

Stories Entwined: Healing through the Resilient Crafts of Weaving and Quilting

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Abstract

Art heals. Art protests. And it is through art that one often finds their voice. Canadian Indigenous history has a long tradition of art and craft as a space that represents their everyday life; it becomes a space of sustenance, a space that creates comfort as well as discomfort. What makes indigenous art and its practices stand out is their intense sense of community along with their unique traditions, styles, and symbols. With the advent of the pandemic and the discovery of the unmarked graves at a former residential school many initiatives came up where quilts were/are being sewed like *Quilt for Survivors* initiative, where quilts are being made to honour the residential school survivors, to show them that there are people who care. A way of sending a touch wrapped in the quilt when physical touch is restricted. Healing circles were shifted to Zoom due to the pandemic, where they gathered virtually to share stories, talk and sew. So, it isn't just about creating art but a space of storytelling as well. Other initiatives include *Women Are Sisters*, where a memory quilt was made to honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Women from various indigenous communities came together to share stories of trauma and abuse, and to empower themselves, and the quilts became a canvas of their resilience. Another crafting art, weaving, also talks about resistance through its patterns. A particularly interesting weaving practice, double-weaving by the Cherokee community, is significant in this regard; works and theories by well-known Indigiqueer artist Qwo-Li Driskill, and poems by Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta, also examine this craft as entwined with the lives and lived realities of Indigenous communities. This paper will focus on how creative arts, healing, and culture come together in Canadian Indigenous communities. The two creative practices this paper will mainly work on are weaving and quilting. It will talk about the various quilting initiatives that came up during pandemic and healing circles that were shifted to the virtual world, not particularly focusing on one indigenous community, moreover, stressing on how women from different indigenous communities came to quilt together, expressing an intense sense of sisterhood and resilience. It will also talk about the double weaving practice of the Cherokee community by looking at the craft as a metaphor for deciphering the politics of intersections amongst Indigenous and Indigiqueer people along with their stories of resilience. Overall, this paper will bring together both the creative practices and their patterns along with all its aesthetics and metaphors to talk about how art creates a space of sharing trauma, a space of bonding and healing, and in turn, stitches a story of resistance.

Keywords:

quilting,
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How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization? (Hooks, 1990, p. 15)

Drawing from Hooks' understanding of resistance as a practice, this essay asks: how do Indigenous quilting and weaving practices function as material forms of storytelling through which years and years of violence, cultural continuity, survival, and resistance are remembered and rearticulated? This essay argues that Indigenous craft practices should be understood not merely as artistic or domestic practices, but rather as embodied and material forms of storytelling that create spaces for remembrance and resistance. Through an examination of contemporary quilting initiatives responding to residential schools and violence against Indigenous women and girls, alongside Cherokee basketry and double-weaving practices, this essay demonstrates how textile practices can make histories of colonial violence visible while simultaneously sustaining Indigenous forms of community, memory, and cultural expression. Through this essay, we further suggest that healing in these contexts should not be understood as a completed or restorative state; rather, it is an ongoing, relational process through which trauma is remembered, articulated, shared, and carried collectively.

Existing scholarship on Indigenous craft practices brings forth several important points of departure for understanding Indigenous craft as a form of cultural and political production. Scholarship on Cherokee basketry, like Sarah H. Hill's (2002) *Weaving New Worlds* or M. Anna Fariello's (2009) *Cherokee Basketry*, situates basketry within the cultural knowledge and intergenerational practices of Southeastern Cherokee women. Works by Amanda Thompson (2020) are a crucial intervention in Indigenous studies; her discussion of Cherokee basketry extends this conversation by examining the basket as a site of colonial inscription, cultural renewal, and Indigenous resistance. Scholars have dealt with quilting and Indigenous visual sovereignty too; the work of Jolene Rickard (1995) further explains how artistic practices can engage in the articulation of Indigenous political presence. Building from this scholarship, this essay focuses more specifically on the relationship between these crafts and how they result in collective storytelling and healing, and also uses them as decolonial expressions, bringing scholarship on quilting and weaving into conversation while attending to the different historical and cultural contexts from which these practices emerge. As the authors are situated outside the communities discussed here, they approach these works through published indigenous scholarship, artists' statements, existing accounts, and critical work. They do not claim to fully capture the nuances of these practices; moreover, they situate our analysis within the knowledge and articulations by indigenous scholars, artists, and communities themselves.

