

# Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland

Carmen Robertson

Volume 42, Number 2, 2017

Continuities Between Eras: Indigenous Art Histories  
Continuité entre les époques : histoires des arts autochtones

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1042943ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1042943ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

## ISSN

0315-9906 (print)  
1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Robertson, C. (2017). Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 42(2), 13–29. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1042943ar>

## Article abstract

Le territoire constitue une force déterminante dans la création artistique. Les prairies austères, notamment, exigent des artistes actuels comme de ceux qui les ont précédés une adaptation constante, déterminée par l'accès aux ressources et la nécessité de mobilité. Cet article s'intéresse à l'impact du territoire sur la pratique du perlage telle qu'exercée par les femmes autochtones. Il met en relation des exemples de perlage traditionnel conservés dans les collections muséales de la Saskatchewan avec les oeuvres de trois artistes contemporaines autochtones des plaines, soit Ruth Cuthand, Judy Anderson et Katherine Boyer. La comparaison vise à mieux comprendre le processus intergénérationnel de transmission des pratiques ancestrales et ainsi révéler comment s'exprime le territoire dans les objets et oeuvres ornés de perles, qui contribuent à façonner le récit des plaines.

# Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland

Carmen Robertson

Le territoire constitue une force déterminante dans la création artistique. Les prairies austères, notamment, exigent des artistes actuels comme de ceux qui les ont précédés une adaptation constante, déterminée par l'accès aux ressources et la nécessité de mobilité. Cet article s'intéresse à l'impact du territoire sur la pratique du perlage telle qu'exercée par les femmes autochtones. Il met en relation des exemples de perlage traditionnel conservés dans les collections muséales de la Saskatchewan avec les œuvres de trois artistes contemporaines autochtones des plaines, soit Ruth Cuthand, Judy Anderson et Katherine Boyer. La comparaison vise à mieux comprendre le processus intergénérationnel de transmission des pratiques ancestrales et ainsi révéler comment s'exprime le territoire dans les objets et œuvres ornés de perles, qui contribuent à façonner le récit des plaines.

Carmen Robertson is a Professor of Art History at University of Regina. Her research centers on contemporary Indigenous arts and constructions of Indigeneity in popular culture.

—carmen.robertson@uregina.ca

1. Brad Bellegarde, "Art exhibit shines light on contemporary beadwork," CBC News, September 29, 2016, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/contemporary-beadwork-slate-1.3784945](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/contemporary-beadwork-slate-1.3784945).

2. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, eds., *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2016).

At the jam-packed opening of *Beadspeak*, a 2016 exhibition of contemporary beadwork organized by Slate Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, it was clear to all that the medium had suddenly become chic in a province that, until recently, had relegated it to the lesser status of craft. The show featured work by five female, Indigenous artists based in Saskatchewan: Judy Anderson, Catherine Blackburn, Katherine Boyer, Ruth Cuthand, and Sherry Farrell Racette. In a media interview prior to the opening, Blackburn, who is of Dene ancestry, acknowledged a generational strength inherent in her beadwork, explaining how her grandmother inspired her: "She would bead at her dining-room table when we were over there visiting. I remember when I was a child every time we would go there and visit she would be working on some new piece, whether that would be moccasins, mukluks or gloves."<sup>1</sup> *Beadspeak* highlighted the interconnectedness present in each of the artworks displayed, thus suggesting deeper ways to consider land and notions of space in prairie beadwork. The concept of "aesthetics of space" recently advanced by Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin in their book *Arts of Engagement* (2016) supports a deeper reading of land and space through art.<sup>2</sup> Asking whether land itself serves as an agential force in considerations of art histories and their relation to beadwork, I plan to trouble the notion of the aesthetics of space in relation to arts produced on the prairie by female beaders since the early twentieth century.

This analysis will engage with the recent work of three Saskatchewan-based contemporary Indigenous artists at different stages of their careers and the work of two anonymous, female artists from southern Saskatchewan, whose work from the early twentieth century is housed in museum collections. This choice has been made in an effort to consider generational continuities, and as a way of calling attention to past misunderstandings about the role and value of female Indigenous artists. Over the last ten years, renowned senior Cree artist Ruth Cuthand has used beadwork in two distinct bodies of work that provocatively address the spread of blood-borne and water-borne pathogens as part of a larger commentary on colonialism. With a keen interest in reciprocity, mid-career Cree artist Judy Anderson has adapted and adopted beading to tell stories about friends and family. Whether beading narratives explore contemporary masculine identity or pay respect to a mentor, notions of land complicate the study of contemporary beadwork on the prairie in different ways. Emerging Métis artist Katherine Boyer voraciously beads visual maps that reference stories connected to identity and place. Her works read as

microcosms of an intersection of cultural and physical space. When the works of these five artists are considered together, an intergenerational relationship emerges between them, one that reveals how epistemological understandings of place, and specifically the land, serve to facilitate interplays of generational, cultural, artistic, and colonial narratives that re-situate the beaded expressions.

### Land Claims

As an ecozone, the prairie covers one fifth of Canada's surface area and extends east from the Rocky Mountains to Hudson Bay. It is the largest natural region in the Prairie Provinces, and, according to scientists David Sauchyn, Harry Diaz, and Suren Kulshreshtha, it is also the most "extensively modified region of the country with more than 80% of Canada's agricultural land and active mining and energy sectors."<sup>3</sup> Grasslands and aspen parkland shaped much of this territory, and prior to agricultural settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, native grasses provided a rich habitat for buffalo and a range of other mammals, birds, and reptiles. European settlers largely destroyed the possibility of a traditional lifestyle for grassland-based Indigenous peoples, and decimated many native animal species, such as the buffalo. However, this land encompasses much more than can be grasped in a scientific understanding of the ecosystem. For Indigenous peoples of this region, flat swaths of grassland punctuated by rolling hills, big skies, and meandering waterways, combined with local smells and sounds, are part of a spiritual relationship and cultural epistemology rooted in the land.

