Nature Reimagined:

Christi Belcourt's Ecological Aesthetic and Its Impact on Canadian Perspectives

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Abstract

Nature Reimagined: Christi Belcourt's Ecological Aesthetics and Its Impact on Canadian Perspectives

Emilie Contant

This thesis examines how Christi Belcourt's works, *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World*, unsettle the legacy of the Canadian landscape tradition by centering the perspectives of Indigenous women and being grounded in traditional knowledge and practices. By situating Belcourt's works in relation to established landscape paintings by the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson, I demonstrate how her practice challenges romanticized and extractive representations of the landscape, instead highlighting the interconnection of all living beings and the fragility of our ecosystems. Drawing on the work of scholars from Indigenous studies, ecology, Indigenous feminisms, and art history, this thesis examines how Belcourt innovatively adapts storytelling, Indigenous ecologies, and Métis floral beadwork to the canvas to redefine the possibilities of contemporary Indigenous art.

Territorial Acknowledgement

I, Emilie Contant, would like to begin by acknowledging that Concordia University is located on unceded Indigenous lands. I recognize the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation, members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, as the traditional custodians of the lands and waters where Concordia's Art History department conducts its research activities and graduate seminars. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering and exchange place for many First Nations, and today, it is home to a diverse Indigenous population, as well as other peoples. I am committed to ensuring that my research is conducted with respect to Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, and that it contributes to efforts toward decolonization and reconciliation.

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Michelle McGeough, for her invaluable guidance, support, and kindness throughout each step of the graduate program and research project. Thank you for always providing excellent advice and constructive feedback, your help has been deeply appreciated.

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To my parents, Chantal and Robert, and to my family, thank you for being supportive of my work and for always believing in me.

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Introduction and Methodologies

From the early twentieth century, wilderness landscape scenes have not only been a widely celebrated genre in Canadian art but have come to shape a specific imagining of the Canadian national identity.[1] While many artists have worked within the wilderness landscape tradition from modernity to the present, it is Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven who have solidified landscape art as Canada's national artistic style and who continue to be commemorated and celebrated today. Empty wilderness scenes gained popularity during the early twentieth-century for their vibrant colors and expressive brushstrokes which were distinct from previous Euro-North American landscape traditions, such as the Hudson River School of Painting of the nineteenth century. While Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven are widely recognized for establishing a national artistic style, their works have contributed to a broader effort of shaping a distinct Canadian identity, one that has come to be criticized for being rooted in patriarchal and colonial values. The rugged northern landscapes portrayed by these early artists not only reinforced a settler patriarchal order but also invited a "particular reading of landscape that erases struggles over access to and ownership over the land and portrays the natural environment as a frontier land just waiting to be surveyed and tamed".[2] As Dr. Jonathan Bordo suggests, the construction of the empty northern scene not only presented Canada's environment as available for expansion but also erased the presence of Indigenous communities living on the land, framing it as "terra nullius".[3] While

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[1] For scholarship on Canadian landscape art, see John O'Brian and Peter White, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014). My discussion expands beyond the scope of this text by examining contemporary Indigenous perspectives.

[2] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2011): 394.

[3] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction," 394; Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine – Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Études Canadiennes* 27, no. 4 (1992), 108.

this representation of Canada's natural world may not resonate with a great many Canadians, it nonetheless continues to carry some weight as Canada's national cultural style and identity.[4]

From the late twentieth century, a growing ecological consciousness has led artists to start looking critically at the tradition of landscape art, leading towards new ecological aesthetics and alternative ways of representing nature in art.[5] For Indigenous women, however, this shift does not represent a new wave, as their art has continuously reflected a deep connection to the land and an engagement with environmentalism, sustainability, and land back. Many contemporary Indigenous women artists have contested the landscape tradition through their work, focusing on creating alternative ways of representing Canada's natural world through the centering of Indigenous women's perspectives on nature. One of these artists is self-taught visual artist, writer, and social activist from the Métis community of Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta, Christi Belcourt. While Belcourt has a diverse artistic practice, she is primarily known for her intricate floral compositions that combine pointillism and beadwork aesthetics to represent the complex yet crucial relationships between plants, animals, the land and waters, and humans.

In this essay, I will argue that Belcourt's works *Wisdom of the Universe* (2014) and *Offerings to Save the World* (2017) unsettle the legacy of Canadian landscape art by centering the perspectives of Indigenous women and by being rooted in Indigenous women's traditional knowledges and practices. My research aims to position Belcourt's acrylic paintings in relation to the established representations of Canada's landscapes, as promoted by the Group of Seven and

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[4] Carmen Robertson, "Notes to a Nation: Teachings on Land through the Art of Norval Morrisseau," in *Unsettling Canadian Art History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 70.
[5] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2011): 395.

Tom Thompson.[6] Through this approach, I will demonstrate that Belcourt's ecological aesthetic not only rejects early representations of the landscape but also encourages viewers to recognize the biodiversity and fragility of our ecosystems in Canada. I will consider how Belcourt presents an alternative aesthetic to the empty wilderness scenes, focusing on how she innovatively adapts the Métis floral beadwork aesthetic to the canvas space, designs intricate compositions, and incorporates the teachings of plants into her work, a perspective that resonates with the ecological and Indigenous knowledge shared in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.[7] In the first section of this essay, I will address how the landscape tradition has come to shape Canada's cultural identity, and I highlight some of the problematics of this ongoing tradition, especially for Indigenous women living in close relationship with the land. For the second section, I demonstrate that Belcourt's works *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World* use storytelling to address issues central to Indigenous feminisms, including advocating for reciprocal relationship with the land and water, and restoring Indigenous women's rightful place as leaders in water governance and sustainability efforts. In the following section, I will consider Belcourt's incorporation of Indigenous ecologies and teachings of plants in her works, and I quote directly from my discussion with close collaborator and friend of Belcourt, Ojibwe artist Isaac Murdoch. Lastly, in the fourth section, I discuss Belcourt's innovative use of beadwork aesthetics and the significance of using traditional forms in contemporary works, as Sherry Farrell Racette notes: "Artists describe the transformative power of traditional materials that enable them to revitalize and mobilize endangered knowledge,

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[6] The term "promoted" is used to acknowledge the Group of Seven's role in shaping dominant narratives of Canadian landscape art. For a critique of their privileged position within Canadian art history and its nationalistic implications, see Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience : Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

[7] For the teachings of plants and their significance in Indigenous worldviews, see Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, first ed. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

and to confront trauma and hidden histories, while affirming the ongoing vitality and sovereignty of their communities."[8]

