To Witness Laxyip:
Continuous Gitxsan Material Practices

by
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Abstract

Following alongside Gitxsan thinkers Xsiwis Dr. M. Jane Smith, Hahl Yee Doreen Jensen, and the Delgamuukw court case, *To Witness Laxyip* draws together significant Gitxsan history along with visual works to discuss continuing relations and realities within a changing Laxyip (ancestral Gitxsan Lands). Indigenous land-based relational material practices are discussed while current, altered, land relations and climate anxieties are addressed through visual works. The Gitxsan methodologies of recognition and validation were followed, as stated by Delgamuukw, which include the display of crests or visual connections, the formal telling of histories, the performance of songs and compositions, and finally to be witnessed and to give offerings. Each of these steps has been attended to through the ancient practices of stitching, weaving, carving, mixed with the new strategies of audio, video, and photo work.

Acknowledgements

T'oyaxsii’niin Laxyip, thank you Land, I always treasure the time I spend time with you.

My teachers and loved ones have been an incredible force on my learning and practice, therefore I would like to thank them here out of respect.

My gratitude goes out to my family for their support. My grandparents. My mothers and fathers. My sisters. My aunties and uncles. My nieces and nephews. Ancestors. Each of you hold space in my heart.

To my mentors at the Freda Diesing School including Master Carver Dempsey Bob, Stan Bevan, Ken McNeil. And to Ya’ya, Vanessa Morgan, Donna Harris, Valerie Morgan, Brenda Crabtree, and Roxanne Charles. T’oyaxsii’n’isim, thank you all.

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I want to thank the Gitanmaax Band Council for their support in my studies, I wouldn’t have gotten this far without their support. Indspire helped me to get through the hard times in Tkaronto, so far away from home, while I completed my studies. Thanks to the OCADU Graduate Research Travel Grant, I was able to visit the Canadian Museum of History. T’oyaxsii’nisim, thanks to all who support Indigenous students breaking into and out of the post-secondary world.

Lastly, and importantly, t'oyaxsii’niin to the Lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, and the Huron-Wendat, the ancestral area known as Tkaronto for hosting me as an uninvited guest.

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Gitsanimx Guide [Gitxsan Language to English meaning]

The following words are listed here because they have been important in my language learning; many are words that represent the materials I work with, and therefore I have a relationship with. I would like to thank First Voices[1] and the language teachers and speakers who have kept our incredible language(s) alive despite persecution. I acknowledge that some of these terms may be incorrect to the Eastern Gitxsan dialect, as it is written as it was learned and remembered.

Adaawk | Wilp (house) histories
Aks | Water
Amluux | Red alder
Ant'imalhlasxw | Public Gitxsan origin stories
Ayookw | Gitxsan law
Enluut'aa | Nest
Gan | Tree
Gitanmaax | The Gitxsan community of People Who Fish by Torchlight
Gitxsan | People of Xsi'yeen / people of the River of Mists
Gitsanimx |Gitxsan Language
Gusliis | Niece or nephew
Gwiis gan m'ala | Robe of power / button blanket / blanket-robe
Haawak' | Birch tree / wood
Halh Yee | An ancestral Gitxsan name as held by artist Doreen Jensen
Ha'miyaa | Thanks
Hana'k | Womxn / woman
Hat'e'l | Cedar bark
Hloxs | Sun
Hloxsim axw |Moon
Lax ha | Sky and heavens
Laxyip | Gitxsan Lands / relations to territory
Sigidim hana'k | Matriarchs
Medeek | Lake Grizzly Bear Spirit
Miso' | Sockeye salmon

[1] www.firstvoices.com is the website I frequent to learn Gitsenimx. This website hosts many of the Indigenous languages within Canada.

Neks’y | My partner
‘Nit | Hello
Nisga’a | A Nation of people, our neighbours
Nixdaa | Auntie
Oo’tsin | Spirit / soul
Plast’ikw | Plastic in my world
Sim gan | Cedar tree / real wood
Simgiget | Chiefs
Sim’oogit | Chief
T'ikw | Belly button
T'oyaxsii’n’iin | Relational thank you
T’oyaxsii’nisim | I thank you all
Tsm’syen | AKA Tsimshian people, our neighbours
Wehlin gigyet | Ancestors
‘Wii Mukwillixw |An ancestral Gitxsan name as held by artist Art Wilson
Wilksiwitxw | One’s father’s relations / the immediate family of your dad’s Wilp (House)
Wilp | Maternal House group
Wooms | A medicine commonly known as devil’s club
Xsi’yeen | River of Mists / Skeena River
Xsiwis | An ancestral Gitxsan name as held by Dr. M. Jane Smith
Ya’ya | An ancestral Gitxsan name as held by artist Chuck Heit
Yukw | Gitxsan Feast system

Chapter One: Salmon Back to the River - The Display of Crests and Symbolic Connections

"The land, the plants, the animals and the people all have spirit – they all must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law."

Sim'oogit Delgamuukw, 1987.

'Nit (hello). Welcome to these pages that bring together my witnessing thus far.

I write these words as though I were to speak in front of my elders. I write these words as though I am speaking them to the next generations of my Gitxsan communities.

Spacing out these statements slows the speed of reading, thereby allowing you to step into a Gitxsan pace and frame of communication. A spoken voice is closer in rhythm with the beat of carving, weaving, and stitching. My spoken voice allows me to feel more comfortable with writing and bringing my ideas together.

This spoken voice allows me to communicate directly, as taking your time and the concept of hagwi' yeen (walk softly) are important to Gitxsan learning. That way, we take care with each statement and give room for pause between ideas.

Witnessing is an honored role for us Gitxsan. I continue this practice while I harvest, process, and create. Through this document, I am inviting you to join me in extending

the act of witnessing.

T'oyaxsy'siin (thank you) for joining me through this journey.

Situating myself is an important aspect of Gitxsan methodologies. I am a mixed[2] Gitxsan nixdaa (auntie) with family and membership from the village of Gitanmaax (Old Hazelton), within so-called northern British Columbia, in settler dominated Canada.

I grew up in northern British Columbia, mostly in Terrace, with some formative years in Hazelton and Gitanmaax.

Gitanmaax means *People who Fish by Torchlight*, which relates back to a story about a woman who adapted her fishing practices in order to feed herself and her family.[3] I will not recite this entire story now, but it is important to note that her careful shift in fishing methods allowed her to keep her family well, and that the story has been kept alive to this day.

When most people hear of the Gitxsan Nation, they often immediately think of

[2] My father's side is Gitxsan and German while my mother is Scottish and Welsh/English.

[3] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 85-87; Neil J. Sterritt, *Mapping My Way Home: A Gitxsan History* (Creekstone Press Ltd, 2016) 33-37.

Delgamuukw v British Columbia, a landmark case where our Nation brought colonial Canada to court.[4] Or they jump to the more recent blockades of pipelines. Such events have shown how Gitxsan are inherently political because our Nation has practiced forms of refusal and care, even in the face of militarized weapons.[5]

Gitxsan have witnessed their Laxyip (Lands) change dramatically, especially since contact with newcomers. The first established trading outpost on the Skeena Watershed was created by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1822,[6] and within the two hundred and one years since, Gitxsan people have had to adapt to living with entirely new ways of being.

The strategized seizure of rights and access to Laxyip has caused on-going tension as Gitxsan law was forcefully suspended in the 20th century and occupied instead with settler colonial concepts of relationality.

But Gitxsan-Laxyip relations have remained deeply entwined. Gitxsan people have

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[4] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 33.

[5] Art Wilson, in *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist: Records, Injustice and Resistance* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996), pp. 50-51; Don Monet and Skanu'u, *Colonialism on Trial: Indigenous Land Rights and the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Sovereignty Case* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992); Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 16-17.

[6] Neil J. Sterritt, *Mapping My Way Home: A Gitxsan History* (Creekstone Press Ltd, 2016) 102.

always expressed their realities, relations, and their knowing through visual and oral forms of expression.

I am interested in how Gitxsan respond to Land relation changes, especially while I am experiencing living in a large city at a time when climate anxiety is at its peak.

This concern informs my questions for my Master's research. Those questions are:

If Gitxsan identity has historically relied on reciprocal relationships to place, how does the current and future stresses of Laxyip (Lands) affect relationality, witnessing, and care?

How does this inform our ways of making, performing, and learning visual and oral languages? And how does this grieving inform this learning?

The research for my master's started the moment I left the west coast. I moved to Toronto, Treaty 13 Lands, which are the traditional territories of the the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. It is also the most populated place in Canada.

From growing up near but far from my father's village, I have learned how to be a guest

on other Nations territories. It means not assuming access to the other living beings but witnessing the (im)balances that may be apparent.

Toronto is very different from the small rural communities in the north that I come from. Terrace British Columbia has a population of around 14,000 people. It is a forestry town located in Tsm'syen territory, closest to Kitsumkalum and Kitselas villages.

Driving from Ts'msyen territory all the way to the Great Lakes, I got to see visual cues of Canadian-land relations change from organized to uncontrolled, even witnessing the devastation of the summer 2021 wildfires.[7]

Moving all this way, from Terrace to Toronto, was to pursue education that was not available in the north, and to visit at museums that house ancestor belongings which were removed from Laxyip so long ago.

I began with zero connections to this place now called Toronto and a willingness to work through my practice in new ways. I came with traditional Land-based skills, few materials, and a recent experience with deep grief from losing my father to alcohol.

[7] The fires from summer 2021 happened after extensive heat waves, and resulted in the entire community of Lytton being evacuated. Most of the town and reserve then burned to the ground in record time on June 30th, 2021. These fires stretched into the interior, burning up the mountain sides like dry timber.

Three main things happened during this research:

First, I continued reading the Gitxsan origin stories that I have been taking in for the past 5 years; this was one of my ways to deal with the pressures of living in the city and reading heavy academic theory. It also helps me to start slowly learning Gitsenimx (Gitxsan language) in a visual way. Gitxsan origin stories continue to ground me in my thinking toward our collective futures by seeing how they dealt with issues in the past.

It is a conscious decision that I am primarily sharing published Gitxsan voices of our Nation's origin stories. As Xsiwis explains, sharing adaawk (house stories) with the public is against Gitxsan law; only ant'imalhlasxw (public origin stories not owned by any particular clan or house group), such as origin and adventure stories, can be openly shared and represented by artists and writers.[8] With this in mind, I am reflecting with what has been previously consented to being shared by members of my community.

Second, I experienced a lack of access to traditional making materials while away from my homelands. My creative practice includes a central aspect of following Gitxsan

[8] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 60. Xsiwis graciously reminds us of important Gitxsan protocols. Although an artist can really paint anything, we must be careful to not unintentionally share someone else's family history. These are ancient protocols for protecting intellectual property.

harvesting cycles which embraces visiting Laxyip daily. I also felt incredibly home sick.

It is against Gitxsan protocols to harvest in someone else's territory without permission. This pushed me to new material relations, including weaving with plastic, working with bought fabrics, while also forming new relationships with these materials that I did not traditionally harvest from Laxyip.

This fact gave me space to reflect on the act of traditional harvesting as refusal, protection, and care within my own relational territories. In turn I began to consider harvesting as acts of Land relations.

Gitxsan-Laxyip relationality is embedded in every aspect of the works created. Colonial-land relations have created unbalanced stress on Lands and prohibited the ways that people can interact with Laxyip and Lands.

Metis scholar Max Liboiron frames pollution as a symptom of colonialism. This pushed me to rethink our own on-going relationships with materials that we use to create with or learn from. As much as I missed home, I had to remember how my harvesting practices become relational, care-full, and reflect my principles as a modern-day Gitxsan nixdaa.

Finally for this research, I went to the Canadian Museum of History (CMH) for private collections visit in August 2022. I had also witnessed the Royal Ontario Museum, The Art Gallery of Ontario, the New York Museum of Natural History, and the New York Museum of the American Indian during this research period.