Cree activist Lewis Cardinal explains the importance of the land in the following way: "The land is paramount for all Indigenous societies. Their relationship to that land, their experience on that land shapes everything that is around them... land is another word for place, environment, your reality, the space you're in."<sup>4</sup> According to Cree poet and scholar Neal McLeod, the land was and is home for the Indigenous peoples of the Plains, thus exerting a sense of identity in their oral narratives.<sup>5</sup> Margaret Kovach, a Cree scholar based in Saskatchewan, similarly affirms how "place links present with past and our personal self with kinship groups."<sup>6</sup> Interconnections between land, culture, and community shape art process and aesthetics.

To situate the land as a central aesthetic force in the art of the flatland or prairie region requires the acknowledgement of a sensorial, embodied connection to place. It is one thing to say that the land exerts itself in the making of beadwork on the Plains, but it is another to fully engage the concept of the land as an active, embodied aesthetic presence in the beadwork of the female artists I will be discussing. The intangibility of such a concept is difficult to articulate, but I contend it is inextricably linked to the notion of stillness associated with beading, a concept described by many beaders. For example, in her 2011 PhD dissertation, Lois Elizabeth Edge explains that beadwork enacts and engages with a timeless spiritual dimension that resides within the movement of the needle, thread and bead and the "stillness" of the beadworker as the latter becomes involved in the process of exercising their creativity, as in a spiritual awakening of consciousness.<sup>7</sup> With that stillness comes an awareness of place and one's connection to it.

3. David Sauchyn, Harry Diaz, Suren Kulshreshtha, eds., *The New Normal: The Canadian Prairies in a Changing Climate* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2010), 1.

4. Quoted by Shawn Wilson in *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 2008), 88.

5. Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory—From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Saskatoon: Purich, 2007).

6. Margaret Kovachs, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 61.

7. Lois Elizabeth Edge, "My Grandmother's Moccasins: Indigenous Women, Ways of Knowing and Indigenous Aesthetic of Beadwork," PhD Diss., University of Alberta, 2011, 124.

In Shannon Webb-Campbell's review of Anishinaabe artist Olivia Whetung's exhibition *Olivia Whetung: tibewh* (2017), organized by Artspace, Peterborough, she similarly makes strong connections between body and land, reinforcing the fusing of beadwork with the land, ancestors, and traditional knowledge systems of the Anishinaabe.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Tahltan artist Peter Morin beautifully articulates such theoretical concepts while writing about his performance, *this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land* (2013), which he presented during a Truth and Reconciliation Commission event in Montreal, Quebec. Morin explains that, in an effort to have "the performance space address Indigenous land," he considered it according to a "Tahltan epistemological tradition."<sup>9</sup> The traditional territory of the Tahltan, says Morin, was "shaped and transformed by the movement of the Stikine River."<sup>10</sup> After a poetic, textual re-telling of the performance Morin states:

I end with speech making. what was this dance? why was there rattling? why did I feel the need to become a big rattle? My body. a reference to the land. A reference to the power of the land. as much as the residential school is a reference to the land. these schools are history. they live within a strand of the indigenous history of this land. they are not the whole history. understanding these parts. understanding a relationship to the whole.<sup>11</sup>

In his eloquent telling of his bodily enactment/performance, Morin clearly delineates a relationship between body and land that does more than reference location. I understand him to say that the land acts simultaneously through the body by channelling an epistemological understanding of the cultural knowledge of that place.

Indigenous beaders, too, hold a sensorial bond to place that translates through the process of making manifested in the beaded works. The movement of the needle and thread, creation of design, and choices of colour, demand keen performative attention, which both quiets and opens the mind. A key aspect of beading practices on the Plains references a generational sharing of technologies and knowledge.

### Beaded Histories and Indigenous Women

Collaborations and mentoring among women of the Plains were key aspects of such beadwork production in the past as well as the present. Sharing patterns and ideas, support, and community remain at the heart of beaded art practices. I am reminded of Saulteaux Elder Danny Musqua's statement: "We never had any doubt that women were the centre and core of our community and our nation. No nation ever existed without the fortitude of our grandmothers, and all of those teachings have to be recovered."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Cree-Métis feminist scholar Kim Anderson offers a fitting, specific example of the links between women, land, culture, and art in her discussion with Wasauksing oral historian Marie Anderson. Anderson shared teachings related to the umbilical cord, explaining how it signified a sacred connection between a child and the land.<sup>13</sup> In a further discussion about a wide variety of cultural practices associated with the umbilical cord, she adds that Plains Cree and Lakota placed the cord in a small bag that was decorated with quills or beads and then hung around the neck of the baby as a form of sacred protection, one that reveals the layers of significance accorded to such decorations.

8. Shannon Webb-Campbell, "Reclaiming Indigenous Territories, Bead by Bead," *Canadian Art*, June 27, 2017, [www.canadianart.ca/reviews/olivia-whetung-tibewh](http://www.canadianart.ca/reviews/olivia-whetung-tibewh).

9. Peter Morin, "this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land," in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, eds. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2016), 77.

10. *Ibid.*, 67.

11. *Ibid.*, 89.

12. Quoted by Kim Anderson in *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings and Story Medicine* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011), 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

With the arrival of Europeans to the Plains over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cultural and artistic expressions changed and adapted new technologies to suit shifting identities. The quills, feathers, and natural pigments that adorned traditional garments were, for example, interspersed or replaced with glass beads, trade cloth, and new designs. Porcupine quillwork, a sacred art form connected to the ceremonies, societies, and protocols of the Plains peoples, served semiotically as a direct signifier of the land, with quills culled from porcupines and dyes derived from plants and other natural materials. Beads, then, operate as floating signifiers for the land, narrative traditions, and ceremony, but also for how colonial presence cross-pollinates to create meaning. Mohawk scholar Joel Monture puts it another way when he describes quillwork as the “grandmother of beadwork.” According to him, quillwork shaped beadwork in an evolutionary process, and the traditional Indigenous medium thus remains present.<sup>14</sup> Beadwork, then, maintains an aesthetic connection to quillwork, even when contemporary issues and ideas complicate that meaning.

