

# Indigenous Fashion: A Genealogy of Material Brilliance

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**Abstract** • Indigenous fashion encompasses the aesthetic plurality of Indigenous material brilliance, innovation, and resilience. Because of this, Indigenous fashion cannot be singularly defined, nor should it be. Situated within this frame of thought, this article tells a story informed by the author's own relationship to Indigenous fashion practice within the context of Turtle Island (North America), alongside and in conversation with the words, ideas, and inquiries of decolonial and Indigenous fashion thinkers, makers, and dreamers. The article begins by critically engaging with the epistemological nature of fashion as a term and concept tied to settler-colonial power and capitalism. Subsequently, the paper discusses Indigenous fashion as a gift from spirit, as keeping our Ancestors' hands warm, and as wearing our homelands, alongside honouring the innovative qualities of Ancestor and grandmother fashion designers who laid the foundation of Indigenous fashion design theory and process. Identifying the ways in which Indigenous fashion embodies Indigenous epistemology, ontology, and cosmology, the article concludes by situating Indigenous fashion as a material bridge that re-stitches Indigenous bodies back to land.

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## INTRODUCTION

“There is no one way to define Indigenous fashion,” said Amber-Dawn Bear Robe (2023), curator, art historian, contemporary Indigenous fashion show director/producer, and fellow panelist during the *Fashion Futurities* panel at the Textiles Museum of Canada in November 2023. Indigenous fashion encompasses the aesthetic plurality of Indigenous material brilliance. Because of this, Indigenous fashion cannot be singularly defined, nor should it be. Situated within this frame of thought, this article is written as a story informed by my own relationship to Indigenous fashion practice alongside and in conversation with the words, ideas, and inquiries of decolonial and Indigenous fashion thinkers, makers, and dreamers. Honouring the reflexivity, fluidity and non-linearity of Indigenous storywork as methodology (Archibald, 2008), the article makes space for personal story, poetry and poetic prose, and expressive forms of writing integrated and intertwined throughout. As a guiding thread, I’ve chosen to lean into conversation with the embodied material theory and practice of Indigenous fashion, specifically within the context of Turtle Island<sup>1</sup> (North America), in relation to how we come to know and be. As an Indigenous body, specifically a Halfbreed<sup>2</sup> body, who creates garments as a way to understand the world around them, exploring Indigenous fashion in material terms is the best way for me to expand it, understand it, and contribute to a definition of it.

My story begins by expanding and stretching the possibility of Indigenous fashion as a fashion practice, critically engaging with the epistemological nature of fashion as a term and concept tied to settler-colonial power and capitalism. I lay out my thinking in relation to existing fashion theories and concepts such as decolonial fashion discourse (Jansen, 2020), fashion and materiality (Jenss and Hofmann, 2019), and defashion (Niessen, 2020) that gesture an unsettling of fashion as a Western phenomenon and help me situate Indigenous fashion within its own theoretical pathway. Situating Indigenous fashion within its own world, I continue my story by honouring the innovative qualities of our<sup>3</sup> Ancestor and grandmother fashion designers who laid the foundation of Indigenous fashion design theory and process across Turtle Island. With this dialogue, I hold space to learn from the material knowledge held in their work that has been passed down to us through time and space. Subsequently, I discuss Indigenous fashion as a gift from spirit, identifying the ways in which Indigenous fashion embodies ancestral knowledge and worldview. I conclude my story by proposing a definition of Indigenous fashion that re-stitches Indigenous bodies to land and refuses settler-colonial displacement of Indigenous ontologies and bodies to place.

<sup>1</sup> Turtle Island is a name used by Indigenous community when referring to what is now known as North America. The term is rooted in Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee creation stories, honouring Indigenous cosmologies and ontologies.

<sup>2</sup> Other terminology I use to situate my positionality with respect to my Indigeneity is Aabitaawikwe, Bois Brûlé and Wiisaakodewikwe. To read more about my relations, please visit: <https://www.justinewoods.com/i-am-a-body-of-complexities>.

<sup>3</sup> My positioning of the word *our* throughout this article is situated in relation to Indigenous kin across Turtle Island. *Our* thus refers to all Indigenous Ancestors who have come before us and honours all future Indigenous Ancestors who will come after us.

## RE-MEMBERING FASHION

I've always believed our Ancestors to be the original fashion designers. A belief that acknowledges an existence of fashion before capital-F *Fashion*—before falling to the hands of the West and linking to a system of colonial power and capitalism disseminated through European imperialism and globalism (Slade and Jansen, 2020).