Even with each of the beautiful displays and accompanied text, it was the personal collections visit at the Canadian Museum of History that I felt really close to the creations from Laxyip, it almost felt like I was back home. There in the archives, I was in-person, surrounded by countless Gitxsan and other Nations' hand-made relational creations, ones that I had dreamed of visiting for several years.

While at the private collections visit at the CMH, I spoke Gitsenmix (Gitxsan language) to each of the pieces. They were not objects just seen in online catalogs and in books, they were like relatives. At the end of each day at the Museum, I felt exhausted from how stimulated I was, being witness to each familial belonging.

I was filled with a diverse range of emotions when spending time in the archives. While so grateful for the moment, inspired and perplexed at the skill level, yet incredibly sad and shook that many of these pieces had been taken and are still held far distances from where they were originally intended to be.

This visit allowed me to connect grief with Laxyip as a relational response, with grief also acting as expressions of care and healing.

I have chosen to incorporate Gitsenimx̲ language into this written version of the text because I am learning our language, and this is intended for a Gitx̲san audience. I don't see the point in doing research if it doesn't serve my communities or Laxyip.

I am using the term Laxyip to express the relationality that Gitx̲san have towards their traditional territories. The English word *land* does not properly express the meaning of what I am trying to say, as generally it refers to colonial-land relations.[9] It is also capitalized to continually remind that every being has spirit, especially Laxyip.

This text will serve my community and the waters that nourished me by bringing to light the resilience of Gitx̲san relationalities.

Gitx̲san relationality is diverse and constantly changing, but consistencies can be found in our language, practices, kinship systems, and in other subtle ways we think and relate

[9] Max Liboiron, "Pollution Is Colonialism," in *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021), 60. T'oyaxsy'niin Max for your work unpacking Land and land relations, each term has intricate meanings depending on emphasis and use. Their relational citation format has helped me decide the best ways for myself to share ideas and work through text. Therefore, I am following them by emphasizing L for Indigenous Land relations and decapitalizing the currently dominant colonial-land relations as a small way to take power back in our relational ways.

to ourselves, Laxyip, and community.

Hahl Yee Doreen Jensen explains in an interview, “traditionally, in my culture the role of the artist has been to record family histories,” and that, “the chiefs were called in from the surrounding areas to witness it. Art is a holistic thing, it tells the history of the people and it is a way of communicating that history from one generation to the next.”[10] Gitxsan making has shifted over time but the intention of sharing relations and history can be said to be an ongoing practice.

I thank each of you for performing the essential role of being a witness to my learning and sharing. Having witnesses to public statements is an essential aspect of truth telling for Gitxsan people in our traditional political system called the yukw (feast).[11]

Witnessing and offering go hand in hand because to ask someone to witness business you must pay them for their time. I will pay my witnesses through sharing my transformative ideas, my visual and audio works, and gifting woodchips during and after the exhibition.

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[10] BC Studies, *BC Studies*, 1997, pp. 289-306, 290-291.

[11] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 33.

Gitxsan history displays witnessing and resulting stories often share perspectives from other animals and beings. This shows that for Gitxsan there is a deeper relational understanding of how we come to know, appreciate, and share what would be considered a reality.

Gitanmaax community member Xsiwis Dr. M. Jane Smith has brought together an in-depth understanding of Gitxsan traditional education, relationality, and belief through an insider community lens. Xsiwis grew up with her elders and returns to ant'imalhlasxw (public Gitxsan origin stories not owned by any particular clan or house group) to understand the underlying ethics of care that Gitxsan carry and how that is passed on through educational storytelling.

Each story, each part of our oral histories relates to different parts of Laxyip and the natural and spiritual worlds that are a part of Gitxsan reality. These oral histories are seen as true and sacred for Gitxsan people, as they have been purposefully passed down generation by generation, to protect the future Gitxsan.

Xsiwis expresses the importance of the Gitxsan values and principles of yahlxw wila yeet'

(harmony), luu hix hogix (balance), and naadahahlhakwlhinhl (interconnectedness), [12] a worldview that generated a culture around respect for all of life. These principles of respect and care can further be observed in Gitxsan methodologies, phrases, and ceremony.

The Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en simgiget (chiefs), particularly Gisday Wa and Delgamuukw, during the court battle for jurisdiction and stewardship of Laxyip, have left a significant testimony of their histories and how Gitxsan-Laxyip relations differ from colonial-land relations.

I wish to talk less about land claims, the common colonial practices of resource extraction, or the impending doom of climate change, but more how Gitxsan see the world, and how an expressive material practice can be a way to process and express witnessing of realities.

I gained insight from these simgigyet (chiefs) that for Gitxsan, "there are no accidents,"

[12] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 12. Xsiwis has created and shared several books and songs and has long been an active teacher in the Gitxsan territories. Her work unpacking Gitxsan epistemologies and relationalities continues to have a far-reaching impact on Gitxsan of all ages, and beyond. T'oyaxsy'niin (thank you) Xsiwis.

[13] and that "everything has spirit.*"[14]* None, and everything, it felt very definitive, but once I really took this in it started making sense.

Though I didn't grow up with my elders, with clan stories, or traditional Gitxsan worldviews, when reflecting on those statements as principles, I could make connections to things I had been told and shown in my childhood. These statements represent an ethics of respectful practices towards relations and an appreciation of learning from all kinds of challenges.

My approach is guided by the Gitxsan methodologies of recognition and validation, which include the display of crests or visual connections; the formal telling of hi/stories; the performance of songs or compositions; to be witnessed and to give offerings.[15]

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[13] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 33. These words left for us are also gifts for the Gitxsan of today because we can continuously reflect on their meanings even if we are physically distant. T'oyaxsy'nisim simgiget (chiefs) and their supporters for these rich resources that I continue to reflect with.

[14] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 7.

[15] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 26. Thanks to these chiefs, and to the many community members and allies involved in Delgamuukw, I have been able to think deeper with our Gitxsan-Laxyip relations. These methods as stated were incredibly helpful in finding my methodologies to marry with my creative process, in finding guidance for this research.

These are ancient, essential methods for upholding truth telling, acknowledgement, and law, and are methods still practiced in the Gitxsan yukw (feast system) today.

These methodologies are represented through each chapter being offered in conjunction with the visual material made, which includes a stitched and appliqued blanket-robe, a woven Land Defence nest, carved masks with accompanied video installation, a steamed and carved bentwood chest, and gifts of woodchips, sound recordings and words.

The Gitxsan material culture methods I practice are carving, weaving, stitching, harvesting, witnessing and storytelling, which have been a central aspect of my life for just over ten years now.

The nixdaa (aunty) methods I practice are guiding, protecting, caring, gifting and teasing. I was disconnected with my own aunties by physical distance, but I quickly learned how to be an auntie from living so close with my first niece when I was only a child. Naturally, I took to making her laugh, helping her learn, and keeping her company. Now I set an example by using my practice to discuss critical issues.

My father and uncles helped me balance becoming nixdaa (auntie) with finding peace just being on Laxyip, while my older sisters and my mom showed me the feminine

nurturing aspect. I am grateful to have been taught stitching by my mother and fishing by my fathers, these are practices that make me feel whole.

A main understanding that I am working from is that our history as Gitxsan is growing each day through what we witness. Delgamuukw stated, "the histories of my House are always being added to… Through the witnessing of all the histories, century after century, we have exercised our jurisdiction."[16]

Gitxsan and other Indigenous Nations have been portrayed as a stagnant, dying-out culture by ethnographers and early settlers. What was not understood is that the cultures and expressions never stopped, they just shifted according to emergent relations.

One example of this shift in practice is the Gwiis gan m'ala (Gitxsan button and appliqued blanket-robes)[17] which were traditionally made from animal skins and furs, certain robes were then painted, quilled, and shelled to represent crest designs.

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[16] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 8.

[17] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000). Hahl Yee Doreen Jensen looked closer at the language of the Gitsenimx term and found that the meaning is closer to 'robe of power'. I am following her lead in mostly calling them blanket-robes, though I grew up knowing them as button blankets.

I witnessed some of the oldest traditional robes which are held in New York, some of those older robes were quilled skins which represent crests. Others had bone, shell, or beak carved noise-makers dangling from garments.

The ceremonial robes from Gitxsan communities materially shifted to wool with smooth buttons when the fur trade made machine processed items easier to access, while fur and skins became exceedingly hard to access due to over-poaching.[18]

Some people didn't see the wool blanket-robes as traditional because the cloth and buttons were made from outside of the community. As Hahl Yee Doreen Jensen notes in *Robes of Power,* the publication for the coinciding exhibition that she curated in 1985, "the blanket cloth had little appeal, was not "really Indian," as one said. The truth escaped them: the materials are indeed non-Indian, but the artistry and original purposes are wholly Indian."[19]

[18] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 80. T'oyaxsy'niin Hahl Yee (Doreen Jensen), her work of uplifting artists across the coast allows many generations to witness the diverse arts of our people. She also taught herself how to carve and sculpt, was one of the founding organizers of Kitanmaax School of Indian Art and will always be one of the first recorded female carvers in Gitxsan territory. Her publication discusses in detail the politics of the blanket-robe changing over time, while also reflecting on material access and resulting meanings.

[19] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 79.

This shows how Indigenous people had to adapt quickly to contact with outsiders, but how they continually brought their original beliefs and customs into their new realities and creations.

Doreen Jensen further explains how blanket-robes were initially made to represent the crest of the wearer, but that contemporary artists began to create new crest designs that are not traditional to the communities they belong to, and how some artists have even represented public origin stories through their blankets.[20]

One example of such creation was by Tahltan and Tlingit artists Linda Bob and Dempsey Bob, with their collaborative work *Raven and Salmon Blanket* (1985). The blanket-robe depicts the salmon origin story of their Nations, which can be understood as an expression of their Land and community relations. The design on the button-robe is Raven spreading salmon eggs in each stream, along with floral beadwork on the sides.

Dempsey Bob has been a main teacher of mine for several years; he invited me to see this piece in-person when they travelled to the Toronto area for his touring retrospective exhibition *Wolves: The Art of Dempsey Bob* at the McMichael Gallery in December of 2022.

[20] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 79.

Dempsey and Linda were accompanied by their sisters and nephews, and invited neks'y (my partner) Angelo Cavagnaro, who is also from the Wolf Clan, to dance with them as an opening ceremony for the exhibition. They took out their dancing specific blanket-robes, headdresses, and ceremonial bags, and lent some regalia to Angelo.

These were special moments because it is an honour to be witness as the ceremonial garb is activated by the Wolf dancers through power of ancestral memory. T'oyaxsy'niin (Thank you) to Dempsey and his family.

Contemporary Indigenous artists have represented new crests, stories, and realities through the methods of making a ceremonial button-robe. In 1985 Doreen Jensen asked, "who will take over where *Robes of Power* leaves off?"[21]

It was in 2010 that Tsimshian, Gitxsan and Cree artist Skeena Reece brought together commissioned modern regalia to embody "a contemporary fe/male warrior figure"[22] through her performance *Raven: On the Colonial Fleet* for the 17th Biennale in Sydney.

[21] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 79.

[22] Kathleen Ritter and Tania Willard, *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2012), 43. This was a legendary moment for modern Indigenous arts and is revered by my generation. T'oyaxsy'nisim to these curators for their work.

A Plains-style feathered headdress, a painted corset, a beaded skirt, and a grenade crest appliquéd button blanket-robe each do their part to express her relationality. Reece describes much of her work as "sacred clowning"[23] through presenting performances as a way to spark conscious thought regarding difficult topics, especially Indigenous politics which are often ignored within dominant society.

The not-so-subtle inclusion of the grenade as crest design on her button-robe may suggest that her relations can be understood as in on-going danger. It also implies that she is prepared to stand her own ground and show how powerful she is as a warrior.

