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# The Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project at SFU's Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre

## Le projet « Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling » au Centre de ressources curriculaires autochtones à l'Université Simon Fraser

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Résumé de l'article

Le projet « Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling » a été mis sur pied au Centre de ressources curriculaires autochtones (CRCA) à la bibliothèque de l'Université Simon Fraser (SFU) dans le but de fournir des ressources permettant d'inclure l'art autochtone dans l'enseignement post-secondaire. Le projet s'est penché sur la notion d'art comme littérature en utilisant le concept de narration autochtone (Archibald, 2008). Dans cet article, nous présentons le contexte du CICR à la bibliothèque SFU et les « Salish Weave Box Sets, » ainsi que l'approche, les thèmes du projet et les leçons tirées du projet « Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling. »

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## **The Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project at SFU's Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre**

### **Le projet « Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling » au Centre de ressources curriculaires autochtones à l'Université Simon Fraser**

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#### ***Abstract / Résumé***

The Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project was conducted for the Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre (ICRC) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) Library, with the goal of providing resources to include Indigenous art in the post-secondary classroom. The project looked at the concept of art as literature, using the concept of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008). In this paper, we provide further context about the ICRC at SFU Library and the Salish Weave Box Sets, and we present the approach, project themes, and lessons learned from the Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project.

Le projet « Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling » a été mis sur pied au Centre de ressources curriculaires autochtones (CRCA) à la bibliothèque de l'Université Simon Fraser (SFU) dans le but de fournir des ressources permettant d'inclure l'art autochtone dans l'enseignement post-secondaire. Le projet s'est penché sur la notion d'art comme

littérature en utilisant le concept de narration autochtone (Archibald, 2008). Dans cet article, nous présentons le contexte du CICR à la bibliothèque SFU et les « Salish Weave Box Sets, » ainsi que l'approche, les thèmes du projet et les leçons tirées du projet « Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling. »

### ***Keywords / Mots-clés***

Indigenous art, Indigenous storywork, decolonizing libraries, decolonizing curriculum, academic libraries, Indigenous librarianship, Indigenous methodologies; Art autochtone, narration autochtone, décoloniser les bibliothèques, décoloniser le curriculum, bibliothèques universitaires, bibliothéconomie autochtone, méthodologies autochtones

### ***Introduction***

We would like to start by saying kitchi-marsii (thank you very much) and màsin cho (thank you) to lessLIE (Penelakut and Esquimalt), Maynard Johnny Jr. (Kwakwaka'wakw and Coast Salish), and Qwul'thilm (Dylan Thomas, Lyackson and Snuneymuxw First Nations) for their time, words, and support for this publication. Kitchi-marsii and màsin cho to Christiane and George Smyth for the support that made this project possible.

This paper describes a project undertaken for the Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre (ICRC), located in the W.A.C. Bennett Library at Simon Fraser University's Burnaby campus. The ICRC, which will be described in more detail later, provides resources regarding decolonization of classrooms and pedagogy to educators at Simon Fraser University (SFU). In the Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project, three Coast Salish artists discuss their art practices and art as literature, and there are accompanying educational activities for multiple disciplines including education, visual arts, and mathematics.

The project was a collaboration between Indigenous Initiatives librarian Ashley Edwards and sociology graduate student Courtney Vance. Following Indigenous protocol, we will provide a brief introduction to us, so the reader gains a sense of who we are and our approach to the project (Fiola, 2021; Kovach, 2009).

Taanshi kiyawaaw, Ashley Edwards dishinihkaashoon. I am Red River Métis, Dutch, and Scottish, and grew up on Stó:lō téméxw (Stó:lō territory) in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. My Métis ancestors took scrip in St. Francis Xavier, Manitoba. I have been working in libraries since graduating with my library technician diploma in 2009 and have been with SFU Library since 2013. In 2020 I graduated from the University of Alberta with a Master's in Library and Information Studies and am currently a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at SFU. My first continuing library position was with the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre library. While there, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to join Sonny Naxaxalhts'i McHalsie on his Stó:lō Place Names tours. During these tours he shared stories of the Fraser Valley landscape, and I started to understand how stories and teachings are held in the land around us. I began to think about what that implied for libraries and to question what

was missing from libraries if only books were included. This shift in my thinking was a motivation behind the Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project, recognizing the importance of art and orality in sharing knowledge.