It is important for me to begin this conversation by thinking expansively about Indigenous fashion as a fashion practice and critically question fashion's epistemological nature.

Does fashion, as a word and concept that “continues to be associated with the upper end of a dualistic conception of culture” (Niessen, 2020, p. 862), take care of Indigenous bodies? Our bodily autonomy? Our ontology? Our spirit? Is defining Indigenous fashion as a fashion practice capable of upholding the values and meanings held within every stitch, every bead, every hand, and every heart of our grandmothers, aunties, cousins, and kin? Is there perhaps a more appropriate way of defining our garment-making and clothing practices grounded in our own language(s)? Through community? Through ceremony? I don't expect to come to a complete answer to these questions as this is something that needs to be collectively—*community*—considered; however, thinking deeply about fashion as a term and as a concept opens up the opportunity to (re)define Indigenous fashion on Indigenous terms.

Fashion as a concept “has been historically allied with the idea of modernity and progress as a unique feature of Western ‘civilization’: a narrative that effectively aided in the construction and self-perception of the West as superior and more advanced than ‘the rest’” (Jenss and Hofmann, 2019, p. 3). Niessen (2020) reminds us how German sociologist and social philosopher, Georg Simmel, “saw fashion as a signal and expression of European superiority,” (p. 862) promoting a definition foregrounded by settler colonialism and in direct opposition against the Other. Simmel's conceptualization of fashion is based upon a temporal structure of rapidly evolving style and aesthetic, with any form of dress existing in contrast to this considered as *non-fashion*. This classification is a direct weaponization against Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, bodies, and lands, in which Niessen (2020) has theorized as *fashion sacrifice zones*: “dress traditions and their makers associated with fashion's Other half, that are destroyed for and by the expansion of industrial fashion” (p. 865). If fashion's definition has been conceptualized to inflict violence against the Indigenous body, can it be situated in such close proximity to Indigenous ways of making, dressing, and adorning the body?

To think expansively about this, I look towards Fashion Studies scholars such as M. Angela Jansen (2020) and her writing on decolonial fashion discourse; the work of Heike Jenss and Viola Hofmann (2020) and their call to re-think fashion in material terms; the work of Sandra Neissen (2022) and her manifesto on defining *defashion*. Indigenous fashion is decolonial fashion discourse in practice. Our Ancestors have engaged in decolonial ways of fashioning the body for hundreds of years (Cheang et al., 2022). Jansen (2020) discusses decolonial fashion discourse as a “radical redefinition of fashion by delinking it from modernity—the very core of its constitution—and therefore from coloniality by redefining it as a multitude of possibilities—in and outside of modernity—rather than a normative framework falsely claiming universality” (p. 817). Decolonial fashion discourse offers a critically informed framework to resist and refuse the dominant fashion system’s role in upholding oppressive social structures that privilege heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism, and makes space to dream alternative worlds generated and built by our own pathways toward liberation. Decolonial fashion discourse prompts a new definition of fashion that includes other ways of fashioning the body that exist outside of modernity, making space for Indigenous fashion to be celebrated as a fashion practice outside of colonial thought (Jansen, 2020). Jansen shares with us: “decolonial fashion discourse is not about including other fashioning systems into contemporary fashion history, acknowledging them as contemporary fashion and assimilating them into the canon of contemporary fashion’s Euroamerican normativity, but about restoring, revaluing and acknowledging a diversity of ways of fashioning the body as well as their histories, genealogies and esthetics” (p. 825).

Jenss and Hofmann (2020), in response to dominating Eurocentric discourses in the field of fashion studies that manifests itself in a binary of fashion vs. clothing/dress, suggest a need to consider fashion in material terms. They suggest: “In order to further help unsettle such binaries, we advocate a need to think of fashion in material terms, and not just as a concept, belief, or value that is temporarily attached to clothing, but more broadly as material culture that is embedded in time and place in various ways, as a substantial part of human experience and everyday practice” (p. 4). Jenss and Hoffman’s theorizing is informed by unpacking the root of the word fashion pointing to an understanding of fashion as a practice that gives shape, tying the term to a material domain. In this sense, the authors suggest that “we have to see fashion and material/lity not as separate entities but as interdependent or intimately entangled, since fashion, if understood as form or form-giving (fashioning), shapes material—such as fibers and fabric or bodily matter—and vice versa” (p. 7). Jenss and Hofmann also identify how material has been historically positioned in contrast to the spiritual, gesturing a division between mind and body informed by Western ways of thinking. Decolonial modes of fashion, such as Indigenous fashion, break down this binary between the material and the spiritual—mind and body. For example, hide dresses made on the Plains and Plateau include design details such as placing the tail of the deer on the dress yoke, acknowledging the dress is made from a living animal “whose life force continues to resonate even after it has been transformed for human use” (Berlo, 2007, p. 98).

