete the final marking and my body collapses. Almost instantly after collapsing to my metaphoric death I find myself unexpectedly sobbing. I am thinking about my mom, her incredible strength. I'm thinking of matriarchal knowledge and Caribou power. I'm thinking of my grandparents and their brilliance. I'm thinking of the land and how the land holds me so tenderly in this moment. I eventually walk back to my siblings to give them a hug and make a tobacco offering to the land. I am forever changed in my research, in my Caribou beingness. I am Caribou. My body remembered.

Figure 22

Caribou-being beyond the boreal (video still)



We all gather back home to watch the footage with my parents and share the story of our day. I am proud to present our hard work and my parents are equally invested. My parents watch the full 15-minute-long unedited video with excited commentary, but I also notice my mom is non-verbal nearly the entire length of the video. The last frame plays and the drone climbs to new heights revealing the word in the snow, it spells E-t-t-h-e-n, Etthén, Caribou in our language. My mom stands up with a huge smile on her face and proclaims, "I am proud to be a woman!!" Almost instantly she restates, "I am proud to be Denesųłiné!" A few days later before jumping in a vehicle to head back on my flight to Tkaronto, I ask her, "mom would you want to walk with me if I were to reshoot this". She smiles and says, "oh, okay!" In this moment my body feels more whole, and I consider the thought that maybe two more feet were missing the whole time. Caribou is a family moving together. I think back to the farmer "lending" us his land and smile knowing it has always been Caribou territory. I think about the permanency of etching blood into

snow that melts into the land, and how my powerful Caribou body weakened but never quit pulling collective wisdom in a forward motion. I am Caribou.

Research question: **How might un-stitching and re-constructing materials aid in storying my urban Indigenous identity and speak to innovation and hybridization? How might hybridization as a method of making story family narratives and speak to Indigenous futurism?**

Caribou Dreamin'

Figure 23

(Laiken, B. Installation image of Caribou Dreamin', April 2025)

(Note: 2025, 72" x 66" x 60", Vintage Skidoo coats, Caribou hair, Swarovski crystals, embroidery thread, ric rac)

“Indigenous storywork opens up the world of dream and allows ancestral wisdom and voice to ripple through and take shape in story.” (Smith et al., 2018)

I dream of a cosmic Caribou dance, a moment where past, present, and future Caribou energies are pulled together. I ruminate on all the knowledge that Caribou has gifted me throughout this research. Us Caribou, we hold time immemorial within us and are capable of teleporting to places beyond these bodies.

The first story that informs this last and final work, *Caribou Dreamin’*, is inspired by a visit with my older brother Anthony. Like many of Anthony’s stories, they include our Setsiye. My brother’s formulative years were spent traversing the land and water near Patuanak, learning from our grandpa Eugene. The story he shares travels by Skidoo as Anthony recalls the 70’s Skidoo coats I have been so enamoured with throughout this research, in particular, the black and yellow bomber style coats that teleport me into my parent’s photo albums. He described that after a day of hunting with grandpa his wrists were frozen from the half-melted chunks of snow clung to the accordion-like texture of his coat cuffs. Anthony’s story ends with a description of hanging his coat from the hook behind the door of my grandparent’s home to let dry near the woodstove.

Figure 24

Caribou Dreamin’ snow covered cuff (detail)

The second story that informs this work, *Caribou Dreamin'*, is one shared by my sister Kristina as we sit on blue Tarp together and unstitch a Skidoo coat. Through the reconstructive methods so central in my research, I began to reimagine what these new coat pieces could become. As new shapes emerged through this deconstructing method, I pondered the ways that Caribou problem solves and safeguards in protection of itself and its herd. I reimagined these Skidoo coat pieces being stitched together into the protective blanket being described in my sister's stories.

Figure 25

My sister Kristina and I unstitching Skidoo coat

Kristina's stories were specific as she fondly recalled time on the rez spent with our Setsuné and Setsiye. She described being pulled in a toboggan at night under a blanket of stars. She was just a small child and yet can vividly describe the warmth of this moment with blankets wrapped around her amidst the crisp northern air. Her last story ends with this description...*I remember feeling that if the world was to end, the safest place would be tucked under the blankets in-between grandma and grandpa*.

I explore embodiment in this work *Caribou Dreamin',* and center Caribou's body as living archive. I remember my imagined vision for this piece, a 'cosmic dance'. I envisioned a galaxy of cosmic time suspended within a blanket of stories. I imagined a meeting moment between Denesųłiné, Caribou and Ancestor worlds. With this vision in mind, I decided to stitch these newly deconstructed Skidoo coat sections together in the formation of a Skidoo dress. I imagined it hung from the ceiling in a sweeping motion, with its arms outstretched, as if reaching for something, someone. I hoped this dress could contain a weightlessness, like a dream. If worn on the body, I hope to feel an indescribable beauty. I hope for all past, present and future Caribou to

feel warmth and protection in this dress as they traverse Caribou territories through Caribou time. I hope it can be Caribou medicine.

Reflections

This masters research centers Denesųłiné dress practices as living knowledge. Inspired by my late Setsuné's incredible talent of garment making and adornment, I continue to create embodied work that charts the love stories of my community and family. I'm excited to continue exploring assemblage as a method in creating new visual languages that speak to Denesųłiné futurisms.

I have come to understand the deep responsibility I have to my community to reflect relational accountability in my research. Guided by transformative beingness, I consider how the language of storytelling shapes the collectiveness I am hoping to describe. It becomes essential for me to always consider that the story's context is not removed from its narrative. I have realized it's essential that the narrative is living, and that the visual language becomes the story of my hearing stories. Through this research I have become increasingly aware of how important the ***telling*** of my research is.

Figure 26

Caribou-being beyond the Boreal (exhibition installation)

As I look to the wholeness of this exhibition, I am deeply grateful. As I see these works installed together, I can visually see my migration. This new material language found through assemblage plants my own story within these family stories. This research and new visual language have helped root my being-ness. As I continue to chart dialogues that explore inter-species-ness and inter-related-ness, I've been made aware of the responsibility I carry to center non-human agency in my research and creation. I have Caribou to thank for guiding me to help answer my research questions:

1. **How can Indigenous storywork make me feel more at home in my own body, how does it care for me?**

2. **How might un-stitching and re-constructing materials aid in storying my urban Indigenous identity and speak to innovation and hybridization? How might this hybridization method help explore family narratives that speak to Indigenous futurism?**

3. **What if I am caribou? What does it mean to survive as Caribou? How is this story told?**

Dear Etthén

You have taught me so much about my own survival. I have my herd to thank for my beautiful story.

You have taught me that our inter-relatedness keeps my feet more solidly planted. I have learned to feel the land differently.

You have taught me that being an urban Caribou-person is profound. This inter-relationship stitched new language that helped close old wounds.

You have taught me how to move forward; that my inter-species-ness stories myself in new ways.

You have taught me how to care for my body to feel more whole. This brought me home to myself.

I am forever grateful. Mahsi Cho. Neghanighita.

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