For this research project, I have employed various methodologies that have deepened my understanding of Indigenous feminisms, beadwork, and traditional plant teachings, providing valuable insights into Belcourt's artistic practice. One of the primary methods I used was an intersectional approach, which has been informed by texts from scholars working in disciplines beyond art history, such as environmental biology, ecology, Indigenous studies, Feminist studies, and Indigenous Feminisms. This approach allowed me to consider the significance of Belcourt's works from different standpoints and perspectives, especially from perspectives that aren't traditionally centered within western art historical discourses. Another method that I used when researching *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World* was visual analysis. While being one of the standard methods used within art historical writing, visual analysis increased my understanding of Belcourt's paintings as her compositions are highly detailed, and the formal elements that she chooses to employ are rich in meaning and significance. Lastly, one of the methods that helped shape this research was conducting an interview with Belcourt's closest collaborator and friend, Isaac Murdoch. It was important for me to conduct an interview during this research because I wanted to take a more collaborative approach and include not only my interpretations of Belcourt's work as a French-Canadian researcher but also the perspectives of an Indigenous artist. It is important to note that oral histories are central to Indigenous methodologies and serve as a key method in art history for highlighting Indigenous perspectives.[9] Murdoch's generously offered perspectives, which will be explored in the third section of this thesis, offer

[8] Sherry Farrell Racette, "Tuft Life: Stitching Sovereignty in Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 123.
[9] Heather L. Igloliorte, and Carla Taunton, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Art Histories in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 5.

new insights into Belcourt's works, and they illuminate Belcourt's approaches to art production and the underlying purpose of her artworks.

Wisdom of the Universe and *Offerings to Save the World*

Christi Belcourt has become a prominent figure in contemporary Canadian art, and she has gained widespread recognition and acclaim for her work over the years. Belcourt has worked with a variety of mediums, such as beadwork, illustration, and stained-glass; however, her practice has consistently been focused on acrylic painting. While Belcourt is primarily known for her artistic practice, she has also been an active environmentalist, language learner, philanthropist, and social justice advocate. Her beliefs and politics are echoed in her work. One of Belcourt's major collaborative projects is her 2013 project titled *Walking with Our Sisters*, which was a crowd-sourced commemorative installation that brought together artists, activists, and the public to honour and pay respect to the lives of the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans and Two-Spirit People of Canada and the United States. This project also honored residential school survivors and commemorated the children who never returned home to their families and communities, through the inclusion of children's vamps.[10] Throughout this project, Belcourt collected over 2000 pairs of moccasins and brought them together as a touring installation.[11] Another important project that Belcourt is currently working on is titled "Onaman Collective," which is a collaboration with Isaac Murdoch and Erin Marie Konsmo. This project focuses on advocating for land and water rights, Indigenous sovereignty, and language revival. One of the strategies that is used by these artists is to produce artworks that can be printed for free on their

[10] "A Commemorative Art Installation for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women of Canada and the United States," Walking With Our Sisters, last modified unknown, http://walkingwithoursisters.ca/about/

[11] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University. Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 131.

website to create banners for activism efforts and protests. One such artwork is the *Water is Life* (2016) [Figure 3] illustration by Belcourt. While the artworks that are produced for this project are quite different in style to Belcourt's acrylic paintings, they nonetheless echo themes evident in *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World*, including environmental protection, storytelling and intergenerational knowledge.

The first artwork that I will be discussing is titled *Wisdom of the Universe* [Figure 1], and it was produced by Belcourt in 2014. *Wisdom of the Universe* is an acrylic painting on canvas that Belcourt painted in her signature style, which combines pointillism with traditional beadwork aesthetics of the Métis people. Traditionally, Métis beadwork has been produced using symmetrical floral patterns with glass beads on a dark background. Likewise, Belcourt has consistently used a black background as a base on which she has layered blue-coloured roots and branches, which extend across the canvas, serving as the foundation of the design. Here, the black background symbolically represents the trade cloth and black velvet used by Indigenous women "in their bead, quill and moose-tufting designs."[12] Over the roots and branches, Belcourt has designed an intricate and colourful floral composition in which every flower and animal that is painted on the left is mirrored on the right, with the exception of a dove, maple leaf, and intersecting leaves at the center of the work. *Wisdom of the Universe* is inspired by 200 species of plants and animals, listed as threatened, endangered, or extinct in Ontario.[13] The species of plants featured in this work include the Dwarf Lake Iris, Spring Blue Eyes Mary, and Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid.[14] In addition, eight bird species are incorporated within the design, including the

[12] Christi Belcourt, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 84.
[13] Art Gallery of Ontario, *Multisensory Moments: Christi Belcourt's Wisdom Of The Universe*, (Ontario: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2022), YouTube.
[14] Art Gallery of Ontario, *Multisensory Moments: Christi Belcourt's Wisdom Of The Universe*, YouTube.

Cerulean Warbler, Acadian Flycatcher, and Hummingbird.[15] The white dove at the center of the work is the only bird depicted with its wings wide open, appearing to be flying out of the canvas and towards the viewer. Lastly, the work features small yellow dots that are scattered around the composition, referencing both the spiritual world and universe.

My second case study is *Offerings to Save the World*, which was completed by Belcourt in 2017. Like *Wisdom of the Universe*, this work features Belcourt's signature pointillism technique on a black-background. However, for this work Belcourt has chosen to depict two human figures at the center of her composition. The two Indigenous women are dressed in black dresses with elaborate motifs on the sleeves. The two women appear to be making an offering, as their hands are reaching out towards the water. It is also important to note that the woman on the right is pregnant. While this painting is not exactly symmetrical, in contrast with *Wisdom of the Universe*, the work is nonetheless balanced, as the two bodies of land are positioned across from each other and are both layered with similar patterns featuring flowers, leaves, berries, and roots. At the center of this work, Belcourt has painted a flowing body of water that parts the land on each side and reaches up, blurring the division between the water and the sky. The water has a dark blue base that is layered with lighter shades of blue, wave-like lines, and white dots. Several species of marine animals have been incorporated within the water portion of the composition, including fish, frogs, snakes, and turtles. Significantly, Belcourt has also depicted an underwater panther, a being from Anishinaabe oral traditions. Like *Wisdom of the Universe*, small yellow and white dots are scattered across the composition, representing the universe and spiritual world.

The Literature

[15] Art Gallery of Ontario, *Multisensory Moments: Christi Belcourt's Wisdom Of The Universe*, YouTube.