Further Gitxsan contemporary interpretations of the button-robe include Gitxsan artist Yolonda Skelton, who has adapted Gitxsan cultural aesthetic into urban fashion wear which has been presented at the Vancouver Indigenous Fashion Week and beyond. Urban Indigenous events such as these continue to grow, uplift, and inspire possibility for Indigenous makers and performers who are both metro and rural based.

Gitxsan and Kwakwaka'wakw artist Valerie Morgan makes contemporary and traditional formal feast wear for members of the communities in the north. These ladies are

[23] Kathleen Ritter and Tania Willard, *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2012), 43.

masters of applique and stitch work, every thread is on point with clean cut designs in wool or ultra-suede material.

Both of these artists have taught blanket-robe workshops in the urban setting as well as on reserve, sharing cultural methods of displaying identity with generations of Gitxsan and people from surrounding nations. T'oyaxsy'nisim (thanks to each) of these ladies for pushing their understanding of these cultural artforms. A special ha'miyaa (thanks) to Valerie Morgan and Bobby Morgan for their teachings in applique and button blanket-robes before this research began, between 2020 and 2021.

Through witnessing the creative acts of these people, I learned that I was able to tell a story through a blanket-robe about who my relations are, expressed in an alternative way. I created a contemporary blanket-robe as a way to introduce myself to my audience and follow the Gitxsan methodology of displaying your crests or visual connections.

Dempsey Bob has said "when we wear our blankets, we show our face. We show who we are and where we come from."[24] It is an important methodology to state your familial affiliation because the Gitxsan and their neighbors have a complex kinship

[24] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 6.

system that follows matrilineal lines.

I have struggled in the past with knowing that I belong to no matrilineal Clan or House, as I am Gitxsan through my father only. However, I have been supported by my Wilksiwitxw (Father House relations) in times of celebration and through grief, and know that this is an important relationality that I am able to express in my own way.[25]

Salmon Back To The River (2023) blanket is my representation of the teachings I have inherited and which have nurtured my being. I am representing how both of my Gitxsan fathers' taught me to fish and most importantly bring the salmon guts and bones back to the river where it was taken. I had to meditate on the childhood I had with my fathers', past the struggles and focus into the ways of being and acts of Gitxsan care.

Traditionally the middle of a Gitxsan blanket-robe would be my main crest, or main relational teaching. This is where I represent Xsi'yeen (Skeena River) and the salmon guts transforming into new life.

The First Salmon Celebration, a Gitxsan origin story as recorded by Xsiwis, reminds the

[25] Adams, John W. *The Gitksan Potlatch: Population Flux, Resource Ownership and Reciprocity*. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1973) 38-39. There are important notes in here about ones father's house/ family. This is important for people who are mixed or have been displaced, to know that there is always support and a place for us to witness, connect, and contribute to.

future Gitxsan to take only what they need, that everything has spirit, to be thankful and practice protocol when harvesting, as a way to respect all lifeforms.[26]

This is an ancient story that has been passed along breath by breath for thousands of years to ensure survival and wellness for all of Laxyip.

Since moving to Toronto, I have brought back my salmon bones to the Humber River and given seedy cereal and tea leaves to the birds that reside near me. This is how I enact Gitxsan care in the most populated city in Canada.[27]

Salmon is the most important source of nutrients for the Gitxsan people, historically and to this day. I had learned as a child to carefully avoid the bigger bones when the fish was mixed in with rice. My parents were always given a few fish each summer from family and friends, and I watched as they knew exactly how to handle and clean the salmon, but I never learned the entire process until I begged my father right before I moved away for my undergrad.

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[26] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 77-80.
The First Salmon Celebration, a Gitxsan origin story as recorded by Xsiwis, it has also been recorded through Delgamuukw and Ken Harris.

[27] Even these small acts of care, these Gitxsan offerings were not always easy to conduct. The natural spaces that are sectioned off in the city are still mainly reserved for off-leash dogs, with no place reserved for Indigenous offerings, unbothered. I personally believe that the Indigenous people of today deserve to experience peaceful, protected spaces where they can make offerings, perform protocol, and harvest on the Land.

In the summer of 2016, my dad showed me the entire process of jarring fish. At sunset we brought the bones and the guts back to the river. I now understand that bringing the salmon remains back to Xsi'yeen was the most important learning aspect of the process. It was an act of Gitxsan care for Laxyip and miso' (sockeye salmon). It is an undertaking that is written in our histories.

The First Salmon Celebration, as recorded by Xsiwis, tells of the care needed when harvesting, preparing and eating salmon.[28] The story involves a Gitxsan man getting lost and then meeting the Salmon People. He became aware that the Salmon People have entire Nations, that they get upset with careless treatment at their deaths.

In the story, the Gitxsan person was given permission by the Salmon People to go back to the Gitxsan villages and inform them of the level of care that was needed when taking the life of the salmon, otherwise, they warned that they would not return.[29]

[28] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 77-80.

[29] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 85-87. Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 49. These are the kind of stories from our nation that helped to form Gitxsan relationalities and ethics. We name ourselves after the river that gives us life, Git (people) Xsan (river).

Every year, the Gitxsan still practice carefully collecting, dressing, and sharing the first catch of the year with the rest of the village, then carefully taking care to return the bones and guts by water or by fire, as has been done for centuries.

I have brought this ancient history together with my own fishing and processing memories. The resulting fabric blanket-robe represents a modern understanding of Gitxsan-Laxyip relationality.

To gather the fabrics for my button blanket, I went to a wool shop in Toronto and to the Textile Museum of Canada. I talked to some really nice people. I waited for sales, and I purchased materials. I sat with them for a while, felt them and got to know them.

There is no fabric store back home anymore, so this felt like a relaxing treat in comparison to the labour-intensive simgan (cedar tree), hat'e'l (cedar bark), amluux (alder), and wooms (devils club) harvesting that I do seasonally. Still, I longed for the time and energy that it takes to process the natural materials. I missed out on several harvesting seasons while being away from Laxyip.

Red fabric was chosen as a base because the colour traditionally equates to Laxyip, and I have been told it also represents associations with the female. It represents here the Gitxsan and Tsm'syen (Tsimshian) Laxyip that nurtured me as I grew up. The red

happened to be the end of the fabric roll so I did not get to decide the overall blanket-robe size, but I found out quickly that it would be a suitable size for my short body if ever worn, though that isn't the intended use.

Blue and green wools are used to embody Xsi'yeen **(**Skeena River), where I was taught to fish relationally and to bring back any remains. Deep burgundy wool represents the organs of the salmon through Gitxsan motifs as well as eggs. The burgundy design depicts the salmon remains flowing and transforming back to life through the streams of Xsi'yeen.

West coast dentalium shells were used to outline the crest in ancestral times. Several blankets I visited at the museums were designed with dentalium, but modern ones are rarely decorated with them. Centuries ago, these little shells were carefully harvested from the Pacific Ocean, then traded across the continent like currency.[30]

I had two types of dentalium, one from a store back home, and one from a store near Toronto, but I had never worked with it before. It was becoming popular with the recent rise of Indigenous bling. I knew the shells get too skinny at one end for a needle, as I had inspected the blankets held in museums.

[30] Thanks to my primary advisor Peter Morin for reminding me of the intensive labour that these little shells took to harvest, process, and trade.

Slowly, I began to saw the thin end of a shall with a fine jewellers saw, as I had learned to do with abalone in the past. Soon, the thin end flew off, ricocheting off the wall.

I began to snap them by hand, and they easily came off, leaving the thicker part of the cylindrical shell so that I can sew them on like long beads. I enjoyed the sound of them snapping, so I recorded the sounds. I attached just a few of these shell beads onto the blanket in reference to salmon bones, and the salmon returning less each year.

Wooms (devils club) is an ancient Gitxsan medicine, it was carefully harvested and hand processed in Laxyip. I then cut the dried stalk into button slivers and lightly sanded each piece. The individual pieces were then fastened to the wool by its inner pith marrow with thread, in reference to the backbone of the salmon alongside the dentalium bones.

Lastly, the black wool border encloses and protects the design, the inner border being the only lines done by a sewing machine. The colour black is said to primarily be a male associated colour in our tradition.[31]

For *Salmon Back to the River* blanket, there is a full border on the perimeter because it

[31] Jensen Doreen and Polly Sargent, *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 77.

will act mostly as a wall hanging depicting my relational connections. Gitxsan generally store their ceremonial blanket-robes in bentwood boxes or other special containers, otherwise hang it in their homes to represent their family in that way. I was also taught to do a full border on my first blanket-robe which became a wall hanging as it was smaller in size, it was gifted to my partner's mother.

In the exhibition that accompanies this text, the blanket is presented suspended from the ceiling using four stitched-in over-sized brass rings and fishing line. This was a hanging method witnessed on an ancient Gitxsan blanket-robe at the Canadian Museum of History, except that the brass rings were small and barely noticeable.

It is still unclear if this hanging method was implemented by the ancestral blanket-robe maker, the original blanket-robe owner, or by past museum curators. In any case, this detail was spotted, reflected on, and rendered more noticeable through my contemporary blanket-robe.

With the blanket suspended a meter away from the wall, it allows the viewer to walk around and see each hand-made stitch. It is a repetitive practice that requires mindful focus.

This blanket-robe is a way to locate on-going Gitxsan ways of being through personal

stories of learning with Laxyip. Relating these moments to the larger community stories of our nation brings together common relationalities which prioritize an ethics of care.

Gitxsan ant'imalhlasxw (public Gitxsan origin stories) tell of what happens when protocols of care are forgotten or remains are disrespected. Laxyip and the spirits disrupt human life to teach people lessons of how to be considerate and respectful of all Nations of beings.

If caring for salmon is a foundational Gitxsan concept, and salmon stocks have dwindled since industrial times (a result of colonialism) then Gitxsan are again ready for Laxyip to retaliate. If *everything has spirit*, and we know that salmon, trees, water, rocks, clouds and more are all being mistreated, then there is cause for Gitxsan grief and responsive expression. This is what I hope to address through my visual practice in the next chapters.

FIGURE 1 *SALMON BACK TO THE RIVER*, WOOL, THREAD, DENTALIUM SHELL, WOOMS (DEVIL'S CLUB), BRASS RINGS, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

FIGURE 2 *SALMON BACK TO THE RIVER* (IN-PROGRESS), WOOL, THREAD, PINS, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANGELO KALUM CAVAGNARO.

FIGURE 3 *SALMON BACK TO THE RIVER* (IN-PROGRESS), WOOL, THREAD, PINS, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERONICA WAECHTER.

Chapter Two: Plast’ikw Enluut'aa (Plastic Nest) - The Formal Telling of Histories

This chapter follows the Gitxsan methodology of formally telling histories or stories. Here I respond to what I have personally witnessed, especially reflecting toward the times since 2021.

A traditional Gitxsan belief is that when something shows itself to you, it is often a spirit of Laxyip that requests you to witness and share that story with others as a lesson.

I will begin to unpack some aspects of my processes of creation which include Laxyip relationality and harvesting. What I found through this next gathering of stories is that shifting with access to materials has an impact on how creative practices can speak to refusal, solidarity, and care.

Traditional Gitxsan skills evolved from relationality to Laxyip. Sim gan (cedar), the tree of life, has always been regarded as one of the most important medicines and lifeforms that benefit Gitxsan existence. Carving and weaving were main means of working with beings of Laxyip.

Working mindfully and carefully with lifeforms, Gitxsan people incorporated these practices into a powerful culture, which includes making regalia, crafting canoes for

travel, masks for history re-enactment, and utensils that represent the owners through visual crest markings.[32]

I use the term lifeform because Gitxsan believe everything has spirit, and I am trying to bring that respectful belief into how I regard every being.

The material culture of the cedar tree as well as other medicinal biodiversity became central means in which to depict the relationships that encompass Gitxsan society. Harvesting, processing and storytelling are ancestral relational knowledges that many Gitxsan still carry today.