I appreciate Niessen's (2022) manifesto on defashion which prompts a "shift away from the current homogenized global Fashion system towards a clothing pluriverse: a multiplicity of clothing systems, constructed for and by specific cultural and physical environments" (p. 441). The concept of defashion is an expansive way to think about the ways in which Indigenous fashion can be defined as a fashion practice, or as Niessen is suggesting, a defashion practice. *Antifashion* is another term used by fashion scholars and designers prompting fashion alternatives. Situating antifashion as a philosophy, Pappas (2011) shares: "Antifashion... presents itself as an alternative to fashion and a voice within fashion's discourse, and a philosophy that wants to know what fashion is should understand its available alternatives" (p. 143). There are some Indigenous designers today who choose to position their work as antifashion, in response to the ways in which Indigenous design and making practices do not fit within capital-F Fashion frameworks. The theorization of concepts such as defashion and antifashion are helpful as they gesture a delinking—an opening up of an autonomous space where fashion can remove itself from its colonial parent. I hold the utmost respect for decolonial fashion scholars and Indigenous designers who have engaged with these terms to mobilize decolonial gestures that challenge Eurocentric fashion paradigms. However, I worry how these terms perpetuate continual fragments of Othering through the use of dualistic terminology (fashion vs. defashion) similar to that of fashion vs. non-fashion. Because of this, these gestures continually exist within a binary that places Indigenous garment-making and dress practices in continual relation/opposition to whiteness. I think this is important to consider thoughtfully and with care.

I find comfort in Niessen's (2020) statement that non-fashion is a symptom of colonial thought. I believe our Ancestors deserve to have their work considered as fashion. This is important to me because of the ways Indigenous fashion and dress have been historically discussed and defined through a Western anthropological lens, diminishing fashion's plurality. Indigenous fashion helps us to think about fashion within pluriversal means. Within this understanding we can re-articulate and re-situate fashion to an alternative standard that has the capacity to love and care for more than just one fashion world.

If we are re-stitching alternative worlds that exist outside of the colonial, I believe fashion still has a place—a home. The remainder of this article welcomes fashion to its new home.

Indigenous fashion is an act of re-membering (Absolon, 2022; Smith, 2023) and of bringing hearts home (Mattes, 2021).

A re-membering of fashion that transgresses its colonial definition

A re-membering of our Ancestors' work as material embodiments of fashion existing  
before fashion was colonized

A re-membering of hands of bodies of knowledge of love

A re-membering that shape shifts

A re-membering that worlds new worlds

## ANCESTOR INNOVATORS

Indigenous fashion is a material embodiment of Indigenous creative brilliance, innovation and resilience. I want to make space to honour the deep fashion design thinking, process, and theory that our Ancestors and grandmothers have carried through time and space in their making practices. I also want to make space to honour the “grandmother-pieces” (Scofield, 2023) themselves by learning from the teachings they share with us through their existence, aesthetics, assembly and construction, and how these teachings are reflected in Indigenous fashion today. To do this, I am grateful to bring into conversation the research and words of Sherry Farrell Racette (2004, 2023), Gregory Scofield (2023), Adolf Hungrywolf (2003), Marcia G. Anderson (2017), Emil Her Many Horses (2007), Colleen Cutshall (2007), and Janet Catherine Berlo (2007).