The shift to glass beads came in the nineteenth century, when they largely replaced the arduous process required by porcupine quillwork. Although glass trade beads arrived in eastern North America shortly after European contact, it was not until about 1820 that large-size 8/0 beads—often called “pony” beads, because they were packed on horseback—arrived in the Upper Missouri River Basin of the Plains and sparked a period of experimentation, innovation, and technological change for Indigenous artists of this region.<sup>15</sup> For example, anthropologist Marsha Bol notes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Lakota living in this territory were “extremely prolific producers of art, even under such profoundly changed circumstances.”<sup>16</sup>

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men and women’s clothing and other utilitarian objects produced on the prairies typically involved cross-gender collaboration. According to Lakota scholar and Elder Beatrice Medicine, gender balance on the Plains helped “foster the harmonious life, which was essential to the smooth functioning of the culture (called *wiconi* in Lakota).”<sup>17</sup> In the beginning, men did not typically make quillwork, and so they were not involved in beadwork either. The commodification of Indigenous artwork in the nineteenth century, however, encouraged artists of both genders to manipulate traditional aesthetics to suit the desires of a growing craft market, and male beadworkers contributed to this market.

Although beadwork and sewing were often understood as a practical way to support one’s family, they were more than commodity production or a vehicle for remuneration. In relation to Métis art of the prairies in the nineteenth century, Farrell Racette explains, “womanly arts of practical and ornamental sewing were valued in both Indigenous and European traditions and provided an area where values from diverse cultural heritages overlapped.”<sup>18</sup> Today, male beadworkers produce exquisite designs, create their own regalia, and produce impressive commodity beadwork throughout the Plains Region. Contemporary male artists also reference beadwork in their practices. For example, Métis artist David Garneau painted a series of beaded landscapes in acrylic on canvas around 2008, which mimic beading as part of a commentary on Métis land rights.<sup>19</sup>

14. Joel Monture, *The Complete Guide to Traditional Native American Beadwork* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 1993), 2.

15. *Ibid.*, 3–5.

16. Marsha C. Bol, “Lakota Beaded Costume of the Early Reservation Era,” *Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas: Selected Readings*, eds. Janet C. Berlo and Lee Ann Wilson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1993), 366.

17. Beatrice Medicine, “Women’s Roles,” *Memory, and Vision: Arts, Cultures, and Lives of Plains Indian People*, ed. Emma I. Hansen (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 95.

18. Sherry Farrell Racette, “Sewing for a Living: The Commodification of Métis Women’s Artistic Production,” *Contact Zones: Aboriginal & Settler Women in Canada’s Colonial Past*, eds. Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 22.

19. See David Garneau, *Winnipeg*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, private collection, [www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-488/Métis\\_Trails\\_of\\_Western\\_Canada\\_.html](http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-488/Métis_Trails_of_Western_Canada_.html).



While gender balance was a part of traditional artistic practice on the Plains, this has not been true for collecting practices. In her close study of patterns of collection by private and public museum collectors in the US and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bol finds that Plains art collectors “had clear and definite notions about who a Sioux was and should continue to be,” and these notions dictated a voracious interest in particular items.<sup>20</sup> She argues that skewed ideas of authenticity and the romanticized nostalgia of popular spectacles, such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, shaped production of Lakota commodity arts in the United States south of the border, where mostly male collectors tended to amass pieces related to war and other exploits associated with masculine identities. As a result, Bol concludes that few efforts were made to market feminized, Victorian adaptations readily found in other regional Indigenous arts collections.<sup>21</sup> That less attention was paid to female Indigenous artists of the Plains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected art histories of this region. Though few studies have actually been done on this topic, we know that collection patterns differed in Saskatchewan from those in the US due to population differences and limited market opportunities.<sup>22</sup>

Anonymity—an issue that plagues women’s work in museum collections, including those in Saskatchewan—not only denies women artists recognition, it inhibits larger narratives surrounding the maker, their artistic prowess, and the cultural connections in their works. Still, while little is known about the two anonymous artists included in my analysis, understandings can be gleaned from extant research from the period, and by following Farrell Racette’s method for analyzing museum collections as valuable sources of Indigenous women’s history. In her research, Farrell Racette demonstrates that using careful and informed looking when examining works reveals “critical information about the worlds and circumstances in which they were created”; she also notes that motifs, materials and methods of production all reflect Indigenous negotiations within the colonial encounter.<sup>23</sup> Even though voices “are often conspicuously absent from historic documents,” she asserts it is possible to read museum-collection histories through colours and designs.<sup>24</sup> Other scholars similarly engage in important archival and narrative research that illustrates how sewing and beadwork sheds light on women’s histories. In addition to deep archival research, this form of research requires a precise knowledge of Indigenous family and community structures. For example, *Recollecting* (2011), a collection of essays edited by Susan Berry and Alison Brown, brings together sewing and art with oral and written sources and serves as a resource for understanding the lives of Métis and Cree women of the Plains.<sup>25</sup>

One of the unique features of Plains women’s art was its communal structure, and such structures remain entrenched in communities and families today, thus reinforcing the notion of intergenerational knowledge.<sup>26</sup> The communal organization of Sioux beaders has its roots in sacred oral histories, such as the Lakota story of women receiving the gift of quillwork from Double Woman. Contemporary Lakota artist Colleen Cutshall explains that the White Buffalo Calf Woman brought the arts, among other gifts, to the people through teachings and ritual.<sup>27</sup> For example, Juanita, Joyce, and Jessica

20. Marsha C. Bol, “Defining Lakota Tourist Art: 1880–1915,” *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 223.

21. *Ibid.*, 214–228.

22. For an excellent study on Indigenous art collecting on the prairies, see Alison Brown, *First Nations, Museums, Narrations: Stories of the 1929 Franklin Motor Expedition to the Canadian Prairies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

23. Sherry Farrell Racette, “Looking for Stories and Unbroken Threads: Museum Artifacts as Women’s History and Cultural Legacy,” *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture*, eds. Gail Valaskakis, Madeleine Dion Stout, and Eric Guimond (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 312.

24. *Ibid.*, 311.

25. Sarah Carter and Patrica A. McCormack, eds., “Lifelines,” *Recollecting: Lives of Aboriginal Women of the Canadian Northwest and Borderlands* (Edmonton: University of Athabasca Press, 2011), 18.

26. Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (1st ed. 1991; London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 132.

27. Colleen Cutshall, “Dresses, Designers, and the Dance of Life,” *Identity By Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses*, exh. cat., ed. Emil Her Many Horses, National Museum of the American Indian (Washington, DC: NMAI and Collins, 2007), 70.