As a well-established artist, Belcourt's artistic projects have earned recognition amongst her peers and in academic circles. Several scholars have recognized Belcourt's use of art as a form of activism, for example, the exhibition *Walking With Our Sisters* (WWOS), which aimed to commemorate the lives of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans and Two-Spirit People (MMIWGT2S) of Canada and the United States, as well as the children who attended residential schools. In 2012, Belcourt put out a call on Facebook inviting people to create vamps in honor of the MMIWGT2S.[16] WWOS gained wide-spread support and emerged as a community driven project, which "blurred the boundaries between art, ceremony, governance, community-building and memorial."[17] As the project travelled across Turtle Island over the course of seven years, communities came together to organize WWOS's visits according to their own protocols.[18] This project demonstrated the power of working collectively, as all participants were volunteers and the project was realized through fundraising.[19] In the Introduction of *Keetsahnak: our missing and murdered Indigenous sisters*, Kim Anderson, professor at the University of Guelph, emphasizes the role of WWOS in starting the collective commemorative movement, which brought families and community groups together to bead and discuss the impacts of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.[20] She observes that it was Belcourt's idea to turn to the public for donations of beaded moccasins and vamps that led to widespread support for the cause and demonstrations of care across Canada, through beading, ceremonies, and scholarship.[21]

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[16] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University, Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 115.
[17] Christi Belcourt, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 115.
[18] Christi Belcourt, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 116.
[19] Christi Belcourt, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 116.
[20] Kim Anderson, "Introduction," in *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters*, edited by Anderson, Kim, Maria Campbell, and Christi Belcourt, (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 2018), XXII.
[21] Kim Anderson, "Introduction," XXIII.

Expanding on Anderson's chapter, Laura Harjo, Jenell Navarro, and Kimberly Robertson argue in "Leading with Our Hearts: Anti-Violence Action and Beadwork Circles as Colonial Resistance" that the strategy used for Belcourt's WWOS, to mobilize the community and embrace the sacred practice of beading, was effective in confronting "the settler colonial imperative to violate and eliminate Indigenous women."[22] They further suggest that the actions that were taken as part of WWOS, which concretized efforts towards decolonization, were (and are) essential in advancing the eradication of violence towards Indigenous women and girls.[23] In the 2017 article "Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland," Carmen Robertson, a Scots-Lakota scholar, positions Belcourt as an important contemporary artist centering beads in her practice, both as an inspiration on the canvas and for traditional beadwork. She argues that Belcourt's practice, notably her WWOS installation, demonstrates the transformative power of beadwork.[24]

While many scholars have written about her community-based art installation WWOS, Belcourt's acrylic paintings have also been recognized for their major contributions to the contemporary art scene. Notably, Belcourt's acrylic paintings have been celebrated for their ability to combine painting and activism, effectively bringing Indigenous perspectives, traditions, and knowledge into the gallery space and to a wide audience. In the 2022 article, "Weaving Water: Toward an Indigenous Method of Self- and Community Care," Jenell Navarro, professor at the University of Saskatchewan in Indigenous Studies, argues that in *Offerings to Save the World* Belcourt intentionally centers water as a way to emphasize the importance of water in Indigenous

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[22] Laura Harjo, Jenell Navarro, Kimberly Robertson, "Leading with Our Hearts: Anti-Violence Action and Beadwork Circles as Colonial Resistance," In *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters*, edited by Anderson, Kim, Maria Campbell, and Christi Belcourt (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 2018), 281.
[23] Laura Harjo, Jenell Navarro, Kimberly Robertson, "Leading with Our Hearts," 281.
[24] Carmen Robertson, "Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland," *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 42, no. 2 (2017): 18.

worldviews on protection, spirit, and healing, and transmit this knowledge to future generations in the form of a visual archive.[25] She further suggests that Belcourt's painting symbolically represents the balance that Indigenous women bring into the world: "the water allows the women to live and, in turn, the 'water' in their wombs allows all of humanity to be born."[26] In the 2020 article, "On Living the Good Life," Nadia Kurd, curator of the University of Alberta, suggests that while Belcourt's works do contribute to efforts towards sovereignty for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people, her work also urges all viewers to recognize the connection between all living things, including human beings.[27] Furthermore, Kurd notes that one of the pressing issues addressed in Belcourt's work is the devastating impacts of climate change and resource extraction in Canada as a result of colonization and the framing of Canada's lands as *terra nullius*.[28] She suggests that Belcourt uses her art practice to demonstrate to the public that we must change our belief systems and recognize our shared responsibility for sustainable practices.

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[25]Jenell Navarro, "Weaving Water: Toward an Indigenous Method of Self- and Community Care," in *Consuelo Jimenez Underwood: Art, Weaving, Vision*, edited by Laura E. Perez and Ann Marie Leimer (Duke University Press, 2022), 200.
[26] Jenell Navarro, "Weaving Water: Toward an Indigenous Method of Self- and Community Care," 217.
[27] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University, Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 83.
[28] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University, Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 82.

Section 1 – Cultural Identity in Canada

The Landscape Tradition and the Group of Seven

The Group of Seven were a Toronto-based Canadian school of landscape painters renowned for being the pioneers of the empty landscape tradition that has come to define Canada's national cultural identity. Tom Thomson is frequently discussed in relation to the Group of Seven, although he was not an official member. The beginning of the Group has been traced back to J.E.H MacDonald's private solo show in November 1911 when he exhibited several sketches that caught the attention of Lawren Harris; however, the first official Group of Seven exhibition was held in May of 1920.[29] The Group was formed with the objective of developing a distinct Canadian art style which moved away from European art movements and influences.[30] Their common goal was to establish a national art that effectively represented the shared values of the Canadian nation.[31] The Group saw the ostensibly untouched wilderness landscape as an ideal subject for a national art primarily because the landscape was understood as authentically Canadian, and "unpossessed wilderness reflected the values of the dominant social classes of the time, as well as the Group of Seven itself."[32] The Group of Seven did welcome new members during their active years, however the original seven members were Frank Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley. While Tom Thomson never officially joined due to his tragic passing prior to the formation of the Group, he nonetheless remains closely associated with them, as he had become a close peer. Having worked alongside several of the

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[29] Dennis Reid, "Introduction to The Group of Seven," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 101.
[30] John O'Brien and Peter White, "Introduction," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 3.
[31] John O'Brien and Peter White, "Introduction," 3.
[32] John O'Brian, "Wild Art History," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 24.

members, Thomson has been regarded as a significant influence on their artistic vision and direction. Notably, for several years Thomson worked at the Grip Limited, a commercial design company located in Toronto, where he met several of the Group's members including Lismer, Varley, Carmichael, Johnston, and his supervisor MacDonald.[33] Like his fellow artists, Thomson painted the Canadian landscape, and his works still hold a prominent place within prestigious Canadian art institutions, including the National Gallery of Canada. The Group worked collaboratively for twenty years before holding their last exhibition in December of 1931, after which they disbanded to join the Canadian Group of Painters.[34] The Group disbanded because they had become "locked into public perception as a narrowly defined landscape school."[35] Joining the Canadian Group of Painters was an opportunity for these artists to broaden the scope of their work beyond landscape painting and to work alongside other Canadian artists, including Montreal painters Prudence Heward, Sarah Robertson and Anne Savage, and Victoria painter Emily Carr.

