

Disrupting the Colonization of Everyday Life

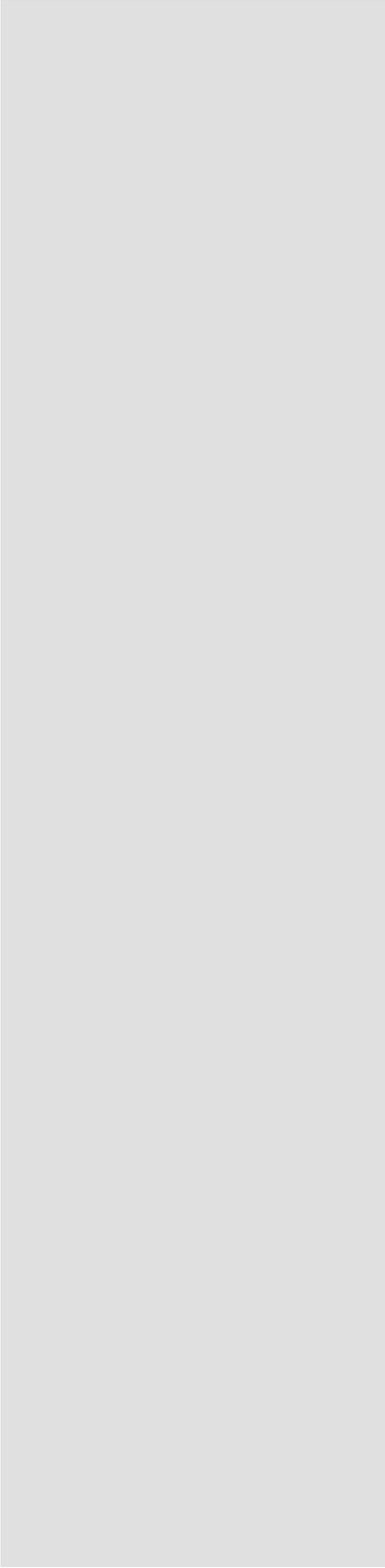


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HAPPY
IS
RESISTANCE

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C. Elizabeth Best



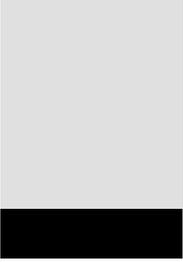
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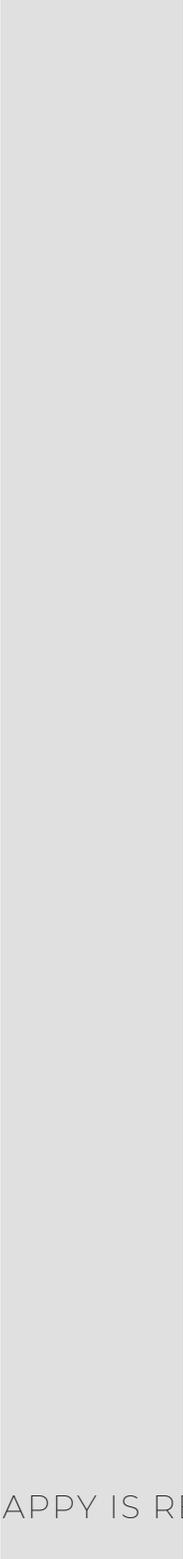
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Happy is Resistance



Colonial processes have always defined my life in ways that are seen and unseen. I am a survivor of Canada's genocidal program to assimilate Indigenous children through so-called "welfare" policies. Whether or not my mother wanted to give me up when I was born is irrelevant. The fact of the matter is that Canada's child welfare system alienated me from community and culture. I was raised by non-Indigenous folks who accept systemic racism as fact. They did nothing to instill pride in where I came from. In fact, they did their best to convince me that alcoholism, sex work, and an inherent inability to raise my own children are characteristics of the blood that flows in my veins. Colonialism is all encompassing: Liberal, Conservative, Left, Right, Provincial, Federal, they are all levels of a system that erases Indigenous history and perpetuate colonialism in Canada. I am not the person who will solve colonial narratives. I will never see a world that is free of colonialism. I am trying to be a happy, functional human in a world where my happiness is not important to the people who judge me by my skin colour. The best I can do is break the cycle of poverty, depression, and reliance on a genocidal state system that defines my family history.