Growing Thunder Fogarty—three generations of one Assiniboine Sioux family from Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana featured in the exhibition *Identity By Design* (2007), organized by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC—acknowledge that “beading brings [them] together.”<sup>28</sup> Links to community have been more difficult to maintain for women beaders in the twentieth century, however, because of the realities of colonialism.

#### Contemporary Beading Practices Beyond Saskatchewan

Prairie beading is an art form influenced by settler colonialism, and this is especially apparent when considering contemporary arts practices. While I have chosen to focus this analysis on Saskatchewan artists, contemporary Indigenous arts practices that include beading and sewing are in no way localized to the Plains. Across the US and Canada, both pre-contact and contemporary sewing and beading traditions link artists to place. Métis artist, Christie Belcourt—a Governor General’s award-winning artist whose ancestry originates in Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta—has, for example, painted canvases inspired by beading and used beading in her artistic practice. *Walking With Our Sisters*, the commemorative installation of moccasin vamps that honours missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, was the brainchild of Belcourt. In 2012, she put out a call on Facebook for people to create and send in moccasin vamps, and within a year, she received over 1,600 pairs.<sup>29</sup> The travelling exhibition blossomed with the help of social media, and it has gone far beyond the original conception for the project, growing into a national and international opportunity to bring awareness to a national tragedy and to provide an avenue for healing and sharing. *Walking with Our Sisters* demonstrates the transformational power of beading.

Other beading and sewing projects have emerged from collective gatherings that foster storytelling, support, and the production of artworks. This is the case for Sobey Award winner Nadia Myre, from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, who created an innovative beading project titled *Indian Act* (1999–2002). Bringing together over 230 participants over a three-year period, this pivotal work, which incorporates all fifty-six pages of the Indian Act, changed the way beadwork was typically understood as a medium within contemporary art practices. Created as part of her MFA project at Concordia University, *Indian Act* inspired countless artists to incorporate beading into their creative practices. Using Stroud cloth—a common English trade cloth introduced in the eighteenth century—as the ground, Myre used white beads to replace the words of the Act passed by the Canadian government in 1876 and red beads to replace the spaces. The work thus serves as a powerful reminder of the colonial past and present and has inspired much critical analysis from art historians. Richard Hill commented that Myre’s act of replacing words with beads “speaks eloquently of cultural difference and the estrangement of the language of the Indian Act from those it is meant to govern.”<sup>30</sup> Janet Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips characterize this work as “a way of claiming Native space.”<sup>31</sup> Cynthia Fowler, who situates Myre’s work within the discourse of craft, focuses on sewing as an expression of collective experience that elicits agential change. She freely admits that Myre’s *Indian Act* speaks to a larger history of Indigenous women’s

28. *A Life in Beads: The Stories a Plains Dress Can Tell* (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2008), [https://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/NMAI\\_lifeinbeads.pdf](https://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/NMAI_lifeinbeads.pdf).

29. See *Walking With Our Sisters*, accessed May 15, 2016, <http://walkingwithoursisters.ca>.

30. Richard William Hill, “The Unreadable Present: Nadia Myre and Kent Monkman,” *C Magazine* 75 (Fall 2002): 75.

31. Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 324.

work in Canada. Yet, by situating her discussion around the notion of craft, she risks reinforcing an imposed Western dichotomy related to artistic categorization—a confining discourse that has influenced the collection and display of beadwork, and which has little to do with Indigenous arts practices. In Myre’s recent exhibition, *Decolonial Gestures Or Doing it Wrong? Refaire Le Chemin* (2016), organized by the McCord Museum, Montreal, she interrogates the museum’s permanent collection and finds inspiration related to her own beading and sewing. In her words,

The production of re-imagined pieces epitomizes personal learning, re-skilling, as well as a system of knowledge transmission. Their creation allows me to restore the cognitive processes that have been the backbone of Native cultures; in revitalizing a material practice, I am performing a decolonial gesture and forging a cultural identity.<sup>32</sup>

Like quillwork and beading, sewing in the history of Indigenous arts resists criteria founded on categorization. Relationships and storytelling (both oral and visual) combine to acknowledge the long histories of beadwork. As with contemporary beadwork created in diverse regions of Canada and the US, the artwork created by Cuthand, Anderson, and Boyer in Saskatchewan confirms ties not only to a larger contemporary art movement, but also to collective knowledge and processes supported by a keen awareness of past practices particular to place.

#### Beading the Plains

Museum collections in large centres in Europe and North America have impressive holdings of Plains peoples’ artworks, but it is not easy for local readers to view examples of work done by earlier generations. Sherry Farrell Racette and I encountered this issue when, in 2005, we curated an exhibition of Saskatchewan-based Indigenous artists working in a variety of media for the Saskatchewan Arts Board. *Clearing a Path* toured widely for three years, moving between galleries in larger cities and libraries and community centres in rural areas, so that artists outside of urban locations could view the works.<sup>33</sup> One of my fondest memories of this project was sitting inconspicuously in the corner of the library in Weyburn, watching a group of female beadworkers from nearby Ocean Man First Nations as they discussed with quiet animation how the artist Marcia Chickeness had ornately beaded a cradleboard.

Small collections of beadwork donated to the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (RSM) in Regina and the Moose Jaw Art Museum (MJAM) confirm the ongoing and active art production in this part of southern Saskatchewan. While many donations to these institutions were the result of collected beadworks purchased at the Regina Exhibitions early in Saskatchewan’s history, for the purposes of this investigation, I will focus on commodity (non-ceremonial) works personally collected by settler women who had established relationships with particular (though anonymous in the records) Indigenous women artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because Saskatchewan is home to more than seven Indigenous nations, including Assiniboiné, Cree, Lakota, Dakota, Nakota, Dene, Saulteaux, and Métis peoples, a wide range of styles and designs can be found in the beadwork in these collections.

At the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, I chose work from a relatively small collection of beadwork, referred to as the Nottingham Collection, which was

32. Martin Siberok, “Algonquin Artist Nadia Myre Recovers Indigenous Identity,” *Nation News*, March 1, 2016, [www.nationnews.ca/recovering-identity-with-algonquin-artist-nadia-myre/](http://www.nationnews.ca/recovering-identity-with-algonquin-artist-nadia-myre/).