The Group distinguished themselves through their use of intense colour palettes and bold brushwork in an Expressionist style to capture rugged Canadian landscapes, which were consistently devoid of human presence. The Group predominantly painted areas found in the Precambrian Shield in central and northern Ontario, and they painted Algonquin Park, Algoma, and the north shore of Lake Superior.[36] While the Group was recognized in Canada for their innovative forms, their success is largely associated with the support they received from patrons, their friendships with writers and editors who were sympathetic to their work, and to their close

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[33] Ross King and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Defiant Spirits : The Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2010), 20.
[34] Dennis Reid, "Introduction to The Group of Seven," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 101.
[35] Joyce Zemans, "The McMichael Canadian Art Collection: What Would the Group of Seven Say?," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 204.
[36] Peter White, "Out of the Woods," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 14.

relationship with the National Art Gallery of Canada, namely the gallery's first director, Eric Brown.[37]

The most accepted narrative surrounding the Group of Seven has been advanced primarily by the National Gallery of Canada, which framed the Group as "Canada's poster boy[s] for cultural nationalism" throughout the twentieth century and arguably, still today.[38] From the early beginnings of the Group, the National Gallery of Canada closely aligned itself with the Group's legacy and has maintained the narrative that the Group's wilderness landscapes can be recognized as a distinctively Canadian art tradition. In the article "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity," Lynda Jessup suggests that the National Gallery's 'official' narrative about the Group of Seven has consistently emphasized the Group's populist stance, positioning them as advocates of Canadian art, for the Canadian people. Furthermore, Jessup argues that by aligning itself with the Group's populist stance, the National Gallery was positioning itself "along with the Group, as a champion of Canadian cultural democracy and as such, of Canadian nationality."[39] This has never been more explicit than at the National Gallery's 1995 exhibition *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, which simultaneously celebrated the Group's continued ability to represent the nation as a whole and the gallery's role in the Group's success. As Anne Whitelaw argues, the National Gallery aimed to establish its authority over Canadian art and shape public understanding of it through various

[37] Douglas Cole, "Artists, Patrons, and Public: An Enquiry into the Success of the Group of Seven," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 132.
[38] Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience : Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 130.
[39] Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," 140.

initiatives, including a reproduction program, loan exhibitions, and art education.[40] Significantly, the Group of Seven has continued to be celebrated and positioned as Canada's national art.[41]

Although the idealized and romantic depictions of the Canadian landscape, as represented by the Group of Seven and Tom Thompson, are increasingly recognized by scholars as an outdated and reductive means of expressing national identity and sentiment, these works continue to shape the nation's collective imagination, largely through their prominence in the National Gallery, and other authoritative galleries and institutions.[42] Significantly, Whitelaw highlights that galleries play an important role in mediating our engagement with artworks and shaping the narratives of artistic production.[43] As suggested by curator Peter White, the legacy of the northern landscape continues to be celebrated across Canada through book publications, articles, and retrospective exhibitions. In 2002, two of the largest touring exhibitions in Canada exclusively featured the works of the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson. The National Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario collaborated on a retrospective exhibition showcasing Tom Thomson's work titled *Tom Thomson*, while the Glenbow Museum organized *The Group of Seven in Western Canada*.[44] In 2005, the Ontario Association of Art Galleries and the Art Gallery of Ontario collaborated on a year-long project titled *The Group of Seven Project*, which included twenty-nine exhibitions to celebrate the Group of Seven's eighty-fifth anniversary.[45] In 2020, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection Museum organized a centenary celebration for the Group of Seven titled *A like Vision:*

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[40] Anne Whitelaw, *Spaces and Places for Art : Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 7.
[41] Carmen Robertson, "Notes to a Nation: Teachings on Land through the Art of Norval Morrisseau," *Unsettling Canadian Art History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 70.
[42] Peter White, "Out of the Woods," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 11.
[43] Anne Whitelaw, *Spaces and Places for Art : Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 267.
[44] Peter White, "Out of the Woods," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 12.
[45] Peter White, "Out of the Woods," 12.

The Group of Seven at 100, which was curated by McMichael's executive director Ian A. C. Desjardin. The exhibition displayed over 280 artworks from the Group throughout five galleries, and a catalogue was produced to accompany the show.[46] The McMichael Museum also organized an exhibition from May 2024 to February 2025 titled *Jackson's Wars: A.Y. Jackson before the Group of Seven*, which examines Jackson's practice leading up to his involvement with the Group.

Despite these repeated celebrations of the Group of Seven's and Tom Thomson's legacies, many artists, art historians, curators, and critics, among others, have re-considered the tradition of landscape art in Canada, even "reinterpreting them as expressions of power with deep-seated ideological implications."[47] As suggested by art historian John O'Brian, the values of the Group of Seven and the National Gallery were not only grounded in a commitment to establishing a Canadian national identity, but were also rooted in the social, political, and economic arrangements that governed postcolonial Canada.[48] As mentioned previously, the Group was framed by the National Gallery as producing art that was representative of the Canadian nation has a whole, thus, it is implied that anyone who doesn't resonate or feel a sense of nationality in response to their work "is not, by definition, part of the nation anyway."[49] However, Jessup suggests that while the Group was positioned as producing seemingly inclusive national and populist art, their work can be more accurately read as a representation of Ontario regionalism and British Canadianism.[50] This is significant because the prominent position that was awarded to the Group of Seven by the National Gallery and the exhibitions that they curated can be read then as part of a larger effort to

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[46] McMichael Canadian Art Collection, "A Like Vision: The Group of Seven at 100," McMichael Canadian Art Collection, last modified unknown, https://mcmichael.com/event/group-of-seven-100/#
[47] Peter White, "Out of the Woods," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 13.
[48] John O'Brian, "Wild Art History," in Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian identity, and Contemporary Art, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 22.
[49] Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience : Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 143.
[50] Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," 136.

"reformulate the cultural authority of the Anglo-Canadian elite."[51] For instance, early exhibitions of the Group of Seven such as the 1927 exhibition titled *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*, which paired works from the Group of Seven with Indigenous art from the Pacific Northwest Coast can be read as an attempt to establish a "cultural hierarchy with clear ethnic, gender, and class divisions, and with the Group of Seven firmly at the top."[52] Within the social and political context of the early twentieth century, it is clear that establishing a cultural hierarchy in Canada was especially problematic considering the implications that it communicated for Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women, living under the oppressive policies of the *Indian Act*.