My name is Courtney Vance, and I am Northern-Tutchone, Tahltan, and German. I am a registered member of Selkirk First Nation, located in Pelly Crossing, Yukon, but have lived my whole life on the unceded and unsurrendered territories of x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Peoples. At the time this project began, I was starting my Master's in Sociology and have since graduated (2023), and I will be a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Toronto in 2024. My Indigenous and settler positionality informs all the work I do and is what led me to the Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling as a means of giving back to the stewards of the lands that have cultivated my dedication to uplifting Indigenous histories, knowledges, and voices.

### **A Brief Note About Terminology**

In the Canadian context, the word Indigenous refers to three groups: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Indigenous became the preferred term when referring to all three groups around 2016, to align with the United Nations' use of the word (Younging, 2018). Other terms, such as Aboriginal, will be used when it is the term preferred by a group or used during a specific time period. Whenever possible we will provide the Nation someone is from, in recognition of the diversity among Indigenous communities. We accept the responsibility for any mistakes or omissions. We will be using Opaskwayak Cree scholar Gregory Younging's (2018) *Elements of Indigenous Style* for guidelines regarding writing about Indigenous peoples and topics.

### ***The Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre, SFU Library***

After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its final reports and 94 Calls to Action in 2015, many institutions and organizations across Canada responded by including initiatives related to reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization in strategic planning documents and action plans. At SFU the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council (ARC) was created. It looked at the TRC Calls to Action and engaged in consultation with different groups at SFU (i.e., students, Indigenous students, faculty, and members of local Indigenous communities) through a series of open forums and closed meetings (SFU Aboriginal Reconciliation Council, 2017). The resulting report was released in 2017 and included 34 Calls to Action specific to the SFU community; it guides much of the truth and reconciliation work being done at the university. Call to Action 21 is to "Establish an Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre" to support the work needed to decolonize and Indigenize curriculum across the disciplines. ARC "propose[d] that the SFU Library continue to provide and enhance current services through the acquisition of indigenous [sic] education curriculum supports, and the linking of resource materials to specific courses and programs" (SFU Aboriginal Reconciliation Council, 2017, p. 46). In response to the ARC report and Call to Action 21, SFU Library began to develop the [Indigenous Curriculum Resource Centre](#) (ICRC), located in the W.A.C. Bennett Library at SFU Burnaby. The purpose of the Centre is to provide

educators with materials and resources to support their own learning on decolonization and education, and materials that can be used in the classroom.

### ***The Salish Weave Collection and Box Sets***

The Salish Weave Box Sets are part of a larger collection by art activists Christiane and George Smyth (Lawrence et al., 2012). The Salish Weave Collection includes prints and 2D objects that the Smyths began purchasing in 2000 when they found an “immediate attraction to the style and aesthetic of Salish art” (Smyth & Smyth, n.d.-a, Discovery and Collection section). “Our purpose was twofold: to promote awareness of Coast Salish art, and to support the artists who are reviving it” (Smyth & Smyth, n.d.-a, Discovery and Collection section). The Smyths want to increase public awareness of Coast Salish art, and they have exhibited pieces and prints from the collection since 2007. The creation of the Salish Weave Box Sets started in 2011 when, after nearly a decade of purchasing Coast Salish art and building relationships with artists, Christiane and George turned their focus to education (Smyth & Smyth, n.d.-a). There are four box sets in total, each containing nine prints from Coast Salish artists; many of the prints were commissioned expressly for the box sets.