Her Many Horses (2007) reminds us how Ancestor fashion designers “incorporated new materials into their lives long before the arrival of Europeans in North America,” where “intertribal networks supplied [makers] with highly prized goods such as dentalium shells, elk teeth, beads made from shells, and paints, which they used to ornament dresses or trade as goods” (p. 24). With the introduction of European trade materials, Ancestor designers engaged with new tools such as steel needles and included new materials such as glass beads and woolen cloth as part of their design process. Ancestor fashion designers upheld an important recognition in maintaining ancestral techniques and aesthetic knowledge, while simultaneously responding and adapting to shifts in material access through new interactive zones—the influx of European materials through trade versus the destruction of Indigenous materials through settler-colonial greed. In these interactive zones, clothing “evolved along circular rather than linear paths” with the “adoption of imported cloth and clothing [co-existing] with the persistence of ancient garment forms and the development of new forms that combined aesthetics, techniques and materials” (Farrell Racette, 2004, p. 64). Her Many Horses (2007) expands on this related to Indigenous women’s dressmaking:

“When introduced to woolen cloth by European traders, women used it only sparingly on dresses. Later when hides became less available due to the decimation of animal herds by Euro-American hunters and the lack of hunting opportunities caused by the confinement of tribes to reservations, cloth—which had become more plentiful—was used to make dresses that resembled those of hide, could be decorated in much the same way, and were easier to make.” (p. 27)

Our Ancestors moved fluidly with these shifts, creating garments imbued with new meaning yet still holding “the memory of hide in their basic cut and construction” (Farrell Racette, 2004, p. 68). They included intentional design details in the pattern making of their woolen dresses such as tapered side panels—producing a longer hemline at the sides—to “represent animal legs, a common feature of hide dresses” (Her Many Horses, 2007, p. 26). In addition, they embedded their own innovative and resourceful techniques such as using the undyed edge or “save-list” of wool yardage to decorate sleeve and bottom openings, a portion of fabric European tailors would usually discard (Her Many Horses, 2007). It is important to acknowledge that Ancestor makers “were not passive recipients of introduced goods; they exerted pressure through market demand and brought their own clothing traditions into the dialogue” (Farrell Racette, 2004, p. 69). Contemporary Indigenous fashion designers, such as Angela DeMontingny (Cree-Métis) and Amy Malbeuf (Métis), have reclaimed the use of hide at the centre of their work. Amy Malbeuf’s collection *Kahkiyaw Kikway (all of everything)*, presented at Indigenous Fashion Arts in 2022, pays homage to home-tanned hide, celebrating its significance as a material embodiment of labour and love within Indigenous communities. Through a body of six wearable artworks, Malbeuf honours ancestral design theory in a futuristic way, creating a collection that mixes “both practical and impractical elements of dress in order to simultaneously bridge and exaggerate the distance between utility and fantasy” (Indigenous Fashion Arts, 2022).

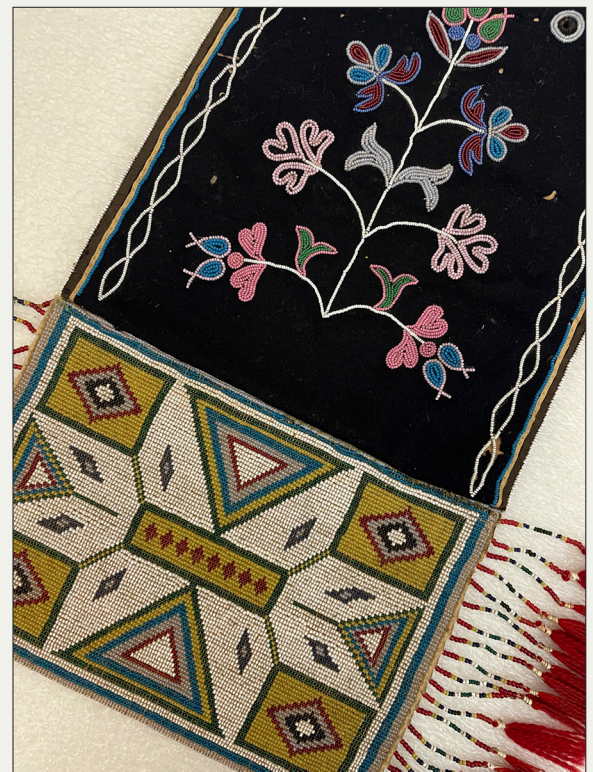
Belcourt with reference to Farrell Racette reminds us how “while techniques used in making Indigenous dress have been historicized, Métis fashions were always on the cutting edge of technology” (Lau, 2022, p. 2). A pivotal example of Indigenous innovation is the evolving hybrid aesthetic of Métis and Halfbreed fashions. As a unique aesthetic style originating from a distinct culture born out of a combination of movement and intermarriage, Métis fashions honour both ancient and new forms of Indigenous fashion theory and process (Farrell Racette, 2023). Farrell Racette (2004) identifies Métis dress as “relational, changing to negotiate a relative distinctness from First Nations and Europeans, a kind of middle ground” that has remained “consistent over time, blending and merging elements to create unique assemblages” (p. 308). Métis and Halfbreed Ancestors and grandmothers invented a new hybrid style of dress, visually identifying a distinct ethnicity that emerged at the seams of social and cultural interactive zones influenced by proximity, exchange, occupation, class, and materials (p. 64). The style presents a deep aesthetic influence in relation to Cree and Anishinaabe kin. An example of this is seen in a pair of sleigh mittens featured on pages 68–69 in Scofield’s (2023), *kôhkominauwak ocihciwâwa—Our Grandmothers’ Hands: Repatriating Métis Material Art*,