In the late nineteenth century, the *Indian Act* was passed by the Canadian government. This act forbids by law the cultural practices, traditions, of Indigenous Nations across Canada. Under this legislation practices such as the Potlach and the Sundance were outlawed. This legislation also established residential schools. While Canada was entering the twentieth century, Indigenous Nations were not only struggling to preserve their artistic practices under the oppressive legislations of the *Indian Act* but were also excluded from consideration as members of the modern Canadian art scene and their art was reduced within this cultural hierarchy as pre-modern or even as a 'vanishing' art.[53] This was further reinforced by the hierarchical division between fine arts and traditional craft, which is deeply rooted in colonial ideologies in Canada. While Euro-Canadian artistic traditions were classified as a "professional" or "fine art," Indigenous artistic practices were relegated to the category of "traditional crafts" and were rarely included in modern craft

[51] Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience : Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 138.
[52] Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," 137.
[53] Lynda Jessup, "Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," 137.

exhibitions.[54] Kristina Huneault demonstrates that the term 'professionalism' was tightly bound to Eurocentric frameworks and served as a construct that deliberately excluded marginalized forms of artistic production, including craft.[55] Though the art created by Indigenous people was culturally significant, prevailing colonial attitudes toward Indigenous art, Indigenous peoples' status as colonized subjects, and the restrictions imposed by the *Indian Act* limited their ability to participate in these exhibitions. When they were able to participate, their work often remained anonymous and treated as ethnographic artifacts.[56] As a result, Indigenous art from the early twentieth century was largely erased from Canadian art. This remained largely true until the Indians of Canada Pavilion at the Expo 67 which marked a pivotal shift, opening new possibilities for Indigenous art, activism, and self-representation.[57] These exclusions from Canada's national art narrative reflects an attempt to erase Indigenous communities, both from the cultural landscape and from the lands (depicted as *terra nullius* in the Group of Seven's paintings) to be displaced, assimilated into Canadian society, or even made to disappear completely.

Since the 1990s, the landscape tradition has been put under pressure as scholars have interrogated the relevance of the landscape tradition as a component of Canada's cultural identity, and they have highlighted its exclusion of Indigenous communities and other marginalized groups living in Canada. In the 1992 article "Jack Pine – Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," Jonathan Bordo argues that the depiction of the Canadian landscape as empty, as seen in the works of Tom Thompson and Lawren Harris for

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[54] Sandra Alfoldy, *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 84.
[55] Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson, eds. *Rethinking Professionalism : Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 17.
[56] Sandra Alfoldy, *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 107.
[57] Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces : Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011) 29.

instance, reflects a broader history of erasing Indigenous presence on the land to create an imagined, or even utopic, vision of untouched wilderness in Canada.[58] Notably, Bordo suggests that what gives these works meaning is the very erasure of Indigenous people from the land, because it demonstrates that the Anglo-Canadian view of wilderness in Canada is not an idea but rather a "cultural project."[59] In the 2008 article "Beyond Survival? Wilderness and Canadian National Identity into the Twenty-First Century," Emily Gilbert builds on Bordo's argument, suggesting that the tactics of erasure have persisted into the twenty-first century as Indigenous people continue to face displacement and issues over land ownership across Canada.[60] Furthermore, Bordo's analysis demonstrates that the erasure of Indigenous people from the landscape is not simply an aesthetic choice but rather part of a project to frame Canada's landscape as uninhabited, legitimizing the westward expansion of settlers on the land and the exploitation of its resources.[61]

In the text "Taking the Romance out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze," Peter Hodgins and Peter Thomson consider traditional landscape art as a key site for ideological struggle and suggest that the wilderness scenes depicted by the Group of Seven and their contemporaries have been criticized not only by environmental groups for reducing nature into "natural resources" but also for excluding marginalized groups of people, notably Indigenous people, to serve the interests of the state.[62] Hodgins and Thompson suggest that Canadian modernity viewed nature through two equally

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[58] Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine – Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Études Canadiennes 27, no. 4 (1992), 108.
[59] Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine –," 102
[60] Emily Gilbert, "Beyond Survival? Wilderness and Canadian National Identity into the Twenty-First Century," British Journal of Canadian Studies 21, no. 1 (2008): 79.
[61] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze," Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture 5, no. 4 (2011): 394.
[62] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction:" 393–4.

problematic gazes, namely the romantic gaze and the extractive gaze. According to the authors, the romantic gaze understands nature as a poetic resource, while the extractive gaze reduces nature into natural resources. Furthermore, the extractive gaze not only strips nature of its meaning and status as our "home", but also sentences it to become "a cache of inert matter to be dammed, dug up, cut down, […] and generally manipulated in order to serve all-too-human purposes."[63] In addition, the authors argue that the continued acceptance of extractive capitalism in Canada stems from the fact that Canadians continue to see nature from these two problematic perspectives.[64] It is also important to note that by creating an imagined and unified Canada, such as through the landscape tradition, issues over land rights and ownership become irrelevant. What is significant here is that the landscape tradition not only reveals the capitalist motivations of the state; it also reveals a disturbing disregard for Indigenous people and their right to practice their culture and traditions on their lands.

I would emphasize here that the Group of Seven's paintings not only erase the presence of Indigenous communities on the land and frame their art as pre-modern, but also reflect a perspective on nature that is deeply rooted in Anglo-Canadian, colonial, and patriarchal values. While the National Gallery has suggested that the Group's landscapes successfully represent the nation as a whole, their works cannot be read as reflecting the perspectives of Indigenous people living in close relationship with the natural world. The members of the Group were largely removed from nature and did not have the lived experience that Indigenous people have with nature through fishing, hunting, and gathering, or the intergenerational knowledge on the healing, sacred, and spiritual properties of the natural world that is passed down from Elders.

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[63] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze," Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture 5, no. 4 (2011): 395.
[64] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction:" 395.

In contrast, Hodgins and Thompson examine the work of four contemporary artists, including Coast Salish artist Paul Yuxweluptun. They argue that these contemporary artists are creating an ecological aesthetic which contests the landscape tradition to "reveal the hidden connection between Canadian landscape art and extractive processes".[65] However, a significant limitation of this article is its exclusive focus on the work of male artists in the case studies. While this article offers a valuable foundation for my research, I argue that an essential next step is to consider the work that Indigenous women have contributed to moving towards a new ecological aesthetic and unsettling the legacy of the landscape tradition in Canada.

It is crucial to acknowledge and recognize the perspectives of Indigenous women on nature, as they have been disproportionately affected by the consequences of environmental destruction and climate change in Canada as a result of colonialism and extractive capitalism. Their perspectives on nature are valuable and must be centered within ongoing discussions on environmental protection and climate change solutions. It is not sufficient for Canadians to simply recognize that the landscape tradition primarily reflects a white, male, Anglo-settler perspective on nature, it is important to also create space within the contemporary Canadian art scene for Indigenous artists, particularly Indigenous women, to share their perspectives and relationship to nature, the land, and the environment through art.