The Smyths have gifted school districts across Vancouver Island and the lower mainland one or two box sets each, and they have given some post-secondary institutions a set to support teacher education programs (Smyth & Smyth, n.d.-b). In 2017, a group of teachers and Indigenous educators in the Cowichan Valley School District collaborated on lesson plans for their K-3 curriculum, and this project continued with other school districts on Vancouver Island. In 2019, Salish Weave partnered with the University of Victoria to continue distributing the box sets and developing curricular materials for K-12 classrooms (Smyth & Smyth, n.d.-b). All the lesson plans and curriculum materials developed are available on the School Program page of the Salish Weave website.

Building on the work done for K-12 classrooms, the Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project provides post-secondary educators with resources to support bringing Coast Salish art into the classroom. Funded by the Salish Weave Fund held at the Victoria Foundation, the project centres around highlighting the voices of the artists within the Salish Weave Collection Box Sets, following Indigenous research methodologies. In particular, this project’s goal was to look into art as Indigenous literature, following Cherokee Nation scholar Daniel Heath Justice’s (2018) description of Indigenous literature including texts such as “cane baskets, wampum belts, birchbark scrolls, gourd masks, sand paintings, rock art, carved and painted cedar poles, stones and whale bones, culturally modified trees, and so on” (p. 22). Following this expansion of what should be considered literature, in this project we wanted to examine art practices as a way of recording and transmitting knowledge. To achieve this, the project used Indigenous storywork, as described by Q’um Q’um Xiiem (Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald, Stó:lō) in her 2008 book, *Indigenous Storywork*. Q’um Q’um Xiiem worked closely with Elders and storytellers, who shared both traditional and personal life-experience stories, to develop ways of bringing storytelling into educational contexts. Her text, *Indigenous Storywork*, demonstrates how stories have the power to educate and heal the heart,

mind, body, and spirit. It builds on the seven principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy that form a framework for understanding the characteristics of stories, appreciating the process of storytelling, establishing a receptive learning context, and engaging in holistic meaning-making.

Storytelling and knowledge sharing are also important parts of traditional Salish artistic practice. An example comes from Maynard Johnny Jr.'s curatorial statement for Ravens Moon:

The moon is the protector of mother earth; it lights the night. The oldest story in West Coast Native art and culture is Raven releasing the sun and moon to the earth and the world.

One story is that Raven stole the chief's chest with the sun and moon inside. Before the raven stole the chest the world was black. Raven was originally white but when he stole the chief's chest from the longhouse he flew up the smoke hole and the soot turned him black.

Another version says Raven stole the chest and released the sun and the moon. When the sun came out of the chest it burned Raven black.

Another says while Raven was flying away with the sun and the moon still in the box they collided and pieces broke off. When Raven opened the box to release the sun and the moon these pieces flew out and became the stars. (Johnny, 2005)

In the statement, Maynard Johnny Jr. provides a summary of Raven releasing the moon. Those who know the stories can also “read” them by looking at the piece (see Figure 1). This is a practice of engaging with art as a form of literacy, recognizing that knowledge exists outside of text-based formats.

## Figure 1

### *Ravens Moon*



Note. From Ravens Moon, by Maynard Johnny Jr., 2005, Salish Weave

([https://salishweave.com/gallery\\_items/ravens-moon-2/](https://salishweave.com/gallery_items/ravens-moon-2/)). Copyright 2005 by Maynard Johnny Jr. Reprinted with permission.

In her book, Q'um Q'um Xiiem writes that giving back is a part of storywork that “educates the heart, mind, body, and spirit” (Archibald, 2008, p. x). She goes on to say that it is “only when our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together do we truly have Indigenous education” (Archibald, 2008, p. 12). Following that intention behind storywork as pedagogy, the curriculum activities that have been created from the conversations with the artists in the Salish Weave Box Sets project are intended to provide the learner with a holistic educational opportunity.

## **Our Approach to the Project**

The Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project began in May 2021 and ended in May 2024. When we started this project, Courtney conducted an annotated bibliography of the literature around Indigenous methodologies and Indigenous art/pedagogies, to ensure we had background information and teachings around cultural protocols and conducting appropriate research with Indigenous communities. This included various sources such as peer-reviewed and academic articles, books, and videos, with an emphasis on works by Indigenous authors. The annotated bibliography purposefully did not engage in a critical analysis of the texts and sources, to ensure the focus remained on the contributors’ arguments and lessons, all of which we deemed relevant to our work within the project.

