

Governance Begins at the Kitchen Table

Anishinaabe Resurgence through Beading

LANA RAY (WAASKONE GIIZHIGOOK)

L'auteure, troisième génération de survivants des pensionnats pour Autochtones, raconte son expérience du perlage avec sa grand-mère, qui a fréquenté le pensionnat de St. Joseph à Fort William (aujourd'hui Thunder Bay) entre 1941 et 1948. Par le biais du perlage, elles s'engagent dans la résurgence Anishinaabe, fournissant un cadre pour explorer les problèmes actuels de gouvernance et de diplomatie auxquels sont confrontés les peuples indigènes.

“On her arrival at the Presbyterian school in Kenora, Lorna Morgan was wearing ‘these nice little beaded moccasins that [her] grandma had made [her] to wear for school, and [she] was very proud of them.’ She said they were taken from her and thrown in the garbage.”
(TRC, 2015, p. 44)

Prologue

I am a third-generation Indian residential school survivor. My grandmother was uprooted from her community of Opwaaganasiniing in 1941 at the age of six to attend St. Joseph's Residential School in Fort William (now Thunder Bay). I don't know much about her time there or her childhood because she never talked about it. She moved away at a young age, leaving my dad in the care of her family.

Later in life, my grandmother moved back home. St. Joseph's had been demolished by then, ending its nearly century-long existence. It was during this time that my grandmother and I reconnected. Up until that point, I hadn't seen my grandmother since I was a child. I remember the first time I went to go visit her after this long rift. It was Christmas, and to “break the ice” I brought her a

Christmas-themed charm bracelet. I knew that she liked knick-knacks and things like that. When I knocked on her door there was no answer, but I left the present with a note. I remember feeling disappointed, but also relieved as I was unsure what I would say if she had answered the door. Shortly after she reached out to me and from then on, I would visit her often and she would teach me what she knew about beading, which she learned from the “Native Centre” in Montreal.

My grandmother always masked the trauma and hurt she carried with jokes and lots of swear words, but during one of our visits, she very somberly expressed guilt and shame about not being able to pass on the culture and language to me. The impingement of Anishinaabe ways of being has had perhaps the deepest impact on us. To move forward as sovereign nations in ways that do not reinscribe colonial violence, we must first ensure that our cultural sovereignty is intact (Gross). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson refers to the rebuilding of Indigenous nations according to our own political, intellectual, and cultural traditions as resurgence, explaining that “A resurgence of Indigenous political cultures, governances and nation-building requires generations of Indigenous peoples to grow up intimately and strongly connected to our homelands, immersed in our languages and spiritualities, and embodying our traditions of agency, leadership, decision-making and diplomacy” (1). While unbeknownst to my grandmother at the time, through our beading circles she gifted me so many teachings about Anishinaabe diplomacy and governance.

Prior to colonialism, women carried political responsibilities in addition to caring for the daily needs of the

community (Flynn et al.). This structure is in vast contrast to colonial modes of rule, which are patriarchal, and separate private from public (Flynn et al.; Laboucan-Massimo). As we work to rebuild and restore our communities and nations, it is imperative that we consider why our ancestors bestowed governing powers among those in the community who were also responsible for caring for the day-to-day needs of the people (Flynn et al.).

What I have come to understand through beading with my grandmother is that Anishinaabe resurgence is "... generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community and generation of people" (Simpson 7). Through our day-to-day activities, we live our Anishinaabe theories and methodologies (Ray, 2015). The more we partake in them, the more they become a part of who we are and how we relate to the world around us (Ray, 2015; Ray).

Janice Acoose imparts on us the understanding that "bestowing governance responsibilities on our clan mothers provided a way to remember and proceed as a community in a way that remembers our relationship with Mother Earth who has always approached us with love, care, kindness and respect" (qtd. in Flynn et al. 597). When my grandmother and I picked up our beading needles and strung our first beads together, beading became "a part of our lives" as we began absorbing cultural knowledge and values, accessing spiritual connections and cementing relationships within the community, our ancestors, and with the natural world (Edge; Ray, 2016; Prete; Gustafson). With each bead that we strung, we became one stitch closer to cultural sovereignty and restructuring our relations within our family, nation, and with the land (Kuokkanen).