where “the band of cut ribbon work on the cuff indicates the Anishinaabek influence on Métis material culture, remembering earlier connections to the Great Lakes Region” (Farrell Racette, 2023, p. 14). In return, dynamic new forms of fashion influenced Cree, Anishinaabe, and Dene fashions, such as beaded cloth fire bags that “originated or were transformed by Métis makers and were later adopted by First Nations” (p. 13).

Indigenous innovation and evolution of visual aesthetics can be seen through the evolving patterns and styles of panel bags, fire bags, and the *gashkididaagan*, also known as the bandolier bag. A style of bag that is said to have originated from an imitation of American and European military ammunition pouches, the *gashkididaagan* has played an important role in Ojibwe trade, in dance as a component of regalia, as a marker of cultural identity and pride, and as an artistic accomplishment (Anderson, 2017). The *gashkididaagan* is also known as The Pony Bag as it was used in trade with the Lakota and Dakota, with one beaded bag equivalent to a pony (Anderson, 2017). Early forms of beaded *gashkididaagan* were embellished using a loom beading technique and contained “design elements or motifs [that] can be traced back to patterns realized using sinew, leather, quills, and other natural materials to creative simple lines in otter track, zigzag, and other repeating forms” (Anderson, 2017, p. 59). In later years the *gashkididaagan* saw a gradual stylistic evolution to floral imagery rendered in flat-stitch beading (also known as bead embroidery). This evolution and shift in beadwork technique and motif exemplifies an important moment of creative agency for Ojibwe makers. Anderson (2017) shares:

“The evolving motif imagery in loom-woven bags strongly suggests that the artists sought more freedom in rendering the kind and quality of the images they chose. While the grid restrictions by the warp and the weft of the looms worked well for the earlier geometric motifs, it limited the bead artists’ design creativity. Their efforts to incorporate floral motifs into woven work were a preview of the spot-stitch appliqué floral masterpieces to come.” (p. 51)

This is important to highlight as it indicates that Indigenous makers (both Ancestor makers and contemporary makers) who designed, crafted, and assembled these bags made their own choices about their designs, asserting Indigenous creative sovereignty (fig. 1). This is also important to recognize in relation to dialogue pertaining to the origins of floral imagery and motifs predominantly found in flat-stitch beadwork of the *gashkididaagan* and other beaded grandmother pieces.



**Figure 1** Detail of a panel bag made by a Nehiyaw Ancestor artist featuring both loom woven geometric beadwork and flat-stitch floral beadwork, circa 1880. Personally taken photo. Belonging currently at rest in the Bata Shoe Museum Collection, Toronto, Canada.

Ancestor beadworkers sought inspiration from the world around them, other Indigenous nations, quilt, rug, and bandana patterns, and European printed and embroidered textiles such as English chintz (Hungrywolf, 2003; Anderson, 2017; Farrell Racette, 2023).

Farrell Racette (2023) makes an important statement in her historical overview for *kôhkominawak ocihcîwâwa – Our Grandmothers’ Hands: Repatriating Métis Material Art*, stating: “Floral imagery predates the arrival of the Grey Nuns” (p. 11). This statement provides an alternative understanding of the development of floral beadwork—one that is deeply intertwined with landscape, geography, and movement. This statement also re-situates our Ancestor beadworkers’ creative autonomy by indicating the genesis of floral beadwork as an aesthetic development existing outside of environments of trauma such as Indian Residential Schools and Boarding Schools.<sup>4</sup>

## KEEPING HANDS WARM

Spending time learning with and from Ancestor garments has gifted me with a deeper understanding of the importance, value, and role of function related to Indigenous fashion. Indigenous fashion is rooted in taking care of the Indigenous body. At the heart of our Ancestor designers’ design thinking was a consideration and intention of keeping the Indigenous body warm, keeping the Indigenous body dry, keeping the Indigenous body safe, and keeping the Indigenous body alive. In a discussion on Norway House/ Norway House Style embroidery and beadwork, Prefontaine (2023), writer and researcher at the Gabriel Dumont Institute, shares a story about Arthur Beacham:

“Arthur Beacham was a “North Runner,” part of a two-member dogsled team that delivered the mail from Red River to Norway House in the wintertime. While the runners were flashy dressers, this jacket is practical. Its fringe keeps out moisture from the snow, leather trim surrounds the stitches, which keeps the wearer dry and offers protection from the wind, and its intricately-designed mink and caribou chest plate provides ventilation and keeps out drafts.” (p. 20)

<sup>4</sup> Indian Residential Schools were boarding schools for Indigenous children (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) funded by the Canadian government and operated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The aim of these schools was to eradicate Indigenous peoples as a cultural and political entity by assimilating the Indigenous body and spirit into Euro-Canadian culture. Similar schools operated across the United States of America and are known within an American context as Indian Boarding Schools.

This story gifts us important knowledge relating to the deep intentions of the design construction and material choices that sit at the heart of Indigenous fashion practices. Farrell Racette (2023) further emphasizes these intentions when discussing a pair of mittens worn by dog drivers, sharing how “silk embroidery was the chosen medium for garments worn outside for long periods of time” as “beads conducted cold, where layers of silk thread added warmth” (p. 14). Reading about these intentions was particularly sentimental to me because my great-grandfather, Albert Woods, and his brother were dog drivers. In the wintertime they would take the fish caught by families who lived at the Moon River from the mouth of the Moon to Parry Sound, Ontario, by dog sled to sell. A journal entry written by my late grandmother, Mary Woods, in 1979, shares that my great-grandfather said the journey would take 4 hours. I think about the garments worn by my great-grandfather during this time, the ways in which they were made to support his Halfbreed body on this journey, and how the design attributes were informed by the landscape and the surrounding world.

Indigenous fashion is about keeping my great-grandfather’s hands warm.

Indigenous fashion is about keeping my grandfather’s hands warm (fig. 2).

Indigenous fashion is about keeping my grandmother’s hands warm.

Indigenous fashion is about keeping each other’s hands warm.

Indigenous fashion is about keeping our future Ancestors’ hands warm.



**Figure 2** My grampa, David Woods, ice fishing on Davis Lake.

There is a relational understanding of and care for land that informs the assembly and construction of Indigenous fashion designs. Hungrywolf (2003) identifies how the desert landscape of Indigenous Nations in the Southwest influenced hard-sole moccasin designs to have separate soles made from a thicker hide to protect their feet from hot sands and sharp rocks. Ancestor fashion designers also used tying techniques to maximize body heat (Farrell Racette, 2004, p. 171).

## Land sits at the heart of material choices, reflecting a deep, spiritual relationship between the maker and the natural world.

Cutshall (2007) shares: “The relationship of these creators to the natural world is evident through the choice of materials... The spirit, bones, sinew, teeth, hides of animals such as deer, elk, and buffalo and quills of the porcupine are combined to create striking attire” (p. 65). This also extends into stitchwork and beadwork iconography and motifs. *Otter track* is one of the oldest line motifs found in Indigenous embroidery and beadwork techniques, consisting of “a double row of zigzag lines [forming] a series of two, three, or four diamonds that are interrupted by elongated hexagons” (Anderson, 2017, p. 58 (fig. 3)). The inspiration of this stitch originates from otter tracks in the snow. A similar beadwork pattern known as *mouse track* is distinctly found in Métis beadwork creating a small arrow-like beadwork pattern along each flower stem inspired by mouse tracks in the snow (fig. 4).



**Figure 3** Detail of a pair of leggings made by a Saulteaux Ancestor artist featuring *otter tracks* using transparent grey glass seed beads, circa 1890. Personally taken photo. Belonging currently at rest in the Bata Shoe Museum Collection, Toronto, Canada.