These practices have been passed on through the generations even when making cultural material and enacting them was outlawed by the Canadian government during the Potlatch Ban, which was in effect from 1884-1951, and heavily disrupted ways of life for the Gitxsan and many other Nations.[33]

Cedar is still relatively common on Laxyip today but access for Gitxsan cultural use is not

[32] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 60; Hilary Stewart, *Cedar* (Seattle, WA: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984). This text has been helpful throughout my learning journeys with cedar bark and cedar wood. Many thanks to this ally for recording our history and relationalities in a good way.

[33] The Indian Act, the Government of Canada (1884-1951).

always an easy feat with more industry staking claim to Laxyip. I collect most of my making materials from specific areas of Laxyip, including amluux (alder), sim gan (cedar), wooms (devil's club), furs, roots, and more, depending on where corporate extraction or 'development' is happening.

I follow the Gitxsan protocols of taking only what I need, from Lands that I have a relation to, or permission to. Most industrial companies have never had permission to lifeform use (resource extraction) on Gitxsan territory and continue to disregard the Gitxsan traditional-use system.

Our traditional-use system allowed Gitxsan leaders to sustainably redistribute material goods throughout the communities, allowing ample regrowth yet enough for each person. Today, Gitxsan material culture continues to evolve do to shifting colonial-land relations and the resulting realities of imbalance and limited access to Laxyip.

It is a reality that Gitxsan have lived through both enjoyable times of plenty and drastic times of famine and change, as told in our on-going oral histories. Wehlin gigyet **(**ancestors) have witnessed mountains moving, watercourses changing, and animals transforming over time.

We only know this because the survivors of said stories had shared what they had lived

through with trusted family members in order to keep respectful practices within Laxyip. Certain Gitxsan histories depict major Laxyip changes, while many stories relate back to the spirits seeking revenge on behalf of Laxyip for acts of disrespect.[34]

All of these things are part of Gitxsan ever-evolving relational society. Laxyip and its beings are responding to changes, and the changes become part of Gitxsan history as it happens. These are not always easy adjustments.

Adapting to changes includes ways of thinking. Gitxsan people are again experiencing a major shift in lived realities as the river we depend on warms and the salmon return in less numbers each year. With death there is grief, and in response there are also acts of care.

Western science has labelled these Land transformations as *climate change* without bridging ancient Indigenous knowledges of similar accounts. There is a gap in understanding as a result of the disregard and treatment of Indigenous histories as folklore.

[34] Kenneth B. Harris and Robinson Frances M P., *Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of Damelahamid* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1976). These stories have been recorded by chiefs, and they are the same story retold slightly differently. T'oyaxsy'nisim to the chiefs and people who saved these stories for our people to keep learning from. See also, Will Robinson, *Men of Medeek* (Northern Sentinel Press, 1962).

Even when Gitxsan leaders took the province of British Columbia to the supreme court to question their misuse and abuses of Laxyip through colonial-land relations, there was no acknowledgement of the ongoing harms. Unfortunately, the courts concluded that, in their perception, the precontact Gitxsan ways of life, Gitxsan practices and usage of Laxyip was plainly, "nasty, brutish, and short".[35]

With evidence concluding that these climate changes have started since colonial-industrial times, we can collect that colonial-land relations are truly nasty, brutish, and short, in contrast to Gitxsan relationalities which have been shown to be prosperous and sustainable in their longevity.

This court case all transpired after years of government policy that aimed to prevent Indigenous people in Canada from being able to seek justice for colonial-land relations in the courts. Further, it happened after years of assimilation, surveillance, and bans on cultural practices, making it difficult for any Gitxsan to gather and prove their continued governance and use of their own territories.

[35] Don Monet and Skanu'u, *Colonialism on Trial: Indigenous Land Rights and the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Sovereignty Case* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992), 187-189. This is always gut-wrenching to think about, but it is a part of our ongoing history as Gitxsan. We acknowledge their systemic racism so that it can be heard and challenged.

Nonetheless the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en case didn't go unnoticed and has had a lasting impact for our Nation, other Nations, allies and thoughts surrounding Land relations more broadly. However, there remains to have been zero accountability by the Canadian state for its colonial-land relations within Gitxsan Laxyip.

Mi'kmaq artist Mike MacDonald was invited to the Gitxsan and Wet'suwt'en territories during the 80's to take video footage of the lifeforms and cultures within Laxyip, as well as the contrasting imagery of the clear-cut logging. Some of his video recordings were used as evidence in the Delgamuukw court case.

Afterward, MacDonald assembled seven old TV's (which would have been new at the time) of variable sizes to coincide with the profiles of the sacred Seven Sisters mountains that tower over Gitxsan Laxyip. This piece is part of a permanent collection on display at the Art Gallery of Ontario,[36] and I knew Laxyip was present the moment I walked into the gallery space. I could feel it. Today, each of the seven TV's continue to show the history of Laxyip during that court case.

Through this installation I knew that Mike MacDonald had shared our on-going history and relationship to Laxyip, while also educating the public about significant political

[36] "A Closer Look at Seven Sisters," Art Gallery of Ontario, May 6, 2019, https://ago.ca/agoinsider/closer-look-seven-sisters.

happenings. At the same time the artist can be said to be exhibiting his solidarity by using his creative practice to reference the strength in the act of witnessing.
T'oyaxsy'niin Mike MacDonald.

Gitxsan people have been thinking about, addressing, and expressing on the issues of changes to Laxyip since before the more imminent changes began being talked about.

What I have come to understand, thanks to Metis scientist and scholar Max Liboiron, is that general conservation and environmentalism are also "structures of colonialism which are based on colonial-land relations," and that "environmentalism does not usually address colonialism and often reproduces it."[37]

This is a discussion that is rarely spoken to, and it is only possible because Liboiron unpacked their own Indigenous Metis relational Land responses in contrast to the mainstream outlook on land relations.

This has made me realize that I do not relate, think about, or assume things about Laxyip in the same way that conventional environmentalists would. That's not to say that

[37] Max Liboiron, "Pollution Is Colonialism," in *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021), 11. Thanks to Max Liboiron for thinking about colonialism and pollution, two tough subjects to address as Natives. Max's Metis identity brings together ideas surrounding Land relations that help me rethink my own Gitxsan way of seeing and being.

environmentalists don't do good work, follow good ethics, or are good allies.

A Gitxsan-Laxyip relation is different in many ways to a modern-day environmentalists' regard of human-land relations.

As our simgiget (chiefs) have stated, "environmental law does not begin to capture what it is when Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en talk of the law of respect for the natural world."[38] Our respect of the natural world is embedded into our language, stories, and how we communicate, it is also in how we harvest, create, and respond to changes.

I can relate this to the old days when Gitxsan would pay a toll to another Nation or leader if they wanted to go down the river and pass through other communities' territories. Our Nation has a living symbol of this at Gitwangak Battle Hill.[39] These are actions of respect and care for Laxyip because it acknowledges the stewardship of the community leaders.

[38] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 36.

[39] Government of Canada Parks Canada Agency, "Gitwangak Battle Hill National Historic Site," Parks Canada Agency, Government of Canada, November 26, 2022, https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/bc/gitwangak. This is a special space in Gitxsan territory. Ancestors created the hill which was made as a watch point for people coming up or down the river. The vantage point being so high allowed them to collect the tolls or sink canoes of those who travelled without making the contribution.

Gitxsan would never assume access for personal activities in another family's territory unless you were verbally given permission, and if they went against this they would have been punished. Max Liboiron reminds us that, "the call for more recycling, for example, still assumes access to Indigenous Land for recycling centres and their pollution."[40]

This is to say, even with the efforts of environmentalism, there is still a huge gap in understanding Indigenous history and Land relations, let alone the support toward agency for each First Nation, Inuit or Metis community to make decisions on their own terms.

It is important for us modern Natives to reflect on these ancient practices and what these actions really convey. There are deep differences in how Gitxsan and Indigenous people respond to their changing environments when compared with the dominant settler-land relations which continue to assume rightful say in what happens within ancestral Indigenous territories.

Like most Indigenous peoples globally, Gitxsan have been continually harmed by racist colonial policy which aimed to exploit what are colonially known as resources, without

[40] Max Liboiron, "Pollution Is Colonialism," in *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021), 6.

receiving benefit or possible input on the matter. Salmon stocks have fluctuated incredibly in the 21st century due to over-fishing, pollution, and warming waters that all lead back to a colonial way of thinking.

The choice for simgiget (Gitxsan chiefs) to again close the rivers of Laxyip to non-Indigenous fishing permit holders has caused some upset in the north. In 2021, simgiget announced that the province had refused to meet with them to address the federal mismanagement of fisheries (settler-land relations) and resulting decline in fish stocks. Therefore they would be banning Canadian licensed sportfishing on the rivers in Laxyip unless a hereditary chief gives explicit permission to an individual, as "sportfishing breaks traditional laws," which include "not playing with our fish," because "catch and release will cause higher fatality."[41]

This relational knowing includes an ancestral type of future thinking that is guided by Gitxsan principles embedded in ant'imalhlasxw (public Gitxsan origin stories). Generational knowledge of cultural practices can be interrupted when we refuse to fish, at the same time the action upholds Gitxsan ethics of care and refusal, which are both traditional cultural practices.

[41] Binny Paul and News, "Gitxsan Nation Extends Ban for Non-Indigenous Fishing Permit Holders across Their Territory," Terrace Standard, April 27, 2021, https://www.terracestandard.com/news/gitxsan-nation-extends-ban-for-non-indigenous-fishing-permit-holders-across-their-territory/.

Gitxsan have closed the rivers since 2019, and off and on before that, in an attempt to respect the fish and allow their people to rebound. The real issue is that the abuse of salmon happens earlier in the salmons' journey home and has been out of Gitxsan ability to prevent.

Systemic ecological violence is a structure that has been acknowledged, refused, responded to and acted upon by Indigenous people so that it can be radically altered for the betterment of all future generations.

'Wii Muk'wilixw Art Wilson illustrates a moment of his relational grief of Laxyip through his painting, *Beat the Drum Slowly (1996)*[42] which depicts a clearcut mountain side crying in his own Gitxsan translation. 'Wii Muk'wilixw had for a time been employed in forestry, but quickly saw the harm those practices were doing to his own wilp (house) territory among others'. Swiftly he leaned in closer to Gitxsan knowledges and became an activist in Gitxsan stewardship practices.

This artist became an outspoken advocate for Indigenous rights globally and took on

[42] Art Wilson, *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist: Records Injustice and Resistance* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996), 34-35.

roles in blockades on Laxyip and during the Delgamuukw case.[43] 'Wii Muk'wilixw writes along with his creative visuals, "historically, our people talk to a tree before we take its life. We assure it that it is not going to die in vain. We tell it that it will continue to live as a drum, spoon, bent box, canoe, longhouse or sweat lodge."[44] These are actions of Gitxsan care toward lifeforms, because the belief that all other beings also have spirit, nations, and agency illustrates how Gitxsan have successfully lived in on-going understanding with Laxyip since time immemorial.

The artwork of 'Wii Muk'wilixw has been a tool for him to share his reality and to talk about the importance of civil rights and ecological rights issues locally and abroad. He acknowledged his own artwork as a way to express the counter narrative of what dominant industry and powers will not recognize, which is that all resource-driven activities in Laxyip are illegal according to Gitxsan ayookw (law) without permissions by simgiget (chiefs).[45]

This is because it benefits few without proper redistribution, as well as being done in a

[43] Don Monet and Skanu'u, *Colonialism on Trial: Indigenous Land Rights and the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Sovereignty Case* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992).

[44] Art Wilson, *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist: Records Injustice and Resistance* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996), 34.

[45] Art Wilson, *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist: Records Injustice and Resistance* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996), 34-35.

way that doesn't respect all of the spirits of Laxyip. Though 'Wii Muk'wilixw primarily depicts modes of Indigenous grief and resistance, there are also humour and Gitxsan wit that can be read, a way to show that there are multiple possible approaches to challenges.