33. See Carmen Robertson and Sherry Farrell Racette, *Clearing A Path: New Ways of Seeing Traditional Indigenous Art* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2009).



amassed in the early twentieth century by an English immigrant who homesteaded with her family near Markinch, and then later lived in Raymore in south-central Saskatchewan.<sup>34</sup> Alice Nottingham (1863–1944) befriended and purchased work from a number of First Nations women beaders—Cree and Saulteaux women living on George Gordon and Kawakatoose First Nations, part of Treaty Four territory. Because the Nottingham family, who moved from England with their two children in 1904, lived close to a specific Indigenous community, the beadwork Mrs. Nottingham collected establishes provenance with a particular group of women living on the prairie during the reservation period.<sup>35</sup> The collection entered RSM through a circuitous route. Mrs. Nottingham gave her collection to her daughter, who later returned with it to England. After her death, the work was eventually discovered in a pillowcase in an attic. The Nottingham grandchildren subsequently donated the collection to RSM, so that it could be preserved and studied as a whole by those close to its origins.

A second collection of beadwork, this one gathered by Margot Keeler of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, contains work by local Indigenous women, and is housed at the Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery. Little information about it is provided. However, it is known that Keeler purchased this work from a display at the Regina Exhibition (date unknown), where she also bought the pair of moccasins that she donated. There is no further information available about the artists or their work.

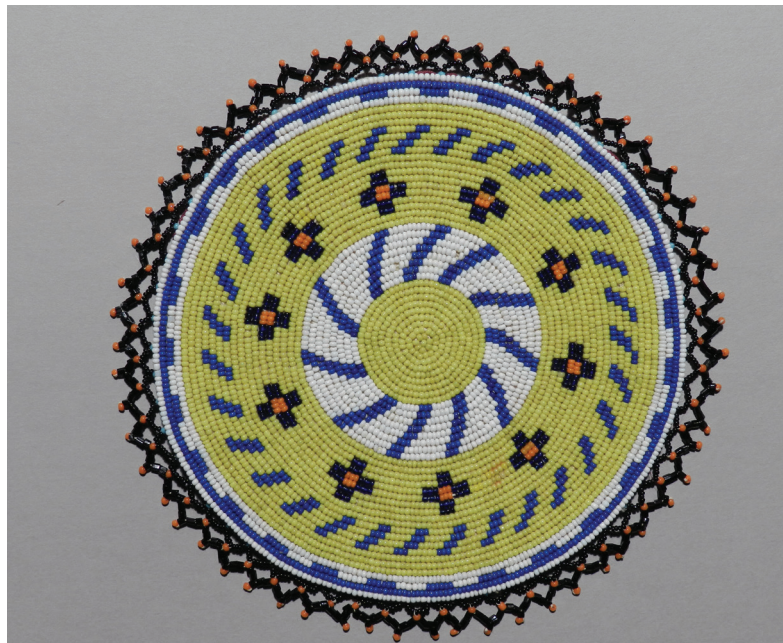
While archival collections at museums in Saskatchewan typically provide more information about collectors than the women who created the quality pieces they acquire, understandings about the art and the artists can be gleaned from reading the works. Due to space constraints, I have chosen only one work from each collection for the purpose of this discussion. Decorative rosettes that serve a functional purpose as trivets, common in both collections, demonstrate an adaptation of traditional designs and aesthetics for new ornamental purposes that both please a Eurocentric audience and are imbued with epistemological ties to the land and cultures of their makers. Visual references to the circle and four directions link the works to Indigenous aesthetic narratives. Coloured beads represent individual aesthetic choices, but also traditional colour patterns found in a wide variety of prairie beadwork. Created as commodities, both works also illustrate each artist's effort to shift the purpose of the piece from an Indigenous context to one that was attractive to an immigrant audience interested in Victorian decorative arts. Both of these works include a lace-like decorative border that resituates them as pieces of decorative art.

The rosette included in the Nottingham collection | **fig. 1** | which references the four directions of the medicine wheel, was collected from either a Cree or Saulteaux beader from central Saskatchewan. The center of the tightly beaded circular design begins with a small, black center circle, from which rows of beads radiate outward interspersed with the first four balanced triangular designs on green, framed with a white band. Four bands of mauve, yellow, red, and green beads punctuated with a black outline create a balanced design in a stylized floral design. Four petals outlined in yellow and black encase the four directions of the focal point. An outer band of

34. Biographical details were found in File E 1141/20293, Nottingham Collection, Royal Saskatchewan Museum, Regina, Saskatchewan.

35. This research is still at an early stage. I would like to work with Elders and beaders at Kawakatoose to try to identify the women who created these works in the RSM Nottingham collection. *Ibid.*