Cree-Métis artist and designer Jason Baerg embodies Cree cosmologies and kinship with land in his design process through his brand, Ayimach Horizons. Instead of following Western fashion seasons of spring/summer and fall/winter, Ayimach Horizons’ collections follow natural cycles of the earth: the Spring and Autumn Equinox and the Summer and Winter Solstices. Additionally, Baerg follows medicine wheel teachings to inform the colour palette, materials, and design attributes of the garments for each collection. For Ayimach Horizon’s 2023 Fall Equinox collection, *Sisopekinam: Medicines Lead Us Forward*, Baerg collaborated with Métis fibre and visual

artist Melanie Monique Rose, creating a collection informed by the red quadrant of the medicine wheel, honouring south, summer, and elemental forces of earth/metal. The collection consists of natural materials such as leather, silk, fur, horsehair, and cotton fibres featuring handmade botanical prints using Indigenous plants of the prairies and metallic accents informing the garments' surface and silhouette. Baerg shares: "By exploring medicinal plants' teachings, ceremonies, and transformative power, this collection spins an abstract narrative that invites us to enact our cultural intelligence, the sensuality of the land and everything red in the medicine wheel" (Ayimach Horizons, 2023). This love and care for the landscape, our non-human relatives, and our cosmologies, embodied in the design intentions and details found in our Ancestors' work and carried through to the present day, acknowledges Indigenous fashion's deep kinship with land.



**Figure 4** Detail of a pair of moccasins made by a relative of Ambroise Didyme Lépine, adjutant-general to Métis leader, Louis Riel. Featuring floral beadwork with *mouse track* details on the flower stems, circa 1880-1890. Personally taken photo. Belonging currently at rest in the Bata Shoe Museum Collection, Toronto, Canada.

## A GIFT FROM SPIRIT

Indigenous fashion is an embodiment of ancestral knowledge and worldview. Our epistemology, ontology, and cosmology as Indigenous peoples are held in the spirit of each bead we stitch and folded into the seams of each garment we make. Because Indigenous knowledges are spiritual and relation-based systems, we consider our material culture as objects with agency, animacy, and spirit. Our worldview is embodied through the maker as the one who makes our material culture "come to life" (Bushman Olsen quoted in Anderson, 2017, p. 118). Our worldview is also embedded in our intentions and activated through wear or use as Farrell Racette (2004) shares: "A piece of clothing or decorative item is only an object until it becomes animated through use or infused with memory and story" (p. 191). There is an important role that the Indigenous body plays in this equation as either the body of a maker or the body of a wearer of which I will discuss more in the next section. Indigenous fashion carries and transmits cultural knowledge from the past that guides us to live a good life in the present and move in ways that care for the future. Our worldview is embodied within Ancestor and grandmother fashion designs that we can listen to and learn from. When writing *kôhkominawak ocihcîwâwa—Our Grandmothers' Hands: Repatriating Métis Material Art*, it was important to Scofield (2023) to ask "the grandmother-pieces themselves to guide and educate [him]," giving

agency and autonomy to the materials, aesthetics, and construction techniques, to be teacher (p. 4). Berlo (2007) expands on this in a context of Indigenous women's dress:

“Maintaining a connection to ancestral ways of knowing, and embodying that knowledge through proper relationships with relatives and with the natural world, continues to be important to Native people today. Making and wearing ceremonial dress is a literal embodiment of ancestral knowledge. Women's dress encapsulates information about the world of animals (how to skin a deer and tan its hide; how to pluck, dye, and shape porcupine quills into ornament) and exemplifies the web of relationships among relatives.” (p. 97)

Indigenous fashion is a gift from spirit. We know this when we look towards our language in relation to our materials. Language situates our worldview and embodies how we know and be in the world (Little Bear, 2000; Young, 2017). The English translation for *manidoominens*, bead in Anishinaabemowin, is “little seed that's a gift of the spirit” (Anderson, 2017, p. 41). Farrell Racette (2004) shares how “the Cree adopted blue stroud and named it *manitouwaggan* or “spirit cloth” because of the physical properties that enable it to wick moisture and dry without warping or hardening” (p. 86). These examples not only exemplify the important ways in which language is deeply intertwined with Indigenous materials and making, but also presents an understanding of our materials and making as something that is deeply spiritual and sacred. In Lakota worldview, it is known for one to sing “something sacred wears me,” referring to the ways in which the wearing of sacred garments facilitates a relationship where the sacred wears the individual in reciprocity (Berlo, 2007, p. 102). In the context of Indigenous women's dressmaking, Berlo (2007) shares: “For many women, the skills used in making a dress are thought to be conferred from the spirit world” (pp. 101-102). If we consider our making practices as a form of material language tied to spirit, our language of making is a reciprocal and respectful gesture that communicates and shares love.