'Wii Muk'wilixw also created a painting that depicts the history of when the DFO came to Gitxsan territory with assault rifles in SWAT gear in 1986, to intimidate and tell Gitxsan they couldn't fish in their own Laxyip, according to Canadian laws. This had happened before, so Gitxsan people were at their wits end.

In response, one day the women and children of the group threw uncooked marshmallows at the heavily armed men, affectively making them retreat. 'Wii Muk'wilixw depicts this moment in his painting entitled, *Marshmallow Wars*.[46] These are moments where our Nation responds carefully and thoughtfully to systemic oppression. T'oyaxsii'niin to those womxn, children, and families who put aside their fears in the summer of 1986, to address violence on Laxyip without also enacting violence.

T'oyaxsii'niin (Thank you) 'Wii Muk'wilixw for sharing Gitxsan and Indigenous realities

[46] 'Wii Muk'wilixw Art Wilson, *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist: Records Injustice and Resistance* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996), 50-51. This happened in the summer of 1986 near Kitwanga, at a traditional fishing site called An'ki'is. The main reason 'Wii Muk'wilixw says that they backed off, is because news reporters and cameras were present.

and histories, which he represents through both colonial subversion and care of Laxyip. The Gitxsan of today are able to see your efforts.

When I moved to Toronto do my master's research, a culture shock hit me. This was someone's traditional territory under all the high rises. One day I was out for a walk, and I witnessed what I now would call plast'ikw enluut'aa (plastic nest), a bird's nest partially made of plastic scraps.

It made me think for a long time. The birds didn't have access to as much natural material as they did human waste. This is a new relationality that the birds have accepted and learned from in their own way.

Back home, each day held a story of what animal encounter there was, what weather and what could be given and taken by the Gitxsan harvest season. Since I have been in the urban density, I have really missed the important practice of being on Laxyip.

Being away from Laxyip has been especially hard on my mental health, so I turned to a live eagle camera on Youtube[47] to hear the sounds of birds and wind. I would turn it on

[47] *YouTube* (YouTube, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4-L2nfGcuE. T'oyaxsy'nisim to those people at Friends of Big Bear Valley who upkeep the live eagle camera in Big Bear Valley. Thanks also to Shadow and Jackie, the eagle couple, for adapting to the camera in their nest. I learn something everyday while watching them, and am comforted by the sounds of a place closer to home.

in the morning, keep it in the background while I create, watch the sunset, and hear their good night song in the evening.

Recently one of the eagles (they are a pair with eggs currently) brought an orange plastic rope up to add to the branches that make up the nest. I was seeing plastic everywhere, even the places I least expected it to be. Plastic may be one of the eaglets' first sights.

I think about where each of the plastic bags and pieces started, as plant beings themselves, then altered, moved, whose hands they passed through, and my own relationality with the disposable material, so-called plastic.

I began tucking the bags aside like my dad use to, I told them they would become something more, not be discarded after just one use. I had spoken to them like sim gan (red cedar).

Suddenly, they were given a Gitxsan name by me, plast'ikw. I started a new relationship with the plast'ikw as I twisted it around my hands, as I spoke its name and thanked it. Laying it out flat, carefully cutting it in strips and bundling it, exactly like hat'e'l (cedar bark).

It struck me that one day Gitxsan may not have access to cedar wood or bark anymore,

at the rate of current resource extraction and environmental racism. Will plast'ikw be all that's left? I wondered if it would carry us forward, how the sim gan (cedar tree) always has. Though I can't imagine life without sim gan or hat'e'l, I know Gitxsan people would find a way to keep living and making.

With hat'e'l (cedar bark), I have been taught very carefully how to harvest from sim gan (cedar tree). Harvesting is a process of Laxyip relationality. The time of year, the amount taken, speaking to it, cleaning it right away, giving blood to mosquitos, and listening and mindfulness are ancestral and on-going relational methods of processing hat'e'l (cedar bark).

My Gitxsan and Nisga'a teachers have always repeated that *no person should take more than one handspan of hat'e'l (bark) from gan (tree),* to allow it enough time to heal before the winter months. A recent study found that numbers of west coast precontact sim gan (cedar trees), which scientists now call *culturally modified trees* or CMT's, had had their hat'e'l (bark) almost completely stripped off, they were even found to have then grown back almost entirely and pulled again multiple times.[48]

This was a shock to me, because an ancestral, continuous harvesting practice which is

[48] Mobley, Charles M., and Michael Lewis. "Tree-Ring Analysis of Traditional Native Bark-Stripping at Ship Island, Southeast Alaska, USA." Vegetation history and archaeobotany 18, no. 3 (2009): 261–268.

altered to more conservative methods of *only taking one handspan* highlights how the Gitxsan and other Indigenous makers may have had to adapt to a changing Laxyip, access, and resource extraction concerns.

Just in the last few years, sim gan or culturally modified tree's (CMT's) are tagged with plast'ikw (plastic) marking tape by forestry officials so as to stop anyone from cutting what would suddenly be seen as a federally owned Indigenous artifact.

What results, from personal experience, are Indigenous people harvesting hat'e'l (cedar bark) from sites proposed for development as an act of ongoing refusal.[49] This way ancestral harvesting becomes a form of continuous protest against dominant land relations, because by their own policy, the site can no longer be simply clear-cut and developed.

The act also demonstrates a continuation of ancestral practices which locates our ongoing existence and resistances to colonial-land relations. Collecting the plast'ikw tape from trees marked to be felled is another form of refusal which I practice without

[49] Simpson, Audra. *On Ethnographic Refusal : Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship*. (Junctures : the journal for thematic dialogue 2007), no. 9: 67–80. While I am just starting to spend time with Simpsons texts and ideas, I found her thoughts on generative refusal to align with my experiences and what I have witnessed when harvesting. This is an example of generative refusal, t'oyaxsii'niin Audra Simpson for helping me to think further about our responses.

shame. This action may free the tree for a time from not being marked simply as a settler resource to be taken away for exploitation.

A couple years ago I ‘found’ some tree marking tape on a logging road in Laxyip, I took it home and without washing it I fastened it as hair to a mask, I suppose that is really where my relationship with plast’ikw started. The special part of the mask became the sourcing of the material, and how enacting harvesting on Laxyip was both forms of resistance and care in how the act also spared other tree lifeforms.

Reflecting on all of these relations with Laxyip harvesting brings intentionality together for a better way to look at the future, despite plastics evident effects on global water systems and general biodiversity.

Plast’ikw Enluut'aa (2021-2023), including a woven Gitxsan style hat, apron-cape, and respirator mask, represent all of these considerations through an adaptation of personal protective regalia.

Strips of cedar bark are woven with blue, grey, yellow and white shades of plast’ikw using the traditional twinning method. The weavings rest on a wooden and brass standing coat rack that I had found on a Toronto street and used all year in the studio. This work is a reflection on past, present, and future Gitxsan relationality, with a prod to

think about personal responses to changes and access.

The photograph, taken by Nisga'a artist and neks'y (my partner) Angelo Cavagnaro, displays the work in-progress (hat unfinished) on myself in a Toronto alleyway which we frequent. This work could be worn at a Land defence rally or for more practical purposes of smog protection.

I can relate this work closer to a nest form. This nest was made after seeing how birds use their materials for both safety and security. I made these items when thinking about the futures of my nieces, nephews and Laxyip, I wanted to explore making items that could actually work for their survival and benefit.

We know that plast'ikw (plastic) is part of life, because *there are no accidents*.[50] To address the dismissive, disposable colonial mindset toward pollution and plastics, and to follow wehlin gigyet (ancestors) in naming newcomers to the territory (ie. tsiggin-chicken, appils-apples) I will continue calling the plastics that I work with plast'ikw.

Interestingly enough, t'ikw means bellybutton in Gitsenimx. There is some not so distant

[50] Alfred Joseph and Delgam Uukw, in *The Spirit in the Land: Statements of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs in the Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1987-1990* (Gabriola, B.C.: Reflections, 1992), 33.

connection for my mind between the terms, as both are treated as important for but one part of its life, then seen as unneeded indefinitely.

I remember growing up in the nineties and seeing plastic bags litter the highways, hanging out with the ferns and berry bushes. As I got older I realized what an endless supply of them there really is. Now, in 2023, every city is trying to suddenly ban them.

When you witness small animals adapting to new materials, bringing it directly into their daily lives, reusing what humans had disposed of after one use, it makes you check your values. It seemed to me it would be a good idea to listen to the birds. Plus, it was incredibly hard to access my traditional materials in the city. I only take what I need when I harvest seasonally, so plast'ikw became an invited alternative.

We also have a complex history of making, weaving and carving as Indigenous womxn.[51] The potlatch ban that affected the entire coast of so-called British Columbia was implemented from 1884 until 1951. This racist policy put people in danger from oppressive forces and disrupted the traditional political system that upheld womxn and

[51] I use the term 'womxn' to mean the diverse forms of feminine, beyond 'woman or women,' this is not to disrespect anyone that identifies as woman/women. This self-locating came from being a part of an exhibition a couple years ago entitled "Womxn and Waterways" at the Bill Reid Gallery in Vancouver, curated by ReMatriate collective. From this group exhibition, I thought more about the dominant projected idea of woman/women and how Gitxsan and other nations may represent alternatively their feminine community members. The Gitxsan word for womxn is hana'k.

makers.

Indigenous womxn, aunties, mothers, and grandmothers were stopped from making traditional items for their families because of the Potlatch Ban. Any dancing, singing, or ceremonies could be cause for RCMP raids or imprisonment. The nurturing role of womxn in the community was stifled which had far reaching impacts for each individual community.

The potlatch ban also had a big effect on Land relations, the traditional redistribution of goods, community ceremonies where people are honoured, and how community members witnessed each other. Despite these terrible circumstances, community members held on to histories, songs, dances, and ways of creating.

Though this work stands still, on its own on a small coat rack, it is displayed standing strongly. It is protected by and yet made up of woven regalia. There is spirit in the materials. The work looks toward the rest of the exhibition, acting as witness, and asking viewers to witness alongside.

FIGURE 4 *PLAST'IKW ENLUUT'AA* (IN-PROGRESS), MATERIALS AND COMPOSITION BY VERONICA WAECHTER, 2021. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANGELO KALUM CAVAGNARO.

FIGURE 5 *PLAST'IKW ENLUUT'AA*, RED CEDAR BARK, PLASTIC, WOOD AND BRASS COAT RACK, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

Chapter Three: Trees Reaching for the Sky - The Performance of Songs and Compositions

As I learned about bodies of wood over the years through my carving practice, I now realize that they also learned about how I speak to them, hold them, see them, and alter them. Working with these wood bodies, simgan (cedar), amluux (alder), and hawa'ak (birch) taught me how to care for them. They each interact differently to my hand tools.

This process of care includes reading the wood bodies life span, working with the flow of the grain, only using sharp tools, slowly and carefully removing aks (water)/ o'otsin (spirit), speaking to the beings, following intuitions, and then carefully putting back in aks / o'otsin, along with my own blood, sweat, and tears.

I had learned how to harvest carving wood from my teachers at the Freda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art, from Dempsey Bob, Stan Bevan and Ken McNeil, as well as through my father. I also know how to harvest certain medicines through past workshops with friends and elders.

Some of my teachers have passed and some are more private, so I cannot name all of them here. But I will always share their names with those who come to know me. I will also share the knowledge given to me with the ones who want to learn.

Working with wet woods hand collected from Laxyip is a complex gift. Forms emerge slowly and sometimes quickly depending on recent understandings, feelings and happenings. These mask creations were made with the understanding of Gitxsan methods of performing songs and compositions, another form of relational practice which centers on sharing specifically gained knowledge.

Masks are ancient methods for Gitxsan storytelling and this is a practice I continue. Each time our bodies visited each other, new relations, new understandings were made. As I took in the happenings on Laxyip and in metro Tkaronto, I put those stories into the wood.