In the next section, beading to evoke cultural sovereignty and Anishinaabe diplomacy and governance is demonstrated through a conversation between my grandmother and I about events impacting ourselves, the community, and the land at her kitchen table, where we would always bead together. Drawing from LeAnne Howe's work, the kitchen table is conceptualized as a rhetorical space for Tribalography where events and non-events of the past, present, and future coalesce to support transformation (118). Conversations with my grandmother, personal memories, and events spanning over years transverse together at my grandmother's kitchen table through a story that is factual, fictitious, and ultimately true. This performance and relational based methodology embody the spirit of my grandmother and our moments together, and allows for the accumulated impacts and experiences to be experienced as I experience it—not discrete, but compounded and interconnected.

Governance Begins at the Kitchen Table

As I approached my grandmother's, I could see that the lone unfortified window, the one in the kitchen, was slightly cracked, which signalled to me that she was home. I knocked on the door and then took a step back. It always took a while for my grandmother to undo the various latches on her door. As I waited, I scanned the boughs of her mature spruce tree, which was intrusive and firmly rooted in her front lawn. There were no lunchtime visitors yet, but I knew that the regulars—crows, cats, and chipmunks—would arrive on cue at the sight of my grandmother's bright yellow bag of dry cat food. With the slide of the last deadbolt, my grandmother appeared, inviting me in.

NOOKOMIS¹. Beads are on the table. Have a seat, and I will get you a glass of water.

LANA. Miigwetch, Grandma. I have just been rushing all morning, first to the grocery store, then I had this consultation thing, and then there was this fancy funding announcement I attended. It's just been one of those days!

(Lana sits down and starts beading)

NOOKOMIS. Just look at what you are doing here. All these beads are interconnected, you know, so any sloppiness will detract from the piece (Monture 32). My Cree friend Rebecca describes this as respect. You have to be able to look twice at something to make sure it is done right. This is how you learn (Ray, 2016).² LANA. Sorry grandma... I am just so frustrated right now. I was at this meeting this morning where we were talking about how important the land is, and then only hours later I am at this launch with some of the same leaders who are taking pictures with and singing the praises of bigwigs from mining companies and the federal government for "gifting" us with money to support Indigenous food sovereignty, all while they are actively working to destroy her.

NOOKOMIS. You never mind that when you are beading. When you bead, you must be in your right mind you know. Beading is a privilege, in that it's an act of love where you have an opportunity to make something beautiful to share (Gustafson). You just can't be trying to do this over here, then doing this over there and expect your beadwork to come out looking good you know. You need to have good intent, be of right mind and follow through with good work, embedding that respect consistently stitch, after stich, after stitch! If not, you will see it in your beading, it will look overworked and it won't turn out good (Ray, 2016). LANA. I know you said not to talk about it anymore, but they are talking about that funding announcement

on the T.V. right now. What, you can't be serious! They are saying that these corporate donations are an example of reconciliation for all of Turtle Island to look to!

Aside: "Aboriginal Capitalism" is an identified practice within some Indigenous communities that refers to economic development (often export-oriented development that extracts natural resources) that is preoccupied with the accumulation of wealth, characterized by corporate alliances, Indigenous elites who benefit disproportionately from profits, and a neglect of social issues such as violence and housing (Kuokkanen 276). Laboucan-Massimo challenges us to question the values we prioritize in our movements, and to engage in a paradigm shift in how we treat each other, ourselves, and the earth (39).