One of the strategies that is used by Indigenous women to communicate their perspectives on nature and to advocate for the protection of the environment is through their art practices, and this is true of Belcourt's practice. Belcourt's practice unsettles the legacy of the landscape tradition in Canada by moving away from the formal qualities of the empty landscape tradition and by

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[65] Peter Hodgins, and Peter Thompson, "Taking the Romance Out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2011): 396.

extension the Anglo-Canadian colonial and patriarchal values that are embedded in it. By rejecting Western landscape painting conventions, such as linear perspective and the idealized, dramatic aesthetics of Romanticism, she demonstrates that her understanding of nature is fundamentally different from the settler perspective. Instead of framing nature as an untouched resource that is just waiting to be surveyed and extracted, Belcourt uses her compositions to emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings living on the land, foreground the land's agency, and the urgent need for its protection.

Section 2 – Indigenous Feminisms

Indigenous Feminisms in Canada

In recent years, Indigenous feminist scholarship has experienced significant growth, with an expanding body of research focusing on revealing the hidden connections between the discrimination that is faced by Indigenous women and the patriarchal and colonial values that are embedded in all aspects of Canada's institutions and policies, including Canadian art institutions like the National Gallery of Canada. Indigenous feminisms is a theoretical framework that emerged as a response to the inadequate representation and support of Indigenous women by Western/white feminists. As Cheryl Suzack, a Batchewana First Nations scholar, suggests in the article "Indigenous Feminisms in Canada," Indigenous women face unique challenges that stem from colonial policies and patriarchal systems that lead to intersecting forms of discrimination and violence.[66] Significantly, the discrimination that is experienced by Indigenous women is distinct from the gendered injustices experienced by non-Indigenous Canadian women, as Indigenous women have experienced gender-based social, political, and cultural disempowerment stemming from the "historical and contemporary practices of colonialism, racism, sexism, and patriarchy leading to social patterns of 'discrimination within discrimination.'"[67] While the implementation of the *Indian Act* had implications for all Indigenous people, it subjected Indigenous women to additional gender-based forms of discrimination. For instance, Section 12 (1)(b) of the revised 1951 version of the *Indian Act* explicitly states that an Indigenous woman who marries a non-indigenous person will lose her status rights.[68] This provision remained in place until 1985. The

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[66] Cheryl Suzack, "Indigenous Feminisms in Canada," *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 23, no. 4 (2015): 261.
[67] Suzack, "Indigenous Feminisms in Canada," 261.
[68] *Indian Act*, RSC 1951, c. 29, s. 12. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/aanc-inac/R5-158-2-1978-eng.pdf

Indian Act also denied Indigenous women political power and limited access to official leadership roles within their communities through the imposition of patriarchal systems, which continue to negatively impact Indigenous women today.[69] For Suzack, it is essential for scholars and artists working with the principles of Indigenous feminisms to produce theories and practices that are contributing to the efforts towards decolonization, gender justice, and self-determination, especially within the current socio-political context in Canada and the ongoing gender-based discrimination in the *Indian Act*.

A core focus of Indigenous feminisms is advocating for gender equality for Indigenous women and girls, a theme that is prominently reflected in Belcourt's artistic practice. The importance of gender equality for Indigenous women has been discussed by Kim Anderson, a prominent Métis feminist scholar. In one of her earlier contributions, *Recognition of Being: reconstructing native womanhood*, Anderson argues that the restoration of gender equality is an essential step towards decolonization and the healing of Indigenous communities. She proposes a process of "self-definition" which include steps for restoring Indigenous women's power despite ongoing systems of oppression, such as reclaiming traditions and bringing them into the contemporary context, "resisting negative definitions of being" and "acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of our communities".[70] *Recognition of Being* has been a foundational text in Indigenous feminist scholarship, as Anderson's emphasis on working toward self-definition and restoration of Indigenous womanhood has been widely referenced and built upon by other scholars.[71] Another important work by Anderson is her 2009 article titled "Leading

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[69] Kim Anderson, "Leading by Action: Female Chiefs and the Political Landscape," in *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture*, edited by Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, Madeleine DionStout, and Guimond Éric (Winnipeg Man.: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 158.
[70] Kim Anderson, *A recognition of being: reconstructing native womanhood*, (Toronto, Ontario: Sumach Press, 2000), 15.
[71] Kim Anderson, *A recognition of being: reconstructing native womanhood*, 15.

by Action: Female Chiefs and the Political Landscape". In this article she suggests that prior to the establishment of colonial systems of governance and imposition of the *Indian Act*, Indigenous women participated in politics just as frequently as men and often held political power through political positions such as clan mothers, members in women's councils, and as traditional or hereditary chiefs in their communities.[72] While Indigenous women continue to be active politically within their communities, the *Indian Act* system has made political participation a man's role and positions of authority have been predominately reserved for men.[73] Anderson draws from interviews conducted with twelve contemporary female chiefs to demonstrate that the most pressing issues and concerns of Indigenous women leaders have not been adequately addressed by male-dominated governing bodies.[74] Overall, Anderson's contributions underscore the necessity of reclaiming Indigenous women's knowledge and traditions, and allowing the perspectives of Indigenous women to be recognized and integrated within Canadian polices and institutions.

Expanding on Anderson's argument, in the 2016 article "Double Consciousness and Nehiyawak Perspectives: Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Knowledge", Shalene Jobin, who is a Cree Métis scholar, argues that forced assimilation policies in Canada following the *Indian Act*, such as mandatory attendance to residential schools for Indigenous children, harmed Indigenous people's self-perception and threated Indigenous knowledge systems.[75] Jobin suggests that the transmission of Indigenous knowledge through storytelling can be read as a revolutionary act of resistance which preserved the knowledge and teachings of ancestors. Significantly, Jobin suggests

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[72] Kim Anderson, "Leading by Action: Female Chiefs and the Political Landscape," in *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture*, edited by Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, Madeleine DionStout, and Guimond Éric (Winnipeg Man.: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 158.
[73] Kim Anderson, "Leading by Action: Female Chiefs and the Political Landscape," 162.
[74] Kim Anderson, "Leading by Action: Female Chiefs and the Political Landscape," 159.
[75] Shalene Jobin, "Double Consciousness and Nehiyawak (Cree) Perspectives: Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Knowledge," in *Living on the land: Indigenous women's understanding of place* (Edmonton, Alberta: AU Press, 2016), 67.

that part of Indigenous women's knowledge that was passed down emphasized the importance of the relationships between women and the land, such as relationships to the earth, water, and nonhuman beings. The importance of environmental protection and sustainability is a principle of Indigenous feminisms that is emphasized by several scholars, notably by Mishuana Goeman, Tonawanda Band of Seneca, who argues that a central objective of Indigenous feminisms is to create new possibilities for social justice for Indigenous women who have endured the effects of colonial gendered violence, including subjugation, dispossession, erasure of cultural and political rights, and struggles over land ownership.[76] Goeman emphasizes that land ownership is a core issue for Indigenous feminists as "Indigenous bodies and a sense of being are tied to a sense of place".[77] For Goeman, storytelling can be used as an Indigenous feminist strategy to illustrate the hidden connections between gendered violence and spatial injustice within a colonial context.