When planning the project we drew on Indigenous methodologies (Archibald, 2008; Brant Castellano, 2004; Iseke, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Kovach, 2010; McGregor, 2017; Smith, 2012) to reflect the goal of the ICRC’s initiative surrounding Indigenizing and decolonizing curriculum, as well as uplifting Indigenous storytelling as a form of research (Archibald, 2008; Iseke 2013).

Guided by Kovach’s (2010) conversational method, we set out to hold recorded conversations over Zoom with artists from the Collection and the Smyths, rather than formal or structured interviews. This allowed the conversations to be grounded in each artist’s particular cultural protocols, have an informal and flexible nature, and include a reflexive and reciprocal exchange between us and the artists (Kovach, 2010). Before each conversation, we shared conversation guides tailored to the Smyths and each artist so they could reflect and be prepared before the recording, but we also let them know we would be happy to hear anything they wanted to share.

After each conversation, we drafted a transcript and sent a copy to each interlocuter for review in case they wanted anything removed or adjusted. This was a practice in transparency and non-extractive research guided by Archibald (2008), Kovach (2010), and Smith (2012). After transcriptions were finalized, we edited the recorded conversations to cut out any pauses, transitions, or moments the Smyths or the artists asked us to remove. Once these edits were completed, we created metadata for each video so they could be housed on SFU’s Digitized Collections site and would be searchable in the context of the topics discussed in each recording, the artists’ names, and their specific Nationhoods and communities.

## **The Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project**

Once we engaged in our own learning and talked about our approach and goals for the project, we were ready to contact the artists. Because the Smyths have long-standing relationships with them, Christiane offered to send an email to each artist introducing us and the project. We were grateful for this introduction, because she was able to tell the artists how this project fit within the larger Salish Weave Box Sets initiative. After Christiane's initial email, we followed up with an email containing more information about us and the project, and an offer to have a preliminary conversation to answer any questions. We also told the artists that we could provide an honorarium, that they would have an opportunity to view an unedited version of the recording and could change their mind about participating at any time, and that we would inform them of any publications that emerged from the project.

The recordings were over Zoom due to the uncertainty of travel at the time because of COVID-19, we provided each artist a gift card to a coffee shop of their choice in place of having an in-person introductory meeting together with refreshments. During an initial conversation with an artist who ended up not having the capacity to participate further, they taught us that we should also gift a blanket to each artist, following Coast Salish protocol. Neither of us are from a Coast Salish community, so we appreciated this teaching and followed up with the artists we had completed a recording with, sending them a blanket and a note explaining how we had learned this protocol.

Over the course of the project we had four recorded conversations, one with the owners of the Salish Weave Collection and three with Coast Salish artists with works in the collection. The first conversation, with Christiane and George Smyth, focused on how they began the Salish Weave Collection, their motivations, and the connections they built with various artists, which helped the collection grow into what it is today. The second conversation was with lessLIE, who is of Cowichan, Penalakut, and Esquimalt Nations and of Irish, Italian, and French heritage. The third conversation was with Coast Salish and Kwakwaka'wakw artist Maynard Johnny Jr. The fourth conversation was with Qwul'thylum (Dylan Thomas) of Lyackson and Snuneymuxw First Nations. The conversations ranged in length from 40 to 80 minutes. We created a slideshow with some pieces from the box sets, so that when talking about a piece during the conversations we could look at it.