It is through my masks that I thought about their lifespans and gestures. Thinking about how trees reach for the sky all of their lives has allowed me to understand more purpose in our own gestures. When Gitxsan say thank you, the ultimate gesture is to reach for Lax ha (sky and heavens), and hloxs (sun), like a big, beautiful stretch.

I take each woodchip as a new understanding, adding onto my relationality with these trees that grew alongside my ancestors. The trees have spirit, they grow tall and much older than people. They also witness us. This is why each carving chip is collected and saved, just as important.

Month of Smoke (2023) is a mask that represents my witnessing of big smoke coming into Laxyip, all the way from the Amazon forests during the month of September 2020. Along with other west coast wildfires on Turtle Island, wind brought smoke up along the coast, making visiting Laxyip a completely different experience. Every being on Laxyip must have witnessed the difference in their living conditions, their homes ashy and dry.

The Amazon forests would be considered a sister, or at least cousin, to the Lands of Laxyip. The smoke lasted weeks, filling the air with barely visible particles of ash. It disrupted harvesting activities. It disrupted migrations that depend on smells.

Hlox̲sim axw (moon) and hlox̲s (sun) looks red and bright orange in extreme pollution, making the air particles visible. This knowing is a gift from the moon and sun for us to learn from. It tells of the health of the planet and what might negatively affect the health of all beings.

The moon face looks different in different territories, I had to visit back home in order to see it again. *Month of Smoke* mask is communicating without speaking, as it gestures to blow wind and clear the air. Git̲xsan people follow the moons cycle for the seasons, so it is very important as an indicator.

Anishinaabe-made pigments *kosmaan'aande - pumpkin, zhaawb'mide - butter, and*

odemin - strawberry by Beam Paints[52] was purchased and used to build up these orange-red colours which reference the bright toned particles. This was also in attempt to support local Indigenous practices, keep plast'ikw from aks (water), and bring Land materials closer together.

Natural pigments mean that the colour may change over the years. The ironic part of all of this is that this is amluux (red alder), which means it stains red orange unless you carefully clean the wet off routinely and dry it in a methodical way. I put a lot of time into making sure this mask was not red-orange and uneven in tone, dried carefully to a clear light tone, just to reintroduce warm Anishinaabe pigments that resemble its original amluux colours.

These are the teachings of the moon, each time we visit there is something new to learn about necessary cycles of life. Then I realized, every being also witnesses the moons cycles and learns from them, there is deep relationality rooted there. This work speaks to the sun, moon, air and water as indicators for land wellness.

I took *Month of Smoke* mask over to the duck pond at High Park in the west end of

[52] www.beampaints.com is a handmade paint business from M'Chigeeng First Nation which carries forward multi-generational practices of pigment harvesting and processing. These pigments are carefully made and wrapped in natural and sustainable packaging. Each pigment is respectfully named with an Anishinaabe term that correlates to the colour or memory of colours.

Toronto. Although I had some difficulties with off-leash dogs, I was able to get footage of the mask reflected in aks (water). I did not realize how dirty the water was until I saw that I had recorded a high number of Styrofoam bits floating in the water.

Thanks are due to my friend Ahmed Bader, who assisted me in 'masking' the video into a shape, which is a type of coding in video editing. I drew the shape of an ovoid for the 'masking', to not only reference Gitxsan forms but to reference a tension of the balanced circle.

The video is then contained in the ovoid shape, projected against *Month of Smoke* mask, which slowly moves, hanging from the ceiling. Ahmed also helped me to slow down the video, giving pause as a gesture of breath and speaking.

Gitxsan origin stories are profound sources of cultural knowledge and reflect the guiding principles of yahlxw wila yeet' (harmony), luu hix hogix (balance), and naadahahlhakwlhinhl (interconnectedness).[53] This next ant'imahlasxw (public Gitxsan origin story) involves a spirit in the form of a monster bear who seeks revenge for acts of disrespect.

[53] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), 12.

Once Medeek (the Great Lake Spirit Bear) sought its revenge by carnage, a plan was enacted and Medeek was then slain. After this happened the Gitxsan of the time realized that they must be diligent with their respect values so that this history doesn't repeat. The story was passed on and made an impact. At the end of the story there are reflections about the learning outcomes of the spirit interaction.

Commonly known as "Revenge of Medeek" as told by Chief Ken Harris in 1974 (selected passage of the ending of the story):

> *But they all soon realized that this was no common enemy of the people. It was a warning. They had been warned again. They had been punished again because they were foolish. They had played with the fishes from the water. They had not taken the fish for something to eat. They used the fish to amuse themselves."*[54]

This is an ancient story that may recur in the more recent times when people disrupt bear Lands for no good reason and then bears end up being culled. *Modern Medeek* (2023) mask was created in reference to seeing and not seeing urban bears and knowing they are not doing well due to the low salmon stocks and ongoing colonial-land relations.

[54] Kenneth B. Harris and Robinson Frances M P., *Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of Damelahamid* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1976), 56-60.
Will Robinson, *Men of Medeek* (Northern Sentinel Press, 1962), 35-42.

Made of amluux (red alder), the cheek bones are cut through as a way to reference bears losing natural habitat and food resources. Its teeth bared, knowing that people have not been following the natural laws of yahlxw wila yeet' (harmony), luuu hix hogix (balance), and naadahahlhakwlhinhl (interconnectedness).

The mask has been painted by my finger drawing lines across the surface with Beam Paints *zhiibiigunatig'aande - graphite* to reference Gitxsan use of ash on the face in times of grief, along with the bear suffering that comes with hunger and loss of habitat. Medeek and the modern bears' own relationality is altered with human changes to Laxyip and our story tells us that we have a part in witnessing and learning from it.

Modern Medeek mask found new relations with the urban garbage, where offerings of disposed leftovers lie. My friend Ahmed Bader helped me take a video of *Modern Medeek* mask in an alleyway near the university, near a food spot I frequent. I turned the mask in my hands to present it as looking at its surroundings, which are graffiti, garbage and sludge bins.

This video was similarly edited with pauses, and 'masked' in a different ovoid shape. I can confirm that it can be pretty awkward to take videos in public at times.

Placing this mask out there in the downtown core, I realized that there are no bears left

in the Greater Toronto Area. But I did witness an adult red fox right downtown once, just trotting on by. Human-Land relations have changed this place so much.

Today, bears are feeling the burden of human-land relations, as Master Carver Dempsey Bob (2022) explains:

> *There are getting to be less and less salmon; they're losing their own habitat. There are lots of bears up in the mountains, but they're now building right up to the bear's house. It's their environment. Some of the rivers up in Alaska have no more salmon because of the mining. Now there are just a few really good rivers and streams that are still clean, and the bears all gather there because it's the only place they can get salmon. That's why the bears are coming into town. They need the salmon. If they don't get fat from eating the salmon they're not going to make it through the winter. And some years, if it's too hot, or if there's not enough rain, the berries don't ripen, and the bears suffer from that too. They need those berries to survive.*[55]

This quote from Master Carver Dempsey Bob demonstrates how he is very serious on this topic, as most Indigenous elders are. It is believed that every impact will come back to humans because it is all connected. You have to wonder, with all this in mind, how many beings are grieving the destructive actions of humans?

Being in Tkaronto for my studies was an adaptation, I missed home and Laxyip often and there were few places that made me feel a sense of relief. Spending time on Laxyip is central to my wellness. One place that helped was visiting with Ya'ya' Chuck Heit's hawk

[55] Dempsey Bob and Sarah Milroy, *Dempsey Bob: In His Own Voice* (Vancouver, BC, Canada: Figure.1, 2022), 184-185.

sculpture at Spadina subway station in Toronto.

Ya'ya passed away unexpectedly right when I started this research, he was like an uncle to me. He was just a young elder yet. Ya'ya is another example of a Gitxsan artist who told his stories and realities through his art.

Of his work *Angry Man - Roadblock Warrior,* a mask completed in 1999, he stated, "I started roadblocking by direct orders from my chiefs of KISPIOX. At the roadblock u get 2 meet lots of misinformed people. I believe they act dumb because in Canada the full truth of history is not told."[56] Ya'ya used his art as a tool and upheld his own Gitxsan law by telling the story as he witnessed it.

Through fierce expression of the mask, and even breaking the grammar and spelling of the English language in his artist statement, he express his realities and feelings, which include anger, grief, and care. The mask is a contemporary expression of a Gitxsan person following what they know to be good and true in accordance with all their relations.

[56] Gary Wyatt, *Mythic Beings: Spirit Art of the Northwest Coast* (North Ryde, NSW: Craftsman House, 1999), 95-96. Gary Wyatt has been a good ally for the instructors and students at the Freda Diesing School and beyond. The Spirit Wrestler Gallery, ran by Gary and team, was the first gallery in Vancouver that I was able to show in. T'oyaxsii'nisim to these great people for supporting contemporary Indigenous arts.

Angry Man - Roadblock Warrior mask is sculpturally carved in silver birch, its features protruding with upset, teeth sharp, and flame-like tendrils pull back from the face all in various shades of red. The mask is not to be a decoration or a commodity for international markets, its goal is to tell the story of continuous Gitxsan resistance to government policy and exploitation. T'oyaxsii'niin (thank you) Ya'ya for your care and teachings that remain with me each day.

If all beings, elements and Laxyip itself has spirit, and the current dominant human habits go against Gitxsan ayookw (law), grief and refusal can become primary modes of response. Grief in the Gitxsan tradition is a complex and carefully thought-out system of practice. It simultaneously protects the family of the departed while also protecting the spirits to move on to the next life journey. It is a system of care and protection.

The Gitxsan belief in reincarnation allows a complex relationality to the world as is experienced.[57] There is no word for *goodbye* in Gitsenimx (Gitxsan language), there is only the phrase *I will see you again,* which speaks to the continuous journeys, relationality, and forms that Gitxsan believe take shape. This worldview enables Gitxsan to think in modes that are more connected to other beings, temporalities, and places.

[57] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), pp. 15.

Indigenous people today use many forms of expression to deal with grief, but some ancient practices that have been observed by the Gitxsan continuing to this day include the burning of items, the smoking of items, cutting of hair, ash on the face, singing and crying, gathering, listening, the eating of food, fasting, offering of food, making visual creations, witnessing, storytelling, and the many forms of refusal.[58]

These world views differ greatly from the common Western practices of grieving, many of which include progressing five or so generalized, non-social steps.[59] Grief is never a linear process and should be observed at an individual or community level.

I was already getting to know grief through of the death of my grandmother in May of 2017, my grandfather in June of 2018, then my father in July 2019. That has remained the most difficult time in my life.

Each time I lost someone I somehow also gained new relations, by meeting relatives, being told family stories, and taken to relational places on Laxyip. Though these losses have generated ongoing intense sorrows, I somehow gained new understandings of myself, and realized that loss is never simply loss.

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[58] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005), pp. 15; Sergei Kan, *Symbolic Immortality* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 112-115.

[59] Kübler-Ross Elizabeth, *On Death and Dying* (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shinbunsha, 1972).

Being aware that the salmon died by the thousands in neighbouring Lands this past summer struck a deep chord of grief, relatable to the loss of family.[60] The natural world is not something to be controlled, but it must be continuously learned from.

Fire is an important aspect of the belief in reincarnation for Gitxsan people. Fire is used as a portal to send food to ancestors. It is also believed that when we feed and take care of ourselves, we feed and take care of our ancestors in the spirit world. I now believe fire to be an ancestral tool and practice.

Fire Near the Tracks is a mask made of haawak' (birch wood), it depicts a hawk being who sees in its eye's wildfire beings. Railroad tracks are carved across its face to show a reflected upon relationality between beings and human-made constructions. There are also carved depictions of burned trees on the cheek.

This mask was made in respect to our neighbours, sister Lands in so-called British Columbia that have faced unpredictable wildfires in recent summers. [61] The burnings have been dreadful for the small communities and the rebound of ecosystems. This

[60] Yvette Brend, "Salmon Struggle to Spawn amid Record-Setting Drought, with Tens of Thousands Dead in B.C.," *CBC News*, October 5, 2022.