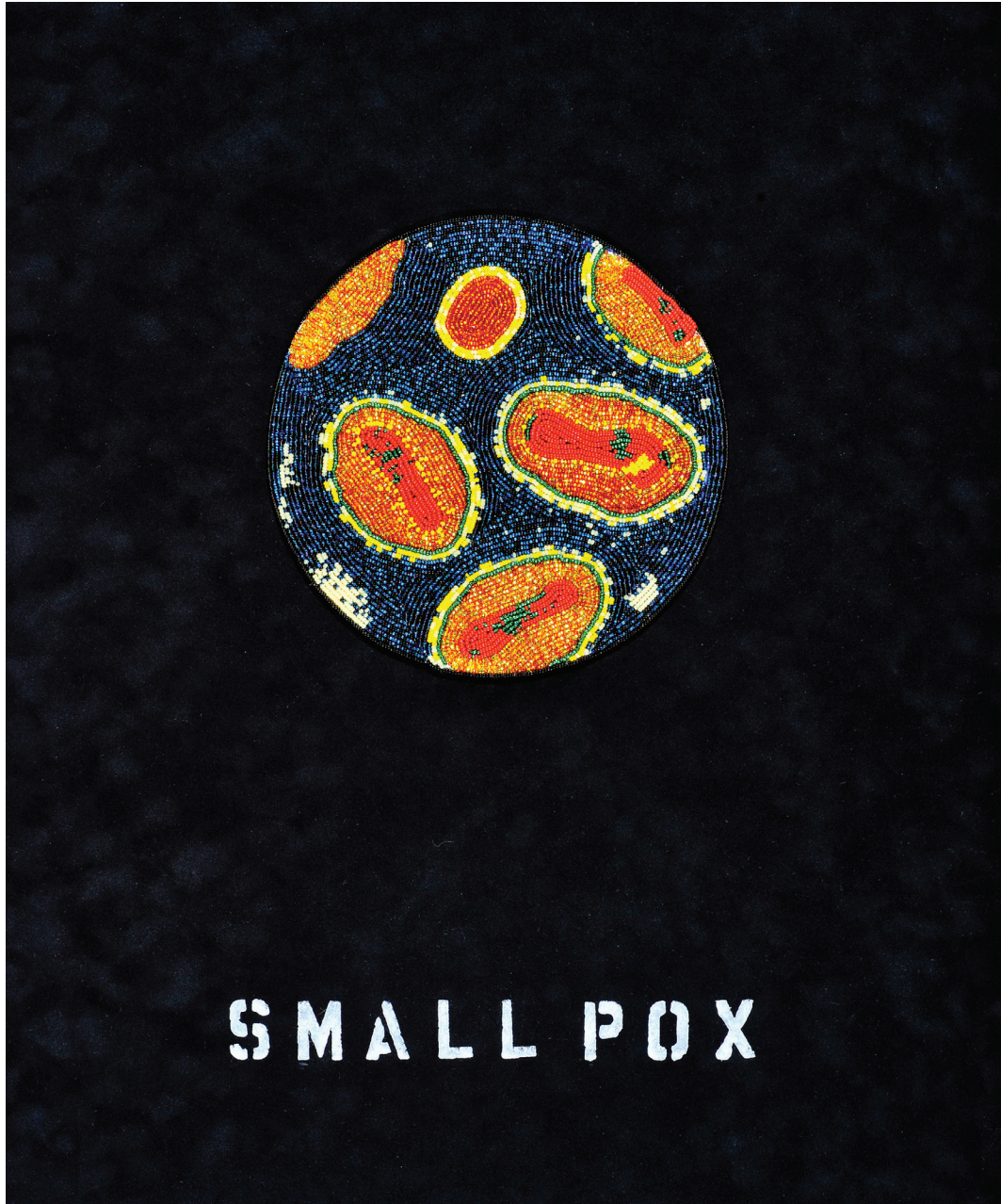
**Figure 1. Beaded Rosette (trivet), glass beads, leather backing, n.d., 0.5 × 18 cm diam.** Collection of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, Nottingham Collection 1411.2/20293. Photo courtesy of RSM.



**Figure 2. Beaded Trivet, glass beads with red silk backing, n.d., 0.5 × 17.8 cm diam.** Collection of the Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery 20.00.5.11, donated by Margot Keeler. Photo courtesy of MJMA.



Figure 3. Ruth Cuthand, *Trading: Smallpox*, 2008, acrylic paint, glass seed beads on beading medium mounted on suede board, 61 × 45.7 × 3.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Mackenzie Art Gallery.



beads, punctuated by eight, balanced sections of red, frame the design. The final, looping decorative edging of beads is done in a variety of colours, and includes a longer, hanging loop that indicates the work is a wall piece.

The rosette chosen from the Keeler Collection | fig. 2 | mimics the overall form of its counterpart in the RSM collection, but utilizes designs that acknowledge Lakota or Dakota geometric antecedents. Both artists incorporated four bands of colour to frame the design elements. Unlike the previous example, in which the floral patterning references a central image of the four directions, the circular centre of this more brightly beaded rosette is devoid of pattern, which draws the eye to a solid circle of yellow beads surrounded by a band of white beads. Radiating lines of royal-blue beads add dynamism. A larger band of yellow beads then serves as the ground for two additional registers of decorative design. Ten black crosses with red centers emphasize balance through a popular Lakota geometric formula, which reinforces symbolic connections to the four directions also referenced in the RSM rosette. Both artists finished their artworks with a decorative border that reflects an awareness of settler aesthetics of the period. Together these rosettes combine traditional epistemologies related to the land as it is symbolized in the four directions with contemporary concerns, thus forging a link between the colonial present and pre-contact quillwork designs, community, and individual meanings.

When Ruth Cuthand created her *Trading Series* (2008–2009), she too chose a circle format to present stunning beaded images of the pathogens that infected Indigenous bodies after contact, thus asserting that “beads and disease go hand-in-hand.”<sup>36</sup> The circular format of each of her eleven beaded diseases brought to the “New World”—the twelfth disease, Syphilis, was completed in porcupine quills—is mounted on a stark, black suede board background, with the requisite disease name stencilled in white lettering below; this format also references the circular view from the oculus of an electron microscope. Still, this relationship to the circle can also be understood as a means of resistance to assimilation and genocide—a symbolic acknowledgement of the rebuilding of Indigenous communities and an embodiment of the land.

James Daschuk’s book, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (2014), put into words the visual narrative of cultural genocide Cuthand had beaded as a destructive story of colonialism. Cuthand considered this colonial practice in an essay published in *The Capilano Review*, in which she states, “I think of the process of ‘budding,’ in which a disease replicates and exhausts the energy of its host cell, as analogous to the process of colonization. ‘Beading’ is different. It is an activity of survival. It is a means of remembering tradition and of feeling well.”<sup>37</sup> The visual impact of the diseases in the *Trading Series* engages the viewer with the seductive aesthetic beauty of each exquisitely beaded pathogen. The horrors associated with these pathogens melt into the complex undulation of shimmering colour and lines evoked by the technologies inherent in the beading process. Take, for example, *Trading: Smallpox*, | fig. 3 | which presents pathogens beaded in orange, yellow, and green metallic colours invading a mostly blue, beaded background, and which represents the microscopic scourge complicit in the death and destruction of the Plains peoples. The process of beading this

36. See “Trading Series,” Ruth Cuthand, May 19, 2016 [www.ruth-cuthand.ca/trading-series/](http://www.ruth-cuthand.ca/trading-series/).