While all the artists we spoke with have unique First Nations cultures and experiences, they each shared what it has been like to practice as an Indigenous artist, the importance of art as a form of literacy, the specificity of Coast Salish design elements, how art can be used to recognize colonial histories and uplift community, and how art is a pathway for decolonization. They each shared about their journey in developing their artistic style and the artists they admired and learned from. Each artist spoke of their admiration for x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam) artist Susan Point, and how she revitalized Coast Salish art practices in the 1970s with her studies on spindle whorls. All artists shared that they took inspiration from spindle whorls, whether as a means of learning Coast Salish design elements like trigons, ovoids, and crescents, or to honour wool-



spinning practices and recognize this Coast Salish tradition in their contemporary art practices.

lessLIE and Maynard Johnny Jr. discussed how their art is a way of sharing their culture with others. lessLIE stated,

I've always approached my work from the perspective that it is an educational tool, and it is something that can help shed light on to Coast Salish culture and just my overall perspective of the world as being a Coast Salish person. (lessLIE et al., 2021, p. 6)

For Maynard Johnny Jr., making Coast Salish art has been a way to share the beauty of Coast Salish culture with the world: "It's my job to tell people about who I am and where my people come from" (Johnny et al., 2021, p. 19). Qwul'thikum talked about the importance of seeing Coast Salish art and having your community recognized, in particular, how important this is for future generations (Thomas et al., 2022). Each artist touched on the importance of how engaging with Coast Salish art allows others to recognize and learn about Coast Salish culture in a meaningful way. They all shared gratitude for the opportunities that have come with being part of the Salish Weave Collection.

## ***Learning and Pivoting***

One challenge in a project like this is the capacity and availability of artists. Many of those we contacted simply did not have capacity to participate, which resulted in only three recorded conversations with artists. As a result, we came up with other resources to support the incorporation of the recorded conversations and the Salish Weave Box Sets into post-secondary classrooms. First, we created activities specific to each artist and for specific disciplines. The goal of the Salish Weave Art and Storytelling Activities (Vance & Edwards, 2023) is to serve as an extension of the recorded conversations to help generate discussion in a classroom or group setting. While designed for post-secondary classrooms, these activities could be adapted for other grade levels.

The second resource is an external website we created to foster further engagement with the recorded conversations, with the aim of being accessible to non-academic communities. It was particularly important to us that the conversations would be available to people from the artists' communities, with no access barriers. Each conversation was transcribed by Courtney and uploaded as a PDF, allowing for different modes of access.

The third resource is an annotated bibliography on Coast Salish Woolly Dogs, to contextualize the history of weaving as it relates to the legacy of Coast Salish art and artists' inspirations in spindle whorls (Thomas, 2020). This also supported another art project within the ICRC, which was to commission weavings from Debra Sparrow (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), Angela George (Sk̓wxwú7mesh), Chief Janice George and Willard "Buddy" Joseph (Sk̓wxwú7mesh), and Atheana Picha (q̓wa:ńłəń).

From this project we have learned that the result will always be different than the initial proposal. It is important to remain open and reflexive to how research can be shaped by everyone involved, and that research should be open to changing as new people, knowledge, and ideas arise; this is a lesson in Indigenous methodologies (Kovach 2009, 2010; Smith 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The Salish Weave Box Sets: Art and Storytelling Project was conducted to support SFU Library's ICRC's role in Indigenizing and decolonizing curriculum in response to SFU's Aboriginal Reconciliation Council Call to Action 21. Using Kovach's (2010) conversational method and grounding our project in Indigenous methodologies (Archibald, 2008; Brant Castellano, 2004; Iseke, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Kovach, 2010; McGregor, 2017; Smith, 2012), we recorded conversations with the owners of the Salish Weave Collection and three Coast Salish artists in the Salish Weave Box Sets. In these conversations, themes emerged around collecting Coast Salish art, promoting awareness of Indigenous art and artists, what it is like to practice as an Indigenous artist, how art can be an educational tool to recognize Indigenous culture, and art as a pathway for decolonization. As we learned lessons we began to pivot from the initial plan and created other outputs to promote the use of the recorded conversations and Salish Weave Box Sets in post-secondary classrooms and beyond. We learned that when using Indigenous research methodologies, it is crucial to remain flexible and reflexive so the shape of the research can change based on the needs, ideas, and knowledge of everyone involved.

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