NOOKOMIS. I don't even know why you watch that. You are just going to get yourself all worked up watching that. You know, none of this is new stuff, this has been going on for years now. I remember when I was your age, even then the government promised to do things differently and to recreate a new relationship with us (Newhouse). What you need to be doing is concentrating on your beadwork, and by what it says on the T.V., none of these people sound to be good beadworkers, so you ain't gonna learn nothing from them! When you bead, you need to start with good thoughts and intentions, otherwise your beadwork will look forced, and it is difficult to fix things at that point. You need to have foresight, and take the time to plan out and understand your project. It's like my friend Richard says, you need to create harmony, and harmony comes from truth, and truth comes from humility. Once you come to that state, then you can create something good (Wagamese). You need harmony inside yourself, and then harmony in your beadwork will come.

LANA. I hear what you are saying, grandma. I saw a lot of people who didn't have that harmony when we marched to the highway junction for the Idle No More Movement.³ It's not like we were blockading the road or anything, but people did have to slow down, and some people seemed so angry. I felt the way that some people glared at me, like they were going to burn a hole right through me. They didn't know me, but it was like they hated me and thought they knew my story. One guy stared at me while he made a gesture with his hand, like to say I only was there for money. He probably values land for what its monetary wealth is, and assumed that this was the same for me. But it wasn't about that at all! It was the opposite of that! Even this money that you are

getting for the Indian Residential School Settlement, I know it's not about the money. I don't see how people don't see that. I guess they don't want to.

NOOKOMIS. Did I ever tell you about how beadwork houses stories? (Ray, 2016). Every time a bead is stitched it becomes animate and a part of us, carrying within it the story of the beader (Edge 39). While it is your story you are telling, through your patterns and colour choices and style (Farrell Racette), the beadwork is also part of a larger story of our peoples and lands (Ray, 2016). Essentially, we become the beadwork, and the beadwork becomes us. This is where beading gets its power from. And, we usually don't keep our beadwork you know, instead we gift it (Piatote) in kindness to show respect to others who have shared with us, and to allow these stories to be shared within our communities (Ray, 2015; Prete). Have you thought about what story will be beaded in your medallion? You think about that while I make us some dinner. I bought the brand name pizzas, so you better be hungry and not waste them.

Aside: As my grandmother pre-set the oven and spread our mini pizzas and fries out on an aluminum pan, I thought about what she had said to me, and I wondered what it meant not only in relation to my beadwork, but in the greater scheme of things.

LANA. Good pizza, grandma. I was so hungry. I didn't even get to eat lunch because I was too busy running around and doing things. Like I said, I went to a session on that proposed pipeline. You should come with me next time I go to one of those sessions. NOOKOMIS. I don't want to go to that. I went to one of those meetings once and it made no sense. They explained that they would cut down trees here and replace them with trees over there and that our waters might be impacted, but that they would make up for that with some jobs in the community. They said there was some agreement we could sign for them using our land. It made no sense to me. Don't we already have an agreement called the Robinson-Superior Treaty for that? Why would we be silly enough to sign an agreement if they can't even uphold the first one!⁴ And I don't get how they figure jobs is the same as clean water?⁵ You got me going now! Okay, back to beading. So, for your medallion, you want to make sure that you have balance. Balance is important. You need to have balance in your colours and bead types (Prete). You don't want them to look too much alike, but you also want them to go nicely together, and you want to make sure that

your pattern is even. You gotta think, how is this going to work with the rest of the piece? Say you're beading flowers; if you beaded just a big flower, it's all you would see, and it can detract from the balance in the beadwork (Ray, 2016).

LANA. You should come to the next session, Grandma, and tell them just that. Not the beading part, but the other part. Well, now that I think about it, maybe the beading part, too! I don't see how these payouts or opportunities are going to help us to restore our

man-made, they were from the land. Even when you think about what we used to bead on, it was hide. That's from an animal, that is part of the land, and it is the foundation for that piece of beadwork or that collective story I mentioned. The more you have a relationship with the land, the better you will be as a beader (Gustafson).

LANA. Gee, grandma, you hit the nail on the head with that one! That's what seems to be missing from so many of these sessions on community planning and development.