37. Ruth Cuthand, “From Reserving and Don’t Drink, Don’t Breathe,” *The Capilano Review* 3, 27 (Fall 2015): 83.

series says much about Cuthand's place on this land, her understanding of colonial past and present, and her implicit relationship to cultural epistemologies grounded in the prairie ecosystem. While the use of beading, colours found in nature, and circular forms reinforce designs present in the rosettes, the stark reality Cuthand references ties her works to colonial events that shape her place in Saskatchewan today.

While her *Trading Series* relates to a larger history of the spread of disease, her most recent series, *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* (2016), considers visual relationships to more contemporary pathogens that plague First Nations. After alarming, front-page news about mould-filled housing and water-borne pathogens in First Nations communities across Canada, Cuthand shifted the way she used beads to call attention to ongoing atrocities.<sup>38</sup> For example, the installation included a blue tarp, because, in her words, "I have seen shacks built by the Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario with roofs made of blue plastic tarp. They can barely stand up to the weather, let alone the wear and tear of multigenerational families."<sup>39</sup> Beading the emblematic blue tarp with representational blooms of black mould in matte-black glass beads [unseen in the photo] mimics the mould blooms on which Cuthand sets a veritable but disquieting banquet of glasses. | **fig. 4** | "From afar the tablecloth and water glasses look beautiful, inviting," she explains. "As viewers come closer, however, it becomes clear that they are not looking at something beautiful but rather at something ugly."<sup>40</sup> As with *Trading Series*, Cuthand pushes aesthetics into the political realm. The tarp serves as a backdrop for a series of 139 resin-filled glasses and baby bottles containing suspended, three-dimensional beaded examples of magnified bacterium and parasites found in ninety-four communities under a boiled-water advisory. Cuthand shifts away from traditional methods of beading to create sculptural, three-dimensional forms constructed from glass beads. Pushing her chosen medium, she repositions confrontational conversations that engage the heavy consequences of colonialism through the hopeful process of beading.

When Cree artist Judy Anderson encountered Cuthand's *Trading Series* for the first time, it blew her away.<sup>41</sup> Like Cuthand, Anderson views beadwork as an opportunity to tell new stories while gaining strength from past generations of beaders. Cuthand has long been a mentor, teacher, and friend to Anderson, and the impact of the beaded pathogens inspired her to create new work that placed beadwork at its heart.<sup>42</sup> Anderson agrees that beading creates an important communal bond. In her words, "[Teaching beading] is like sitting at a kitchen table drinking tea, we tell stories and get to know each other."<sup>43</sup> While she had often produced contemporary works in different mediums, such as handmade paper, Anderson first audited a course on traditional beading in 2005 before settling on the medium as a vehicle for a new work in 2008 and experimenting with new stitches and techniques.

Her *Exploit Robe Series*, which includes *Exploit Robe (Toying Around)* (2012), is an early response to this proverbial call to beads. | **fig. 5** | Re-creating the "burner"<sup>44</sup> her son Cruz made when he was twelve, she combined contemporary graffiti art with the masculine form of warrior-exploit robes, a traditional narrative art form once used by Plain's Peoples to promote status and record war exploits. Beaded on a large moose hide, *Exploit Robe (Toying Around)* amounts to

38. See "Trading Series," Ruth Cuthand.

39. Cuthand, "From Reserving," 83.

40. *Ibid.*, 83.

41. Judy Anderson, interviewed by the author, July 2, 2016.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. A burner is an elaborate piece of graffiti that requires much time and energy. According to a glossary of graffiti terms located at Graffiti.Org, "A burner is any piece that has good bright colors, good style (often in wildstyle) and seems to 'burn' off of the wall." Chad and Schmoo, "The Words: A Graffiti Glossary," *Art Crimes*, [www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html](http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html).





**Figure 4.** Ruth Cuthand, *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, 2016, ninety-four vessels with glass beads and resin, hand-beaded blue tarpaulin tablecloth, table, shelf unit, gas board, 274.3 × 487.6 × 162.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and dc3 Art Projects.

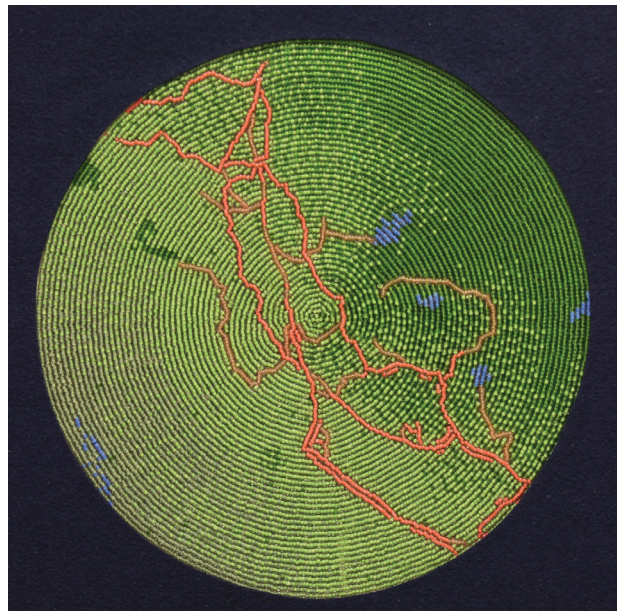
**Figure 5.** Judy Anderson, *Exploit Robe Series (Toying Around)*, 2012, glass beads on tanned moosehide, 147.3 × 157.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Cruz Anderson.





**Figure 6.** Judy Anderson, *And from her parts of me emerged*, 2016, beads, material, coyote pelt, rocks, Plexiglass, handmade paper, 30.5 × 18.7 × 12.7 cm. Cover image used with permission of McClelland & Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited. Original photo of Maria Campbell by Dan Gordon. Courtesy of the artist and Cruz Anderson.