Love for our Ancestors

Love for our families

Love for land

Love for spirit

We communicate and share love with our Ancestors by “making a garment that recalls their deeds [and] the wearing of it...as an occasion to remember and recount their generosity of spirit” (p. 130). We communicate and share love with land by choosing to work with natural materials that have a high material vibration such as hide, wool, or linen—materials that will care for the land in return when their life cycle has come to an end (DeMontigny, 2023). We communicate and share love with our families through the incredible amount of beads we stitch onto the creations we make for them.

## WEARING OUR HOMELANDS

Settler-colonialism's main goal is to sever Indigenous bodies' relationship to land. Within settler-colonialism the occupation of land is equivalent to the occupation of the Indigenous body. This makes the acquisition of land most valued because of how "settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence" (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 5). This violence extends into clothing, playing a key role in the residential school system. Ottmann (2020) identifies that "[w]hile a depth of understanding of Indigenous dress theory was lacking amongst the men who set up the residential schools, they did know that by letting Indigenous dress remain, it would mean a failure to completely "civilize," which is why dress was stripped from the children entering these schools and replaced with Western-styled clothing" (p. 8). Sampson (2018) discusses making and wearing as "a means of uncovering embodied and bodily knowledge" (p. 61). Wearing clothing is thus a form of knowledge. It is an embodied practice that facilitates and produces relationships between our identities, our bodies, and the external world. Sampson further identifies how "[o]ur garments (both part of our 'body-schema' and other to them) afford us the capacity (both physically, psychically and socially) to traverse spaces and perform acts: our garments (and perhaps because of their capacity to alter our motility and nobility...) orientate us into the world" (p. 66). This is particularly important within an Indigenous worldview where everything is interconnected through relationships (Wilson, 2008).

## The clothing we wear allows us to mediate our relationships with the external world, mobilizing being in relation.

Garments are also "akin to a second skin: a two-sided surface, touching the body-self and the world" (Sampson, 2020a, p. 94). Being in relation to our clothing facilitates a reciprocal relationship between body and material, mobilizing a level of agency that extends beyond the surface of the body. This cyclical relationship carries the capacity to "affect deeply and effect change" (Sampson, 2020b, p. 65).

Indigenous Fashion = Indigenous Body Sovereignty

According to Entwistle (2015), "dress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them" (p. 7). With this understanding of dress, the clothes we wear support our bodies in feeling at home. Ottmann (2020) shares: "If culture is located on the body through dress and Indigenous culture is fundamentally linked to land, then land is also located on the body" (p. 8). The garments

of Wichi designer, Mawo, and their brand Wichilhenay, “made by the Wichi” in the Wichi language, represents a deep relationship between body, land, and fashion. The garments honour Wichi textile history “and its significance as a sacred element of community knowledge” (Indigenous Fashion Arts [IFA], 2022). Each piece of clothing is woven by hand using vegetable fibres from the designer’s homelands and is visually informed by the mountains, plants, and animals, found within these territories. Blending both traditional and contemporary aesthetics, the collection embodies a “care of nature,” honouring Wichi survival and worldview through a deep material collaboration between the Wichi body and land (IFA, 2022). Because Indigenous fashion embodies Indigenous epistemology, ontology, and cosmology, Indigenous fashion is a material bridge that reconnects Indigenous ways of being and knowing back to the Indigenous body and thus re-stitches Indigenous bodies back to land. Indigenous fashion gifts us with the ability to wear our home territories on our backs, even home territories that we have been displaced from.

Indigenous fashion is a refusal of settler-colonial displacement of Indigenous ontologies.

Indigenous fashion is a remembering of bodies to land.

Indigenous fashion is wearing our homelands.

## STITCHING WITH WALLEYE

kettle boils

hands covered in translucent jello

flour, salt, and crisco, not butter

melting between my tongue and glovers needle

i asked walleye their favourite colour

sky blue they said

walleye asked me about the callus on my left index finger

a cushion of labour of love i said

fingernails stained burnt

orange pekoe red rose

i asked walleye if they had another favorite colour

no said walleye then it wouldn't be my favourite

walleye said they have known me a long time

breathing a geography of my body

below a surface visiting swimming

i asked walleye where their home was  
beausoleil island they said  
at the fold of the sun's smile they said  
kettle boils ice melting water spilling  
stitching a part  
holding hands with the bay  
stitching together  
gently piercing new worlds into existence  
adorned by the currents  
hugging bodies to place and never letting go  
walleye asked me how I learned to stitch like that  
the water i said

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