I think there could be very different discussions and decisions (maybe even solutions!) if, like bead-ers, we were to create something with land as our foundation.

communities. We need balance just like you said. Sure, having some employment and funding opportunities are okay, but not if the trade-off is land and community division. Plus, reconciliation needs to “revolve around community rebuilding, interpersonal understanding and Canadian reparative responsibility” (James 19). We need to reunify and regenerate families and communities that have been dispersed by this trauma, not tear them apart even further (Cornstassel 140). It's like you just told me, grandma, we need all of the beads to work together to create a unified piece, a beautiful piece of beadwork. But, instead, a lot of this talk on “reconciliation” just causes fights. Some are onboard with a project, others aren't. Do we re-invest, or do we get individual pay-outs? If so, who gets them? Because of colonialism, we are working with all different sizes and shapes of beads. That's what we have to fix first!

Aside: Pam Palmater notes that settler governments have been successful in creating divisions between “good Indians” and “bad Indians,” “willing partner chiefs” and “rogue chiefs,” and that we need to withdraw from harmful government processes and relationships and re-engage in our relationships with the land, the water, our people, and our cultures (7).

NOOKOMIS. Land is very important to your beadwork, too, you know. You will notice in beadwork, the different symbols and references to plants and animals. The colours are reflective of the land, and a lot of the stories and patterns in our beadwork relate to land (Ray, 2015; Gustafson). Even traditionally, the materials that we would use to bead were not

I mean talk of land is present. Like, for instance, that pipeline session I was just at. Land was talked about, but it wasn't a foundational and integral part like it is in beading. Like what always seems to happen, land was acknowledged then like clockwork a “but” positioned as the “pragmatic” voice of reason is spoken so that the talk can be re-centred around jobs and revenues. I think there could be very different discussions and decisions (maybe even solutions!) if, like bead-ers, we were to create something with land as our foundation. Like for jobs and revenues why can't the conversation be framed like this: ensuring the well-being and livelihood of our community and community members is important, so let's support each other to make this happen in a way that doesn't compromise our responsibilities and relationships to land. You know, grandma, I really enjoy this time that we have together.

NOOKOMIS. I know you do; I can see it in your beadwork. I can tell that you have been listening cuz your beading is getting better.

Epilogue

In 2015 my grandmother passed over to the spirit world. Beading at my grandmother's kitchen table was the place that we were able to reconnect, reclaim, and re-envision. As we sat together, chatting about life and beading, we began to know each other once again. As she taught me about beading, we worked to revive intergenerational knowledge sharing, and through the process we also resisted non-Indigenous frameworks of knowing and being.

Laboucan-Massimo heeds warning that we are in an ecological and moral human crisis where we see people's

homes and traditional territories being turned into industrialized landscapes (37). To find our way forward, we must be transformative in our efforts and not accept colonial permanence, which constrains our rebellion to settler colonial thought and reality (Simpson 13). While the word “transformative” may signal to some that we must start to envision something that has never existed, we can look to beadwork for a vision of transformation. Looking to Indigenous women’s knowledge systems is a viable approach to restore Anishinaabe governance.

giving, and land. Only when we do so will we be able to adorn our communities with something that is as beautiful as my grandmother’s beadwork.

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Beadwork holds within its process and aesthetics our values, ethics, and natural laws (Ray, 2015; Prete). Beads have been used to record the vision of co-existence articulated prior to confederation. Wampum belts⁶ such as the Two Row Wampum committed both nations to a co-existence rooted in friendship, peace, and respect (Powless 3–4). At my grandmother’s kitchen table, values and ethics entrenched within the practice and aesthetic of beadwork, such as right thinking, respect, balance, harmony, giving, love, and land have been illuminated.