**Figure 7.** Katherine Boyer, *Red River Trails*, 2014, seed beads, Stroud cloth, 40.6 × 50.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



a fertile collaboration between mother and son in the tradition of gender balance noted earlier. The alliance served as a catalyst for other smaller projects that fuse graffiti and beadwork. “I think of the Exploit Robes as an extension of the land, of rocks, of storytelling,” explains Anderson, connecting rock to a process of marking the land, much like the stories graffiti artists tell.<sup>45</sup>

The range of sharp, clear bead colours and sizes chosen in consultation with her son results in a juxtaposition of colour and contemporary design, with the traditional connotations of the buttery-soft, tanned moosehide. Anderson’s large-scale piece is elaborately beaded using a subtle, but decorative fan design that runs throughout Cruz’s dramatically outlined burner. The balanced composition fuses masculine and feminine visual design elements. While continuing to explore such themes in the *Exploit Robe Series*, Anderson has recently undertaken a second series of beaded works that, like Cuthand, repositions beadwork technologies.

*And from her parts of me emerged* (2016) | **fig. 6** | serves as a beaded homage to Cree Knowledge Keeper and Elder, Maria Campbell. Anderson explains, “Maria has played a significant role in my life personally and spiritually. I feel from her I was able to find parts of me that would have remained hidden had she not been in my life.”<sup>46</sup> Resembling the cover of Campbell’s award-winning book, *Halfbreed* (1973), the fully beaded, large-scale book cover mimics the iconic original, as if it were a photographic reproduction. From between the cover and the pages of this symbolic text emerges a coyote pelt. Anderson explains, “Coyote is incredibly important to me and my time spent with Maria helped me realize this... Like Coyote, who emerges from the book, so do the lessons that Maria teaches.”<sup>47</sup> Together the beaded book and coyote pelt create a three-dimensional sculptural form that combines traditional and contemporary stories with beadwork, thus bridging ways of knowing specific to Plains peoples’ identities. To that end, Anderson confirms, “When I think of Maria and that box, I am going back to the land to the teachings, to mother earth. I feel like Coyote emerges with the help of Maria and Maria has the help of the land.”<sup>48</sup>

While Judy Anderson gained inspiration and mentorship from Ruth Cuthand, Métis artist Katherine Boyer credits her interest in beading to Anderson. The intergenerational line of contemporary female artists united by their collaborative interest in Indigenous media and their “I” rootedness to the prairie land extends to Boyer. Although admitting she started out by learning three stitches from Anderson, Boyer quickly progressed and today she is a prolific beader who uses the medium as if she had done so all her life. Like the rosettes discussed above, Boyer’s works often takes a circular form. She explains that her beadwork has focused “almost exclusively on place, land and our perspectives in relation to our histories (personal and more general).”<sup>49</sup> She admits that she has been “taking unconscious cues from predecessors,” which have invariably set the standard of representation in beading for her contemporary pieces.<sup>50</sup> Featuring a circular composition beaded on black, *Red River Trails* (2014) | **fig. 7** | recalls Cuthand’s *Trading Series*, although Boyer tells different stories with her work. The variegated use of greens and blues, which recall the prairie grasslands, are incised by a series of linear pathways in red that bisect the circle. Stroud cloth serves as the backdrop for the visual,

45. Judy Anderson, interviewed by the author, June 26, 2017.

46. Anderson, interviewed by the author, August 30, 2016.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Anderson, interviewed by the author, June 26, 2017.

49. Katherine Boyer, interviewed by the author, June 20, 2016.

50. *Ibid.*



bird's-eye-view mapping of Métis territory, adding additional dimensions to the stories told about trade and displacement. Boyer's precise, circular, beaded lines begin in the centre and radiate outward, reinforcing symbolic associations with the circle in the anonymous rosettes, while also re-presenting a Métis worldview on Métis territory that, like Cuthand and Anderson's works, spans time and space as it relates to place specifically.

*Tracking Trading* | **fig. 9** | shifts meanings and pushes considerations of spatial memory in fresh ways. Boyer fuses beading and rabbit fur to forge a dialogue surrounding relationships between trade and culture both past and present. The work also evokes narratives of balance in male and female aspects of Métis epistemologies. This delicate work, which features a subtly beaded white centre on a larger, white rabbit-fur ground, includes Boyer's signature style of beading complex designs inside a circular space. White-on-white, beaded tracks mapped upon a snowy landscape reference more than simply masculine trapping practices, and also visually reinforce community and familial ties to the land. Boyer understands her artworks done in beads as "a unique access point to our older generations and where their creative opportunities lie."<sup>51</sup> In and among the rows of painstakingly sewn beads in Boyer's works lies a re-territorialization of space—a reclamation of the land and an understanding of how it shapes identities.

The stark prairie of southern Saskatchewan unfalteringly demands of its original peoples a delicate negotiation predicated on mobility and adaptability. Indigenous epistemologies shaped by this agential force flow through the beaded artworks discussed in this analysis in ways that transmit understanding of space, place, and the land. Anderson understands that in her art making "ideas and thoughts come from... ceremonies of being on the land."<sup>52</sup> The physical action of beading—the slowing, the stillness—in which each of these artists is engaged communicates embodied connections to the prairie ecosystem that resonate in the diverse patterns, designs, teachings, and knowledge their works encapsulate.

Each of the works by the five women artists included in this analysis contains a sensorial embodiment derived from traditional, cultural knowledge related to life on the flatland. The complex visual narratives found in the contemporary art pieces push the medium into new areas of visual investigation, confronting ongoing colonial oppression and supporting healing discourses. Design adaptations and manipulations of the medium shift expectations related to beadwork. And while these and other articulations created by Anderson, Boyer, and Cuthand re-situate beadwork in the twenty-first century, their works maintain intergenerational, Indigenous ways of knowing from the Plains. Indigenous women artists of earlier generations similarly adapted and adjusted their art production to meet new challenges. An enduring aesthetics of space and place mingle and mix in beadwork to formulate histories of art of the Saskatchewan flatland. ¶

51. Ibid.

52. Anderson, interviewed by the author, June 26, 2017.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** I would like to acknowledge the support and creative spirit of Ruth Cuthand, Judy Anderson, Katherine Boyer, and the two anonymous women whose work inspired me. Thank you also to the staff at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum and the Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery, and to Heather Igloliore, Carla Tauton, and the editors of *RACAR* for their encouragement and assistance. I am indebted to the University of Regina's Humanities Research Institute for funding this research.

**Figure 9.** Katherine Boyer, *Tracking & Trading: Canadian Pacific Railway*, 2015, seed beads, rabbit hide, 50.8 × 60.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