I am an urban Indigenous 2S person living on the territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Neutral Nations. As mixed race Vietnamese and Métis, I am constantly expected to justify my position because the government deems me Native enough for the child welfare system but not Native enough to give me a card. Add a confusing trail of guardian placements between Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Moose Jaw, Manitoulin Island and Southern Ontario and it's fair to be confused about who I am. I am a person in between. Except that my Indigenous identity is inscribed in my skin and my hair and my eyes and it's obvious that I am not the mainstream. I am not fully accepted by Indigenous folks and I will never be welcomed in by the white folks. My mixed identity makes people so uncomfortable that the most common form of racism I face is to be completely ignored. Maybe that's why I am pursuing a PhD: because the title "Doctor" is the only way your people will take what I have to say seriously.

I study Canadian and Indigenous history. I often feel like I am living in an alternate universe where my experience is so outside the Canadian narrative that I don't actually exist. One time a person very close to me told me that my experiences in child welfare would have been the same if I was white. I really believed that nonsense for a while. Then I realized that this person never really listens to what I say, and they will never see me as an expert in the history of my people. Colonialism is forcing survivors to convince you of the validity of their lived experiences through books and articles and lines on a CV. I have to prove to you that what I am saying has colonial impact. The irony is that my child welfare experiences led me to a PhD so early. I have the rest of my life to use your tools to dismantle your systems.

Art is the best way for me to explain what I experience to people who have trouble with the reality that I live. Resistance is who I am. Every day I resist by being present, participating in a system that tries to break me down to easily digestible parts to make you comfortable. Looking to me to solve your problems because I survived your system is not okay. My existence and my art are resistance. Beaded art is time consuming, it's special, it's part of my journey. Beading is how my people express themselves since time immemorial. The fact that I know this skill despite my cultural alienation is resistance. All I can do is make space for the next survivor to come along and continue the fight. To resist is to live my truth no matter how complicated it is. Resistance is finding ways to serve my community. Resistance is finding love and happy to replace trauma and hurt. Happy is resistance.

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ILUMAN YAKU WARMIKUNA

Iluman Woman on the Water

Sara Fuentes Maldonado

This series of photographs was created in honor of the Indigenous Kichwa women of Iluman who fought back in the 80s to protect the water that kept their community alive. These types of narratives are often hidden from textbooks and platforms of recognition. As an indigenous woman from this community I want to honor my abuelita, who showed me a different type of leadership. Due to women like this, more women are encouraged to take up spaces that promote the growth of our communities and future generations.







SHUK MAKIWAN

WITH ONE COLLECTIVE HAND

Growing up, my grandma used to tell me stories every time I went over to her house to eat. One of those stories that brought her so much collective pride was that one time she defended, along other women, the water spring from her community. It is known that San Juan Pokyo comes from the depths of the heart. At that time, many used this water for their sacred rituals, to clean themselves, and to wash their families' clothes.











SHUK SHUNKUWAN

WITH ONE HEART

However, the authorities were taking their water source little by little to feed other emerging cities. Some leaders alarmed the community of this injustice because the community was being left with no water. This started confrontation with the police. Many thought that if women were sent to stand in the waterspring the police would not hurt them. But, the repression continued and they started throwing tear gas at these women.







SHUK YUYAYWAN

WITH ONE MINDSET

The confrontation stopped after the community defeated the police. Our water is the result of a group of women thinking about the future of their generations. Today, there are descendants of these women that beyond looking for recognition they aimed to provide the best for their families. Leadership can look very different everywhere, and small acts such as these are also political.