May 2021 is an important juncture in Canadian indigenous history due to the unmasking of the 215 unmarked graves of indigenous children at a former residential school; and along with it came the history of years of trauma and abuse that steeped within the walls of these schools. They created a fractured and disintegrated sense of self, family, and home, which often led to the loss of speech and language. To honour the residential school survivors, Vanessa Génier, a member of the Missinabie Cree First Nation, who is also a quilter, came up with the thought to make quilts for them. Initially, she started with the aim of making 18 quilts that consist of 216 blocks honouring the 215 indigenous children, plus one. She took it to Facebook, asking her fellow quilters to join the cause, and a group was created named *Quilt for Survivors*, and within days it turned into a non-profit. Thousands of people joined; they started quilting for the residential school survivors. Génier says that to be able to give a piece of themselves to a survivor is something they found to be very comforting

(Baiguzhiyeva, 2021). It is through being motivated by Génier's initiative that various other quilting guilds joined the cause, like the *Kennebecasis Valley Quilting Guild*. Due to the advent of the pandemic, the quilting sessions were moved to the virtual world; it was through 'Zoom quilting sessions' that the quilters gathered, talked, shared stories, and created their quilts.

Quilts and the idea of different clothes being stitched together are often taken as a metaphor to show the multicultural character of Canada, which is fragmented but whole. The upper side of the quilt, as seamless as it might seem, has a knotted backside is something that must not be overlooked. The various quilting projects become a necessary intervention that exposes or becomes important documentation in exposing the knotted side of the Quilt/ Nation that otherwise remains concealed. Is it possible to read the quilts as texts? Why not.

Dr. Kristy Robertson (2009), in her essay, *Threads of Hope: The Living Healing Quilt Project*, talks about how the quilting projects can be a part of "feminist rethinking of quilts as emancipatory texts" (p. 87). In this regard, it is important to trace back and look at 2007, when the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement. In June 2008, with the apology to the former students at residential schools by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Alice Williams called for quilt blocks that reflect residential school experiences. The project was started to create awareness and to honour the courage of the residential school survivors, with the hope of healing. Quilting as a craft resided in the domestic spheres, which document the lives of people and their stories, which in turn creates a bigger picture of the nation. Quilting can be seen as an act of 'talking back' where talking might not always be verbal. As Tudor Cushman, Boise Peace Quilter, says, "The Quilt speaks truth to power" (Cushman, as cited in Elsley, 2006, p. 203).

Quilts, when created for a loved one, often give comfort, but there are times when these quilts create discomfort, the discomfort that is necessary to be felt. Initiatives like the *Living Healing Quilt Project* become an act of remembrance, an act of telling stories by sewing them, or initiatives like *Quilt for Survivors*, where a quilt resembles a warm hug sent to the survivors. The latter aims at showing the survivors that there are people who care, who think of them. While the former also honours the survivors, along with aiming at unearthing experiences of residential school, stories of trauma, and instances of abuse for people to know, also an act where the survivors come to terms with their own stories as well, often turning it into an act of healing. Healing, rather than being completed, is moreover a process. Quilting is naturally associated with the idea of comfort being sewed along with the warmth that feels like home. But this home is often not the space of comfort. While talking about domestic violence, Judge Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond says, "To First Nations people, the expressions, culture of violence, and domestic violence not only have their customary connotation of violence by men against women but also mean domestic (that is, Canadian State) violence against the First Nations" (Emberly, 2007, 35). Quilting projects like *Women Are Sisters* create an intimate space, a canvas of resistance; it becomes an act of agency in the part of the sewer as well. It depends on them what they want to represent, a conscious process of selection and elimination. Further initiatives like *Women are Sisters* came up, where indigenous and non-indigenous women met to share stories of their domestic abuse and to quilt their experiences in honour of the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. It becomes a space of healing for them, a space as the facilitator of the healing circle, Melanie Morrison, a Mohawk from Kahnawake, Que. says, "The women found solidarity and strength by being able to share in a secure place where they don't have to worry about being judged or backlash" (as cited in Ka'nhehsí:io