[61] The Lytton Creek Fire, June 30th, 2021. Telegraph Creek Fire, August, 2018.

speaks to Nation to Nation witnessing and our roles in supporting after devastations.

In the past, Indigenous people practiced controlled burning which was a way to make sure that brush fires don't happen without care, these are practices used to maintain a balance. With Indigenous Land relations restricted, the practice of care-burning is no longer regulated. I believe burnings are again seeking care.

During my exhibition, a good friend who lives near High Park in Toronto told me that High Park was doing a controlled burning to open up the Black Oak seeds. Land relation practices being brought back was exciting to think about. It was also 30 C weather for most of the exhibition period, which was a record for this area, and air pollution levels were extremely high.

The hawk is depicted in the mask, it sees all, high above, the Lands changing. In Toronto hawks showed themselves to me a number of times, probably due to the high rat population. But there are no eagles or ravens here, relations that I am accustomed to waving at and thanking. Hawks have adapted to these metropolitan land relations and seem to be thriving.

Fire Near the Tracks mask (2023) is burned in reference to the importance of fire in Gitxsan grief, reincarnation and rebirth beliefs. Carving the railway into the mask

reminded me of the times spent with my fathers, going through the trees, and then across the train tracks, meaning testing colonial boundaries of where we were allowed to walk and cross.

Working through this piece also helped me think through my own grief as a rebirth, a new relation that is ongoing. On occasion I would visit the Spadina subway station to spend time with the hawk carving that Ya'ya made for the public to enjoy. It became a special place to access a part of home.

This mask also reminds me of the times when Indigenous communities and allies would show up at the train blockades in years past in support of our neighbours' rights.[62] It reminds me that there are people, beings and spirits watching out for Laxyip.

I brought Hawk mask over to Dovercourt park in Toronto. Neks'y (my partner) and I started a small fire with cedar shims, brown paper bags, and some cedar carving chips. He took the video of me burning the mask. We had to go back because the first time I didn't video and it had not burned that much. The video was then edited with pauses and 'masked' with a different ovoid sketch.

[62] Art Wilson, *Heartbeat of the Earth: A First Nations Artist: Records Injustice and Resistance* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996). There have been supportive gatherings for many years. Each of these add to our ongoing history. I also attended multiple rallies between 2021-2023 in Tkaronto, and before that some rallies in Vancouver, Hazelton and Terrace.

Together, this installation is called *Trees Reaching for the Sky* (2023). The videos are projected side by side within the ovoid shapes, with the masks hanging and connecting with the projections.

It is a way for me to think through these on-going Land relations. Together this installation represents a longing for Laxyip, and a way to create my own connections from a distance.

These masks and media works were completed after visiting the museum and archives. I had witnessed these incredible carvings from all across the coast, lying still, stacked on shelves in a large, quiet building.

Each piece was filled with enormous energy and emotion. I felt like I was meeting a baby yet seeing an elder for the last time, there was such a mixture of emotion ranging from grief to immense gratitude.

It was an intense process, but it helped me to finish my masks and reflect on their storytelling intentions and presentation. I am tired of seeing my masks stiff on a wall. They are meant to be in movement, meant to be communicating.

Although I don't dance my masks traditionally or contemporarily, there is so much

opportunity for diverse engagement through them. I have been taught to carve, weave, stitch, steam-bend, and story tell, but I have never been taught to dance. I had to think about other ways to allow themselves movement.

Adding a small leather strap to the back of the masks with epoxy resin was an effective way to adapt to emergent hanging needs. Fishing line was an accessible and familiar material to hang the works with, and a small fan allowed the masks to turn this way or that, pausing and moving at their own paces.

Each mask interacts with the projected light of their memories. Their shadows and cut throughs show in the video, which speaks to carrying forward what we witness. This shares the start of these tree lifeforms engaging in their new lives as masks.

A song was composed to play alongside this installation. I mixed the sounds of my gloved hand moving brass thimbles on a century-old Gitxsan dancing apron. My hand was gloved because the Canadian Museum of History staff highly suggest wearing them specifically when making contact with textiles, whereas wood pieces I will sometimes touch without gloves.

This apron was a special piece to see in person because the older ones were made with bones or beaks to dangle and make sounds, but this piece directly shows contact, trade,

and adaptation through the use of brass thimbles as noise-makers.[63]

The sound of them was incredible and I could only imagine the sounds it would make when it was truly danced again. Running the brass thimbles through my gloved fingers sent chills up my spine, and I wanted to share this impact in a new way. The sounds of the metal clanging so gently can be heard over the mumble of neks'y (my partner) speaking and laughing with the museum curators in the same room.

I mixed these sounds with some audio of a rattle my father had made 20 years ago. I inherited this piece when he passed away in 2019 but I did not rattle it for more than a year. It is a special piece because although it wasn't a 'completed' carving it represented the k'utk'unuxws (owl) which is also a Gitxsan wilp (house) and crest my grandmother and father were born into.

The shudder of my rattle, mixed with the sounds of the ancient apron experience, the trickling of asks (water) in Laxyip, the snapping of dentalium shell for the blanket, my partner laughing, and sounds of me knife-finishing a bentwood chest, all together created a sound composition that reflect some of my recent experiences. The song is composed to be gentle with reverberation, pauses, fades, and then replays, shuffling

[63] "Search the Collection: Canadian Museum of History," Home (Canadian Museum of History), accessed March 19, 2023, https://www.historymuseum.ca/collections/artifact/62580.

through four approximately one-minute tracks.

I had never worked with sound but found to enjoy this new medium which also has ancient roots in Gitxsan culture. Until I played with this medium, I hadn't realized how much sound is already an important part of my practice. Hearing those sounds in the gallery space really spoke to the processes and made the works feel fully alive.

My friend Ahmed Bader guided me through a free audio computer program where I was able to put my recordings together. He helped me with transitions and effects, giving an ambient quality to the work that allowed the sounds to flow into each other.

I am grateful for the support in this process, as I believe this installation would not feel as active if it were not for the sounds. It creates a sensory experience for the witness, thereby sharing the stories in more than one way.

I would like to thank Chiu Pang (skyearthstories), an elder and documentarian originally from Hong Kong who I first met at a Land Defence project next to the Kinder Morgan Facility on Burnaby Mountain, in fall of 2018. We met again in Toronto over tea and he encouraged me and gave me tips on ways to explore technology and media, something I had not previously prioritized through my work. I recognized then that to adapt and

respond with what is available is something that Gitxsan have done since time immemorial.

FIGURE 6 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY*,(IN-PROGRESS) FROM LEFT: *FIRE NEAR THE TRACKS, MONTH OF SMOKE, MODERN MEDEEK*, OILED AND MARKED ALDER AND BIRCH MASKS, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERONICA WAECHTER.

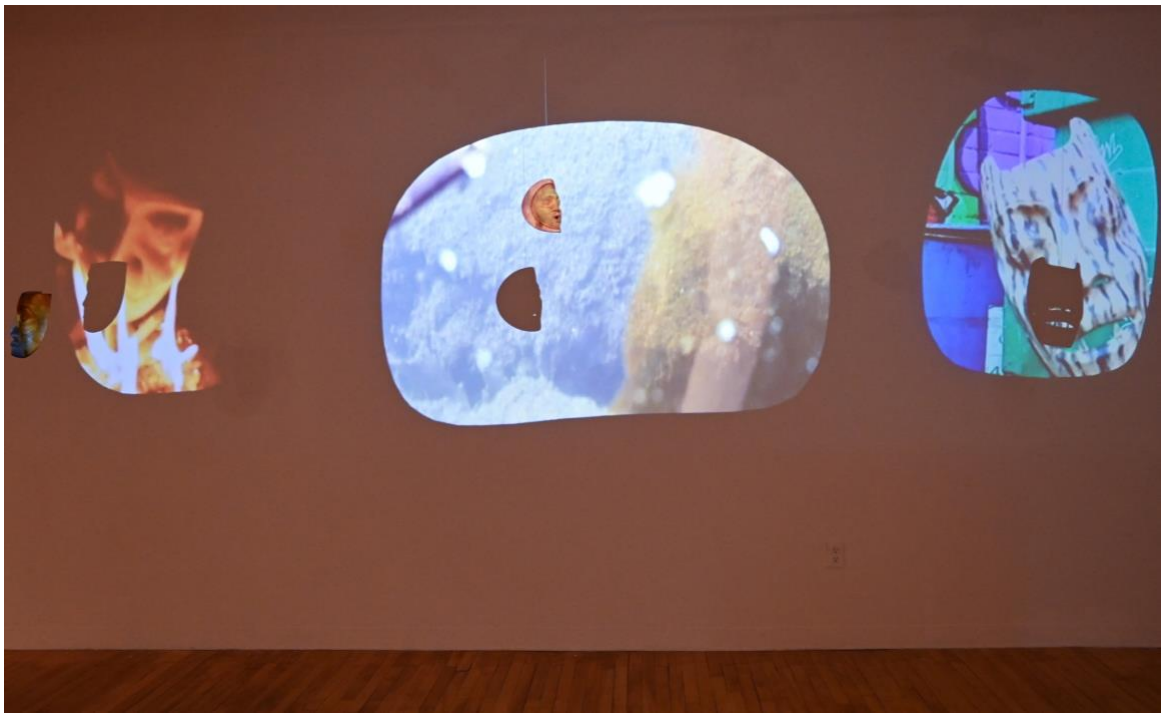

FIGURE 7 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY*, MEDIA INSTALLATION, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

FIGURE 8 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY INSTALLATION*, INSTALLATION OF *MONTH OF SMOKE* MASK AND VIDEO PROJECTION, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

FIGURE 9 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY* INSTALLATION, *FIRE NEAR THE TRACKS* MASK AND VIDEO PROJECTION, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

FIGURE 10 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY* INSTALLATION, *FIRE NEAR THE TRACKS* MASK AND VIDEO PROJECTION, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERONICA WAECHTER.

FIGURE 11 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY* INSTALLATION, *MODERN MEDEEK* MASK AND VIDEO PROJECTION, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

FIGURE 12 *TREES REACHING FOR THE SKY* INSTALLATION, *MODERN MEDEEK* MASK AND VIDEO PROJECTION, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERONICA WAECHTER.

Chapter Four: Continuous Gitxsan Material Practices - To Be Witnessed, To Give Offerings

To this point, we've talked about the Gitxsan methodologies of sharing who you are through crests and story relations, formally telling histories as witnessed, and sharing compositions and songs. The last two requirements for Gitxsan laws of acknowledgement are to be witnessed and to give offerings.

As stated, this research which largely surrounds Laxyip is being presented on Treaty 13, Lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, at OCAD University in downtown Toronto.

Originally, I thought I would be marking how many witnesses come through the space. An important aspect that I learned from attending a yukw (feast) is that those hosting and participating always keep a note of any support received and be sure to repay all witnesses/guests through the serving of food and distributing gifts.

Keeping tally on the wall wasn't fully possible for me because I was not quick enough. However, my offerings became a way to keep tally of witnesses and became a beautiful way of measure. I made around one hundred pouches for offerings, and about half remained after the exhibition. I also shared snacks and beverages with attendees.

Right before the pandemic Demspey Bob invited me and neks'y (my partner) up to the Freda Diesing School to watch a bentwood box demonstration, this was mid-March of 2020. Students were making small boxes with support of Master Carvers, but none of the boxes worked out, they all snapped. Many first projects are like that, they teach you something.

Fast forward two years later, *Box Offering* was created in fall of 2022 with the support from my partner. Angelo, who practices Nisga'a art, was making a bentwood chest and gave me an extra piece of simgan (cedar wood) he had shipped from back home. We looked back at the photos of the demonstration from 2020 and studied old bentwood box guidelines my dad had given me from his days at 'Ksan school.[64]

I knife finished the entire back and front of the 12" x 7' cedar plank, then carefully undercut three measured kerfs to a thinness of about 5mm. It was awkward working on the floor in our small apartment. Angelo put together a small steaming box and we found an old kettle at a thrift shop which could fit to the box.