Sara Fuentes Maldonado

FASHION AS RESISTANCE

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Jennifer Rokaya Sedgewick



In February 2021, Rawiri Waititi (Maori), an MP of the Maori Party in New Zealand, was ejected from Parliament for wearing a heitiki around his neck rather than the mandatory tie for men politicians (1). Waititi referred to the dress-code requirement as a “colonial noose”, declaring that “this party will not be subjugated nor assimilated to dated colonial rules” (2). He won the “tie war” – Parliament removed the requirement.

For her Fall/Winter 2018 collection, Métis fashion designer and visual storyteller Justine Woods revealed her collection of bespoke-tailored suits adorned with vivid palettes of Métis floral beadwork. Woods describes her work as an act of Indigenous resurgence through the “defacement of Western tailored garments”, highlighting that these garments have “a colonial history [that] reflects a status of power, privilege, capitalism, and settler authority” (3).



Since 2011, thousands of Indigenous Peoples from a diversity of Nations demonstrate their cultural pride every second week of November by sharing photos of themselves sporting their moccasins at school or work to social media under the hashtag #RockYourMocs. Ashley Daniels (Dakota Ojibway) discussed the movement’s personal significance in a CBC interview (4): “I’m showing my representation in public spaces, including social media, just to be reminded that we hold these spaces, too”.



Resisting colonialism is not only achieved through formal collective actions like demonstrations or street protests, but also through everyday actions such as our fashion choices. Though sometimes dismissed as a “superficial” or “trivial” topic, how we visually present ourselves (particularly in public) is a significant political statement as exemplified by how clothing, hairstyles, and other means of expressing personal and cultural identities (e.g., tattoos, make-up) have historically been and continue to be weaponized by colonial institutions by penalizing people with appearances that deviate from Eurocentric beauty standards (e.g., gender expression based on one’s gender identity, thin body ideal, “tame” hair, etc.). Contemporary examples of how colonial standards of self-expression are forcefully perpetuated includes workplace dress-codes that claim to be non-discriminatory yet inherently target a specific group of people (“The deadlocks ban applies to everyone in the office, therefore it’s not racist!”), or business schools that grade students on their “professional” appearance (this was literally built into the syllabi of upper-year business courses at my previous institution). Colonial norms are also implicitly reinforced through general socialization, as media messaging, educational institutions, and everyday social interactions communicate that “appropriate” appearances are rewarded (e.g., friend groups, employee promotions) and “inappropriate” ones are punished (e.g., bullying, job discrimination).

These colonial narratives of fashion have not gone unchallenged. As highlighted at the beginning of this section, Indigenous Peoples are disrupting Eurocentric norms of self-expression through direct protest, such as Rawiri Waititi's refusal to wear the mandatory "colonial noose" (a necktie) in Parliament, through political statements that challenge the fashion industry, such as Justine Woods using beadwork to deface garments (suits) that symbolize settler authority, and by confronting colonial norms, such as those posting pictures to social media of themselves "rocking their mocs" within colonial spaces. Although these examples may be perceived as individual "moments", they are part of a movement in which we, Indigenous Peoples, are both asserting and reclaiming how we get to represent ourselves in the world. By decolonizing our closets, we are interrogating colonial notions of "conventional" or "proper" attire, thereby shifting (or at least, challenging) colonial perceptions of normative practices of self-expression.





Me, in front of the Administration Building at the University of Saskatchewan (my previous university)

For me (and presumably many others), “decolonizing my closet” personally symbolizes my agency in disrupting the settler colonial project from Indigenous erasure. As a Métis/English woman with a mother who was adopted during the Sixties Scoop and whose maternal ancestors were forcefully removed by the Canadian government from their/our settlements at Batoche and previously, Red River, I feel an overwhelming responsibility to reconnect and reclaim my Métis identity as a means of resisting the intentional ways that Canada has tried to eliminate or assimilate us (and other Indigenous Peoples, more broadly) into the settler population. I also feel that reclamation is important for honouring the sacrifices that many of my ancestors made to hide their Métis identity to avoid further colonial violence and oppression. One of my uncles went so far as to change his last name from “Fiddler” to “Fleming”, as “Fiddler” blatantly signaled his Métis identity in his city of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Celebrating my cultural pride in a public way honours those ancestors, indicates to other disconnected or reconnecting Indigenous Peoples that we can proudly express our cultural identity, and is a visual reminder that Canada failed to erase us. We are still here, louder than ever.