Marsden suggests “if we can re-integrate Wampum and other beading and weaving tools back into our institutions of knowledge, and into our psyches, we will be well on our way back to rebalancing who we are as human beings” (68). The embodiment process of beading is foundational to the mobilization of the pedagogy (Lussier 379) that does not dictate or define but, instead, evokes knowledges that can connect us to ourselves; other people; the past, present, and future; and other beings (Wrightson 202–3). This conceptualization of beadwork carries the practice into the present, and positions beading as a way of “thinking about and creating a decolonial future” (Wrightson 203). For Williamson, these words ring true as she speaks of her own grandmother, and how her grandma’s moccasin making provided a mechanism to resist colonial systems, rebuild severed connections, and a way to give to the next generations (Varley 73). For me, there is a resonance within these words. I now possess my grandmother’s beading box. It is both a material vestige of the time that we spent together and a path to move forward.

Within our nation, we need a movement of beadworkers. We need people who can not only see the limitations of Indian Act governing processes, but who are committed to moving forward our nations in a way that is rooted in the principles of right thinking, respect, balance, harmony,

Endnotes

¹ Growing up, we did not use the terminology *nookomis* (grandmother in Anishinaabemowin), but I purposefully use it here to position our time beading together as an act of resurgence.

² Rebecca refers to Cree Elder Rebecca Martell.

³ Idle No More, Our Story, para 1. Originating in 2012, Idle No More is an Indigenous mass movement that was sparked by impending parliamentary bills that would negatively impact Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections.

⁴ Not all members of Red Rock Indian Band concede that we had a representative at the Robinson Superior Treaty signing. This statement is not an affirmation of the signing of the Treaty. What is important here is that the Federal government works within this assumption, so their conduct needs to be examined in a framework of Treaty responsibilities.

⁵ Scholars such as Hall have critiqued resource development projects as colonial projects, and environmental assessment processes and impact benefit agreements as colonial tools, which attempt to reconcile Indigenous peoples into a capitalist economy and alienate Indigenous peoples from their Traditional knowledge systems.

⁶ Haas, Wampum as Hypertext, 80. Haas credits Deborah Doxtator with this quote and describes wampum belts as a living record of mutual relationships between parties. The integrity of the record is maintained through regular re-readings.

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IRENE MARQUES

Three Poems

The evening country

She inhabited a country always on evening

There were always lunar and solar eclipses
and no matter how much she prayed to the gods
to get a handle on the deeds of men,
the gods stayed immobile and would or could do nothing,
and so, the men continued the ravaging of the country
and it was always, always night

She took so much in, and nothing ever came out,
except the prayers to the gods that never brought any solace,
any change to the stoned hearts of men

And then, one day, she could take no more
and flew with the birds, attached to their tiny tails
ends of beings that can transport you very far away,
set that they are on knowing more that their present condition

The men raged even more and said,
“What now, what will be of us now that she is gone?
No one to call us out and call the gods in,
we are forever doomed,
forever in evening country, our will has no return.”

Let this be a parable for the brute,
a low voice sung from above
in the voice of a willing tenor

She moves

She moves between light like a dancer in the dark,
a character of many talents who can only revel
in the pleasure of others

She leaves traces of her body everywhere she goes
and she goes to many places, constantly somersaulting between here and now,
between her desires and our needs
—a character of many talents that never finds solace in the suffering of others,
only their satiated laughter can cause her to rest

In the kitchen, she creates marvelous and clean meals
that steam our insides melting us into love
our bodies and souls growing to extreme conditions
(unless we are ungrateful and have been unmindful to her dancing light)

In the bedroom, she feeds my brothers and sisters and myself,
her chest against our sorry, sorrowful mouths
and we take and take from her

In the night, when we dream a bad dream,
she comes walking between light, picking us up from the terror we were in
and taking us with her to the bottom of a sparkling, clear, clean river,
where cicadas sing and butterflies are blue with rings on their noses

She moves between light, savvy and dexterous that she is,
or only because that is what is needed,
and she is called to do her best

Gods are those who do on earth
where everything dies
and everything hurts

My Self

My Self is not a mute stone:
it arcs toward the language that the other speaks
that sweet tongue that will extend my bones
and its marrow making me everlasting.

The satiated lioness of the prairies
at the altar of everything.
A flying bird,
transparent, transposing, transposed.

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