I propose that Belcourt's works *Offerings to Save the World* and *Wisdom of the Universe* challenge the legacy of the landscape tradition and its associated meanings by centering Indigenous women's knowledge, identity, and traditions in her work. Significantly, the framework that is used by Belcourt aligns with the principles of Indigenous feminisms and enacts them through her practice. While the following sections will examine Belcourt's efforts towards centering Indigenous women's perspectives on nature, notably the interconnection between all living beings, and reclaiming traditional Métis beadwork on canvas, I will begin here by considering her use of storytelling as an act of healing and placing Indigenous worldviews at the center of her art practice. As argued by Jobin, storytelling can be read as a revolutionary act of resistance which has allowed Indigenous women to preserve traditional knowledges and stories despite the challenges and

[76] Mishuana Goeman, "Ongoing Storms and Struggles: Gendered Violence and Resource Exploitation," In *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, edited by Joanne Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 100.
[77] Mishuana Goeman, "Ongoing Storms and Struggles," 101.

oppression they experienced as a result of the *Indian Act*. Belcourt strategically weaves elements of storytelling into her paintings to center Indigenous knowledge systems and engage with the ethos of these stories, sharing their teachings with her audiences. Through this approach, Belcourt unsettles Western epistemologies by encouraging a more reciprocal relationship with the land and water, and a restoration of Indigenous women's rightful place as leaders in water governance and sustainability efforts. Within the works *Offerings to Save the World* and *Wisdom of the Universe,* Belcourt makes clear reference to two stories with powerful teachings: the story of "Mishipeshu" and the Creation story of "Skywoman".

In *Offerings to Save the World* Belcourt has included the underwater being "Mishipeshu", which appears amongst the other water animals and can be recognized by its distinctive cat-like body and dragon-like horns [Figure 4]. While some of the stories included in Belcourt's works are more subtle, Mishipeshu's presence is boldly emphasized through the high contrast between its form and the lighter blue hues of the surrounding water. In addition, Mishipeshu's fluid, wave-like motion reflects the movement of the surrounding water, connecting this being to the other elements of the composition. Also known as "the Great Lynx", Mishipeshu is an important being for the Ojibwe nation as they have made offerings and held ceremonies dedicated to this being for centuries.[78] Mishipeshu is known for inhabiting the depth of several bodies of water, including lakes and rivers, but has been particularly associated with the Lake Superior.[79] The movement of its tail is seen as being responsible for causing waves, whirlpools, and even sudden strong wind or

[78] *A Sea Change for Superior: The Warming of the World's Largest Lake*, directed by John Thain (Hamline University, 2023), Vimeo.; While Belcourt is part of the Métis-Cree community, her long-term collaboration with Isaac Murdoch (Ojibwe) suggests that she is familiar with Ojibwe oral traditions, including the story and ethos of Mishipeshu.

[79] *A Sea Change for Superior: The Warming of the World's Largest Lake*, directed by John Thain (Hamline University, 2023), Vimeo.

fog, for which the Lake Superior is known for.[80] While Mishipeshu are seen as creatures whose acts may cause great destruction, they are also recognized for providing wisdom, abundance of food, medicine, and healing.[81] Significantly, Mishipeshu is considered a protector of the waters and as suggested by Ojibwe artist Jonathan Thunder, this gives another layer of meaning to this being: "Given that it's a protector of the water, to me that sort of makes it a little noble. So even if it's presented in some stories as being kind of a menace, I see it as having its own story and its own reasoning."[82] The story of Mishipeshu is not merely for entertainment, it is an oral tradition that carries wisdom and instructions, particularly on respect for nature and spiritual forces, balance, offerings, and the recognition that water is life.

In *Offerings to Save the World,* Belcourt depicts Mishipeshu as a central figure, whose upward motion appears to direct the movement of the painting. As the waves echo Mishipeshu's form, we are reminded that in Ojibwe stories, this being is not only responsible for the waves and whirlpools but also embodies the spirit of the water itself.[83] Mishipeshu's presence reminds viewers that within Indigenous oral traditions, water is considered a spiritual entity that needs to be protected, respected, and nurtured.[84] Significantly, Belcourt has depicted two Indigenous women standing on the shore, their hands seemingly illuminated by light, drawing attention to the offerings they are making to the water spirit. Through this imagery, Belcourt brings attention to the significance of reciprocal responsibilities between the environment and humans. While not all

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[80] Serge Lemaitre, "Mishipeshu," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified March 4th, 2025, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mishipeshu
[81] Serge Lemaitre, "Mishipeshu," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified March 4th, 2025, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mishipeshu
[82] *A Sea Change for Superior: The Warming of the World's Largest Lake*, directed by John Thain (Hamline University, 2023), Vimeo.
[83] *A Sea Change for Superior: The Warming of the World's Largest Lake*, directed by John Thain (Hamline University, 2023), Vimeo.
[84] Kate Cave and Shianne McKay, "Water Song : Indigenous Women and Water, " *resilience*, last modified December 12, 2016, Water Song: Indigenous Women and Water - resilience

audiences may be familiar with the story of Mishipeshu, the narrative of the two women making an offering to the water is clear and the urgency of recognizing the importance of water for our survival is further supported by the work's title. This encourages all viewers to respond to Belcourt's call for reciprocal relationships with water and to reconsider our individual responsibilities towards the environment.

Belcourt's representation of Mishipeshu and the two women, including a pregnant woman on the right, is also an important reference to the sacred relationship that is shared between Indigenous women, through their role as child bearers, and the spirit of water.[85] Within Indigenous oral traditions, it is believed that Indigenous women have a sacred connection to water and have responsibilities to nurture water and carry intergenerational knowledge surrounding water.[86] While Indigenous women have continued to carry this knowledge and perform traditional practices, such as offerings and water walks, their involvement with water governance has been limited due to the impacts of colonization and the inequities resulting from the *Indian Act*.[87] Belcourt has intentionally chosen to depict women rather than men in this work to draw attention to the necessity of reclaiming Indigenous women's rights to participate in water governance and restore their roles as caretakers of the water with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Belcourt demonstrates that empowering Indigenous women is an essential step toward honoring traditional knowledge systems, shifting Canadian perspectives on water governance, and ensuring the protection of water for future generations.