Deer, 2020). Healing circles play an important part in strengthening sisterhood, a sense of safe space for sisters in struggle to share stories of abuse, trauma, and everyday life. It becomes a space where women are heard, women's speech becomes important, and in turn, it becomes a space of creation. Indigenous memoirs like *We Who Walk the Seven Ways* by Terra Trevor show how Native women can become important sources of guidance and knowledge for each other, and the continued need for healing and having a sense of belonging. Trevor reflects on the women who entered her life after her aunt's death, writing,

After Auntie passed into the spirit world, other Native women came into my life, shaping me into the woman I am today. ...I loved the flow of these women in my life, the ones with the grandmother faces, walking the seven ways. How they made me laugh and told me the truth even when it was hard for me to listen. (Trevor, 2023)

In this regard, it is important to look at other crafting arts like Weaving, which talks about resistance through its patterns. Weaving has been a popular form of craft throughout various indigenous communities with a plethora of interesting practices, one such being the double-weaving baskets made by the Cherokee Community. Cherokees are famous for their basketry, and it plays a key role in their culture and livelihood. Baskets are treated as living things, as author and poet MariJo Moore says in *The Spirit of a Cherokee Basket* quoting from her Cherokee elder aunt, "When we weave a basket, it is held close to our body to impart our spirit into the basket. When you give a basket, you give a part of your spirit" (Moore, 2002, p. 25).

Historically, it was mostly the women who made baskets for their everyday work, starting with using them for collecting items, for storing purposes, and for various other ritualistic activities as well. The history and changes of Cherokee Basketry can be traced to decipher historical trajectories of practices and the nature of exchanges. With the signing of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, the Cherokees were forced to move to what is presently Oklahoma, and this move was called the 'Trail of Tears.' Given the situation where they had to start from scratch, sustenance became the concern. Most Cherokee women started making baskets in place of the inadequate household items. Apart from the responsibility of their families, Cherokee women wove, quilted, and looked for items to make baskets in this new, unknown territory. Due to the shift in geographical locations, the availability of materials changed, and that led to the change in techniques of basketry. Though they had to give up on their ancestral techniques, taking up a traditional art form at a time of crisis as an act of survival is in itself resilient. Baskets were sold, exchanged instead of food or other necessary items; they were gifted to strengthen kinships, and most importantly to preserve their culture. As Tuscarora art historian Jolene Rickard says, "even the most 'traditional' form, like basket weaving, is a demonstration of Indigenous renewal, survival, and political and environmental awareness" (Rickard, 2002, p. 145).

Shan Goshorn was one of the infamous Cherokee artists and weavers who used baskets as a tool to address the heinous crimes and injustices against indigenous people, mainly women. She named one of her baskets 'Sqaw', which drew attention to violence against indigenous women. It was through colonial contact that women who were previously respected as leaders were now seen as sexually promiscuous bodies and were referred to as 'Sqaw', a slur used to refer to indigenous women. The inner wall of the basket is painted red, which has the list of names of the murdered and missing indigenous women and the communities they belonged to. Some of these cases were either dissolved or were never investigated, thus bringing forth the utter fallacy on the government's part.

The double-woven baskets of Cherokees are used as metaphors for indigenous and indigiqueer people and their lives, starting from the theories and stories of indigiqueer

artist Qwo-li Driskill and poems and tales by Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta. Marilou Awiakta begins her book, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*, by saying, "This double-woven basket- this book of seed-thoughts- is for you, your family, and loved ones as it is for mine" (Awiakta, 1993, p. 1). She attests to her work as a double-weaved basket. She sees a pattern in her book; she says,

As I worked with the poems, essays, and stories, I saw they shared a common base—the sacred law of taking and giving back with respect, of maintaining balance. From there they wove around four themes, gradually assuming a double-sided pattern—one outer, one inner—distinct, yet interconnected in a whole. ... Reading will be easy if you keep the weaving mode in mind: over... under... over... under. A round basket never runs straight on. (Awiakta, 1993, p. 34)

Awiakta's book strongly refuses to separate the written word from the material practices through which knowledge is carried and shared; rather, she creates the book in such a way that it itself becomes a woven object, where different forms of stories, poems, and essays come together and braid themselves in a knot without losing their individuality. Just like the strands of a basket, Awiakta's every work gains meaning through its relationship to others. However, the process is not linear; it moves continuously "over... under" and back again, creating both a text and a material metaphor for the ways Indigenous knowledge can be further carried and passed on.