[64] This is something I cannot properly cite as they were handouts and not published, the best I can do is note that it was created by the primary teachers at Kitanmaax School of Indian Art (1969-2005), namely Gitxsan artists Walter Harris, Earl Muldoe, Vernon Stephens, and Ken Mowatt. Stewart, Hilary. *Cedar*. (Seattle, WA: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984) has been a great reference for me also when working with sim gan, cedar.

Now that we had a steam box set up, we carefully assembled it in our second story rental in the west end of Toronto. We used cardboard for the steam run off and bricks to keep the kettle off the ground. There are three cuts to soften, steam, and bend, each took around 30 minutes to an hour to soften before bending the wood 90 degrees.

The air of the apartment smelled like rich cedar and made us feel like we were back home. Once each side was steamed and bent, I nailed the ends shut, holding together my first full-sized bentwood chest. We had sourced some local oak wood, which was harder than cedar, and nailed it to the bottom of the chest. Each side, inside and out, is carved to a fine knife finish with the tools I hand-made.

The bentwood chest is imperfect because there are gaps where it is bent, showing they were carved too wide. It is a learning moment that can be seen from above and is another reason it is shown on a lower-level plinth.

The steam bending process is a practice I value understanding even with mistakes and (literal) learning curbs, because it not only is a practical and striking design but it offers me more physical understanding of simgan (cedar tree) and the abilities it has when activated with heat and aks (water) over time. It seems if I can steam a medium sized bentwood chest in the middle of the biggest city in Canada, that there may be more to explore with this knowledge back in Laxyip.

Bentwood boxes and chests were historically made by Gitxsan and neighbouring nations to hold many things from food to regalia, to being used as a child's cradle, to being a used as a coffin. Sim gan (red cedar) is protection for us.

There is deep significance to these types of containers as holders of sacred items, some with intricate designs that represent the family or person who takes care of the box. This bentwood chest is undesigned and unpainted other than knife finish, to keep the focus on how the materials speak.

I treated the red oak just as carefully as I did the sim gan, from learning in what ways oak trees hold special significances to these territories and Nations.[65] Put together, these wood relations reflect my current holding of space; bringing parts of Laxyip where ever I go, and with the witnessing of other Nation's Lands which expand my own sense of community.

Woodchips gathered from carving creations past, from the masks, and even from the making of *Box Offering* fill inside the box. Each chip has been cared for, in reference to

[65] Natasha Myers, "Becoming Sensor in Sentient Worlds: A More-than-Natural History of a Black Oak Savannah," *Between Matter and Method*, January 2020, pp. 73-96, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003084792-5.

the Gitxsan way of believing that everything has spirit. The woodchips still hold life and potential and are parts of living entities that will always be part of my growing relationality.

I hand out these woodchips to witnesses of the exhibition, wrap them in off-cuts of *Salmon Back to the River* blanket, and thank each person. This way, each witness holds a part of my practice and the Lands I have been interacting with.

Acknowledging new relations and futures to emerge, the woodchips may be scattered in the wind, in the water, become fire starter, kitty litter, or simply be kept by the witness. This way it becomes a medicine offering. They may act as a reminder of some aspect of this exhibition, though no visitor is expected to remember every detail.

"A gift creates on-going relationship"[66] because chips travel. Literally they end up in my bed, sweaters, socks, hair. They become me. The intention of the gift also travels, a duty to the remembrance of witnessing.

[66] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Vancouver, B.C.: Langara College, 2022), 26. This is an incredible read for anyone looking to think with Indigenous concepts of learning from other Nations of beings. This work helped me to think further about my own season Gitxsan harvesting ways, and how the gift economy can return and be strong. T'oyaxsii'niin Robin Kimmerer for allowing us to dream back these good ways.

The gallery came to feel like a home space as soon as the work began to sit together. Each piece was made away from home, but in a way represent home and the continuous relations that stem from the making. It shows that despite the adaptations, there is an embedded Gitxsan spirit in each creative form.

A week after the exhibition, I gathered at a park in Toronto with some friends for a fire; right before we head back home, back to Laxyip. This will be how I pay my personal toll to these Lands. It is a gesture of giving to the fire in this place. I have thought a lot about what would be the most appropriate gesture to offer by me at this time.

Having a fire is a way to communicate with ancestors, and it can be a good way to signal the closing of this ceremony or chapter, and the beginning of the next round elsewhere. This way, I am able to say my "see you again's" to good friends who have helped me find some sense of community while away.

Our friend Ahmed was just as awkward as us in the big city, and we quickly built a kinship around that. Angelo and I began sharing carving techniques and tools with Ahmed in the summer of 2022. He is from Sudan so there is a carving history in his lineage as well.

We formed a reciprocal relationship by sharing traditional and contemporary methods

of creation, bridging and growing our practices simultaneously. The opportunity to be able to learn and then combine new medias with my traditional skills practice allows me to tell more distinct stories which may promote richer interactions with the works.

Connecting with other artists became essential to my wellbeing, as I began this MFA journey near the end of the covid-19 pandemic. I am incredibly grateful to have been able to learn and share space with a skilled artist and kind person like Ahmed. T'oyaxsii'niin Ahmed.

I will continue the Gitxsan traditions of witnessing our relations, our realities, and sharing through storytelling. This exhibition and accompanied text may allow people from other backgrounds to witness further ways of relating to the Lands and its beings. It may allow them, for a moment, to see that Indigenous people are still doing ancestral work that impacts how we interact with our surroundings today.

As an auntie to nieces, nephews and young ones, I share these histories in a way to connect our realities of the past and present into the future times.

Gitxsan aunties have traditional roles for supporting children through different life stages, such as making certain personal items like clothing for the nieces and nephews. Aunties and uncles may also pass on skills, passions, and mindsets.

I was always disconnected with my aunties by distance, but when we did visit they were the best moments because there was so much care.

Now, I have many more nieces and nephews, each so special.

Over time, I have learned that being nixdaa (auntie) means caring for the little ones that are the next thinkers, makers, and caretakers of Laxyip. It means that care for Laxyip is also care for the children. And care for the children is care for Laxyip.

In this way, being nixdaa pushes me to reconsider every creation, every word and every action. An auntie prioritizes work which benefits their gusliis (niece or nephew), work with lasting impact that brings in our intergenerational knowing. This is why looking at our ancient and present Laxyip and land relations becomes so essential.

This work allowed me to think through my land-based practice, about access to traditional materials, Gitxsan protocols, stresses on Laxyip that span time immemorial, and how small acts of care may help us move forward.

Xsiwis Dr. M. Jane Smith has expressed the importance of the Gitxsan values and principles of yahlxw wila yeet' (harmony), luu hix hogix (balance), and

naadahahlhakwlhinhl (interconnectedness),[67] a worldview that generated a culture around respect for all of life. It is crucial that people on a greater level reevaluate their own Land relations. We bring these relations wherever we go.

This research has become a collection of selected Gitxsan histories, a way of relating our stories at a moment in time.

Xsiwis states that for Gitxsan, "the listener becomes a part of many storytellers, past, present and future."[68]

T'oyaxsii'niin for becoming a part of this.

We will continue witnessing.

[67] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005) 12.

[68] M. Jane Smith (Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2005) 15.

FIGURE 13 BOX OFFERING, STEAM BENT RED CEDAR AND OAK CHEST, VARIOUS SPECIES OF WOODCHIPS, COTTON, THREAD, NAILS, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

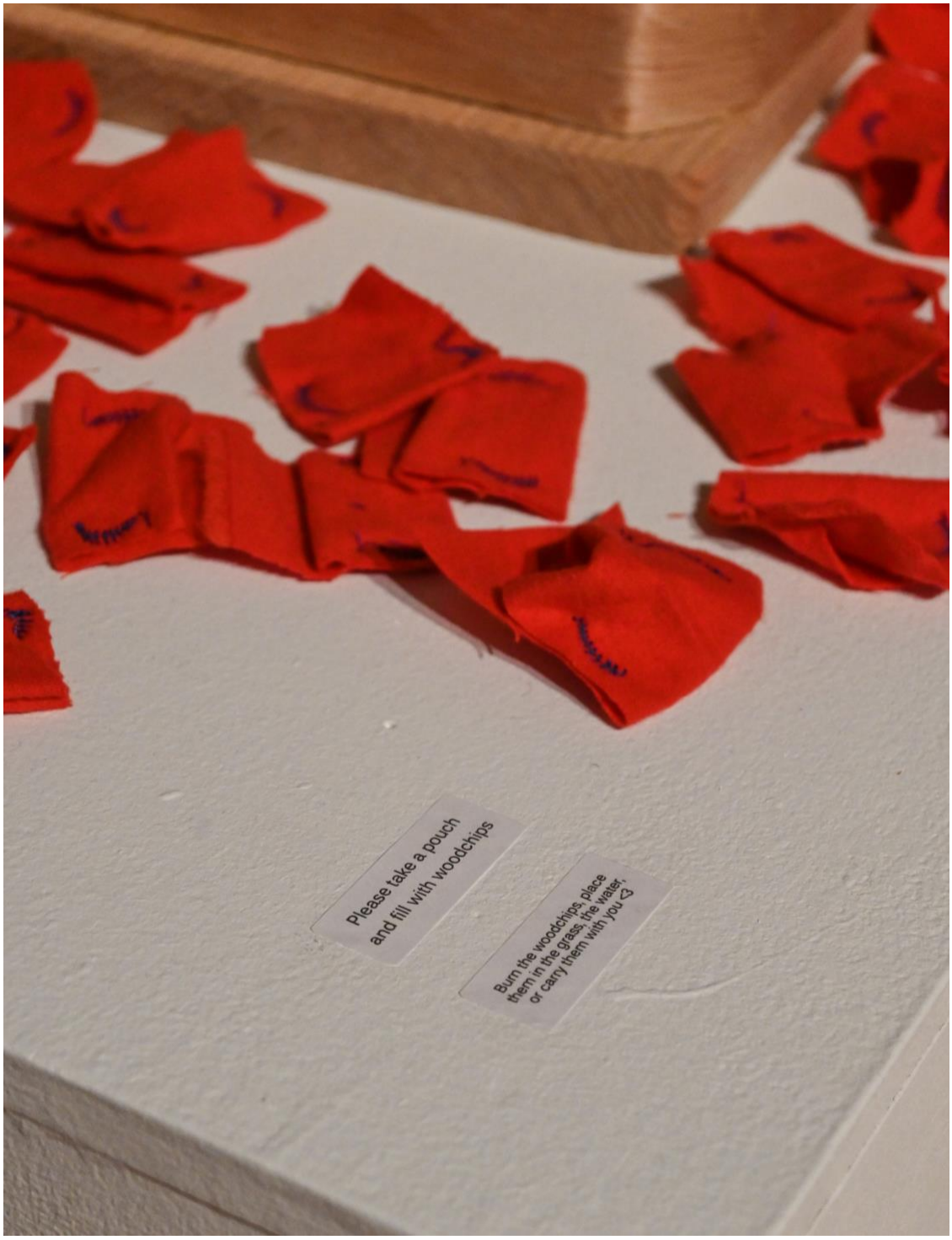

FIGURE 14 *BOX OFFERING*, RED CEDAR AND OAK BENTWOOD CHEST, WOODCHIPS, COTTON, THREAD, NAILS, 2023. PHOTOGRAPH BY NAOMI DARYN BOYD.

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Appendices

FIGURE 15 SHADOW THE EAGLE CHECKING ON THE NEST, LIVE YOUTUBE PHOTO CAPTURE, FEBRUARY 21ST, 2023.

FIGURE 16 GITXSAN APRON HELD AT CMH, LABLED VII-C-1823(NO DATE), VISITED AUGUST 2022. PHOTOGRAPH BY VERONICA WAECHTER.