Perhaps it seems like reclaiming one’s Indigeneity through clothing and other means of self-expression is relatively effortless. This has not been the case for me. After learning that I was Métis when I was 18 after my mom found her biological mother, Marie “Dolly” Fiddler, it took me approximately ten years of extensive learning about my family and connecting with suburban Indigenous communities before feeling like I was “allowed to” or even deserving of wearing anything that signaled my Indigeneity – I just didn’t feel “Indigenous enough”. I can’t pinpoint a specific moment when I felt inspired to reclaim my Indigeneity in a self-expressive way, but one of several reasons why I resisted my own cultural imposter syndrome was knowing that if I continued to repress a part of myself that was purposefully taken away by the Canadian state, I would essentially be endorsing cultural genocide against my own people.



Fay (my mom) wearing her birthday beaded earrings



Mark (my brother) sporting his Métis ballcap while waiting for some bannock at Back To Batoche



Me, wearing earrings by Indi City and a Métis beaded flower pin that I made

COVID mask but make it Indigenous: Me in a Kokum scarf mask



In my office at the Schulich School of Business wearing a robe by Lisa Shepherd (a Métis artist) covered in images of beadwork

Today, I adorn myself with beadwork by Indigenous artists (e.g., Savage Rose, THIS CLAW), use make-up by Indigenous-owned brands (e.g., Cheekbone Beauty Cosmetics), and wear clothes by Indigenous designers (e.g., Lisa Shephard, Dommivera) in my everyday life. My self-expression, as I hope I've articulated in my zine contribution, is not just an aesthetic choice, it's an intentional political statement. When I proudly wear my beaded earrings, when a Maori MP trades his necktie for a hei-tiki, or when thousands of Indigenous Peoples slip on their moccasins upon entering colonial spaces, it symbolizes that Indigenous Peoples are disrupting the very institutions that have historically (and albeit, continuously) tried to deny us from entering. Aside from its symbolism towards the public, it's a personal reminder of the emotional, mental, and spiritual work that I've done to embrace my cultural pride and identity. This pride in my self and my People fuels my spirit with power and resilience as I navigate the physical and bureaucratic spaces of academia where I'm currently undertaking graduate studies.



Although it may not resemble a petition or a protest, Indigenous Peoples representing their authentic selves through their own fashions and self-expression is a silent but deeply symbolic political statement, both confronting and disrupting colonial narratives of “normative” dress through “ordinary”, everyday actions.

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1. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-feb-10-2021-1.5908372/maori-new-zealand-mp-ejected-from-parliament-gets-dated-tie-policy-thrown-out-1.5908564>
2. https://twitter.com/Rawiri_Waititi/status/1358968913510338564
3. <https://www.justinewoods.com/f-w-18-collection>
4. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/rock-your-mocs-week-1.5356530>

Photo Credits

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Portrait of Rawiri Waititi - Rawiri Waititi/Facebook

Justine Woods' Bespoke suits - <https://www.justinewoods.com/f-w-18-collection>

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Left: SECTION 35 jackets - <https://www.sectionthirtyfive.com/>

Middle-left: THE NTVS' Not For Sale Spray t-shirt by Steven Paul Judd -

<https://www.thentvs.com/shop/not-for-sale-spray-steven-paul-judd-limited-preorder>

Middle-right: Killer Whale Crosshatch' Face Mask by Curtis Wilson -

<https://www.beadeddreams.ca/collections/indigenous-face-masks/products/killer-whale-crosshatch-face-mask-by-curtis-wilson>

Right: Earrings by Indi City - <https://www.indicity.ca/>

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<https://wjmouat.abbyschools.ca/events/rock-your-mocs-week>

Remaining images are my own