Indigenous artist Qwo-li Driskill, in their book *'Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory,'* focuses on the necessary re-reading of stories of colonialism and the importance of "(re)telling and (re)imagining" of asegi stories that Cherokees can work on by placing "gender and sexuality at the center of radical decolonial work" (Driskill, 2016, p. 7). Asegi means Queer, and Driskill offers to look at these queer stories as a way of expanding one's imagination and beliefs and "as an act of resistance to the erasures of asegi memories in imaginations of both colonizers and the colonized" (Driskill, 2016, p. 7). Driskill brings in the traditional craft of double weaving baskets as a metaphor for representing Cherokee Two-Spirit and Queer people. Driskill talks about the space of Two-spirit and Queer people through the double-woven baskets, which is unique in its style as it has one basket inside the other, creating a hidden space between the two. This in-between space, the signification of which is only known by the craftsperson, has the walls of heteronormative patriarchal gender binaries on both sides. This void is comparable to Bhabha's concept of third space, a potential site of articulation of indigenous resistance. Driskill brings in asegi stories from colonial times to reimagine them and interweaves them with history and theories.

Hooks talks about the politics of resistance and its interconnectedness with subjectivity. She points out the need for continuous struggle and the aspirations of resilience. Weaving and Quilting, thus, become resilient crafts in their own ways, be it the quilting initiatives that aim at unmasking trauma and abuse and that eventually aid the healing process, where a domestic art form acts as a powerful tool of resistance. Whereas weaving becomes a decolonizing tool used for renewal, survival, and as a metaphor to represent the living realities of the indigenous and indigiqueer people. The textile becomes the text, a blank canvas for the craftsman who quilts or weaves stories that are important to be heard. The pandemic saw a huge loss of work for artists, which led to economic challenges that, in turn, threatened the loss of culture. And in such challenging times, to cope with the hardships, various initiatives were taken virtually, starting from arranging online exhibitions to online healing circles.

Ultimately, a quilt or basket can survive the moment of its making, but its meaning is generated through the hands, memories, histories, and relationships that converge in its

production. This shifts the question from whether craft can represent resistance or healing to how making itself can become a form of cultural and political action. These practices examined here resist the distinction between art and life, object and process, archive and embodiment. The thread or the straw is significant precisely because it does not stand alone; its meaning depends upon what it touches, what it crosses, and what it helps to hold together.

Thus, art becomes a space for various kinds of indigenous articulations and to be free from ‘preconceived notions.’ And as Renate Eigenbrod, in her essay, ‘A Necessary Inclusion: Native Literature in Native Studies,’ says while talking about native literature says that it “is an expression of a cultural continuum contributing to Indigenous intellectual traditions and also a form of re-writing, a ‘dispelling of lies’ and therefore an articulation of empowerment” (Eigenbrod, 2010, p. 18). It is important to read indigenous art because of its lack of transparency, because it is not simply given to you without problematizing it. One needs to delve into the brushstrokes, the beads, the threads, the colours, the abstract form of the artwork, which will eventually aim at decolonizing one’s mindset and compel one to engage with it closely but again from a distance to decipher them; this distance is the distance of discomfort. It is important to hear through the artwork’s form, theme, and tone, the history of the years of mishaps, distrust, and abuse. These artworks address trauma, fear, grief, and passing time, and they act as an uncovering agent that exposes the wounds, which in turn aims at coming to terms with that wound and initiates the process of healing. As in Sara Ahmed’s words, “healing does not cover over, but exposes the wound to others: the recovery is a form of exposure” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 200).

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