While *Wisdom of the Universe* does not feature a being like Mishipeshu, it does make reference to the Haudenosaunee Creation story of Skywoman and her daughter, "Earth woman"

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[85] Kate Cave and Shianne McKay, "Water Song : Indigenous Women and Water, " *resilience*, last modified December 12, 2016, Water Song: Indigenous Women and Water - resilience
[86] Kate Cave and Shianne McKay, "Water Song : Indigenous Women and Water, "
[87] Kate Cave and Shianne McKay, "Water Song : Indigenous Women and Water, "

through the representation of the strawberry plant. *Wisdom of the Universe* presents a highly detailed and symmetrical composition which features plants and animals that are listed as threatened, endangered, or extinct in Canada.[88] The symmetry of the composition is interrupted at the center of the work where Belcourt has chosen to depict a strawberry plant with both ripe strawberries and white strawberry flowers below a white dove. I propose that Belcourt's decision to place the strawberry plant at the heart of the composition is a reference to the story of Sky woman and Earth woman. While Belcourt has painted strawberries in other works, including *Offerings to Save the World* and *Water Song* (2010), the proximity of the strawberry plant and the white dove, a symbol of peace and hope, suggests that it holds special significance in this piece. In this creation story, Earth woman tragically passes away while giving birth to her twin boys Sapling and Flint. Her mother, Skywoman, buries her body into the earth, which is the place where she grew up and had loved, and been loved by, all the other beings.[89] The story goes that as Earth woman's final gift, the most revered plants grew from her body, with the strawberry growing from her heart.[90] Today, the strawberry is known as the "heart berry" and it is recognized for being the first berry of the summer season, leading the way for other berries.[91] This story carries important wisdom and instructions which are meant to guide communities in their responsibilities towards Mother Earth and reinforce the connection between the land and humans.

Belcourt's reference to the story of Skywoman is significant because she is using this story to not only bring attention to the importance of reciprocity with the land, but also to highlight the sacred connection that exists between Indigenous women and the land in oral traditions. Through

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[88] Christi Belcourt, "Artist's statement: Christi Belcourt on The Wisdom of the Universe," AGO, last modified August 7th, 2014, https://ago.ca/agoinsider/artists-statement-christi-belcourt-wisdom-universe
[89] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, first ed. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 23.
[90] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 23.
[91] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 23.

this story, Belcourt highlights that Indigenous women's connection to the land is deeply tied to their cultural and spiritual identity, making land protection essential for preserving their culture, health, and wellbeing. Honoring the Creation story of Skywoman in this piece can also be understood as an act of healing Indigenous women and their communities, and working towards restoring Indigenous women's rights, self-determination, and sovereignty. As suggested by Anderson, reviving traditional practices, such as stories and oral traditions, in the contemporary context, is an essential step toward decolonization and gender equality. In this work, the strawberry plant and the white dove together represent a symbol of hope for Indigenous women, hope for the restoration of cultural traditions and for the recognition of their leadership roles in establishing reciprocal relationships with the land. In addition, the intricate composition in this work, which connects the strawberry plant with the endangered plant species, symbolizes hope for their survival and the revival of healthy lands. However, this renewal depends on our willingness to respond to the story and teachings of Skywoman, as depicted by Belcourt, and commit to alternative ways of relating to and caring for nature. The stories of Mishipeshu and Skywoman in Belcourt's work carry important instructions that have helped guide Indigenous people's understanding of place and relationship with the land and water, and it is essential to act in solidarity with Indigenous women who are leading the way in restoring these relationships and advocating for sustainable futures.

Section 3 – Indigenous Ecologies and Teachings of Plants

As discussed previously, the perspective through which nature is framed in the empty landscape paintings of the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson is shaped by an Anglo-Canadian, colonial, and patriarchal understanding of the natural world. This perspective positions nature as simultaneously an external, untouched wilderness, separate from the human experience and an extractable resource to be exploited and consumed. In contrast, Belcourt's works center an Indigenous woman's perspective on nature that is deeply grounded in the principles and values of Indigenous ecologies, the teachings of plants, and traditional knowledge. In the works *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World* we witness a deliberate effort by Belcourt to represent the natural world through a lens that foregrounds the interconnection between all living beings, the fragility of ecosystems, and the beauty of nature. Furthermore, Belcourt's work evokes a different sense of collectivity than the Group of Seven, as she centers the importance of community and building strong relationships with the land in her practice.

In an article on Indigenous ecologies, "Listening to Our Ancestors: Rebuilding Indigenous Nations in the Face of Environmental Destruction", Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson argues that the environmental crisis impacting Indigenous communities across Canada cannot be resolved unless Indigenous people collectively resist against the destruction of the environment by the Canadian government and regain the authority and control over their lands and waters.[92] It's important to recognize that environmental change and destruction is inherently gendered, and Indigenous women are disproportionately vulnerable due to intersecting forms of

[92] Leanne Simpson, "Listening to Our Ancestors: Rebuilding Indigenous Nations in the Face of Environmental Destruction," in *Every Grain of Sand : Canadian Perspectives on Ecology and* Environment (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 121.

marginalization.[93] The traditional roles of Indigenous women in regards to caring for the environment and carrying traditional knowledge on medicinal uses of plants have been disrupted by colonization, which "transformed both the treatment of the Earth and the role of Indigenous women in society."[94] Simpson further argues that it is through the reclamation of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and knowledge systems that Indigenous people will be able to rebuild sustainable and healthy nations as the destruction of nature is ultimately rooted in colonial policies, colonization, and forced assimilation of Indigenous people by the settler nation state government.[95] Empowering Indigenous women to reclaim traditional knowledge and supporting them in their roles as leaders in resisting environmental destruction are essential steps toward gender equality and creating a more sustainable relationship with Mother Earth.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer highlights the importance of preserving and embracing Indigenous knowledges of plants and traditional practices, even when it means pushing the boundaries of Western scientific frameworks and institutions. She demonstrates that Indigenous ecological knowledge is not only valid and well-founded, it is the perspective from which many Indigenous people understand and relate to nature. Kimmerer uses storytelling as a powerful tool to present an alternative perspective to the study of the natural world, that is simultaneously informed by her studies within the Western scientific world, the traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities, and the teachings of plants. Kimmerer demonstrates that Western science has limitations and can be strengthened by recognizing the value of Indigenous knowledge of plants. Furthermore, she proposes that

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[93] Mary Kate Dennis, and Finn McLafferty Bell, "Indigenous Women, Water Protectors, and Reciprocal Responsibilities," *Social Work* 65, no. 4 (2020): 379.
[94] Mary Kate Dennis, and Finn McLafferty Bell, "Indigenous Women, " 378.
[95] Leanne Simpson, "Listening to Our Ancestors: Rebuilding Indigenous Nations in the Face of Environmental Destruction," In *Every Grain of Sand: Canadian Perspectives on Ecology and Environment* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 121.

traditional practices have the ability to heal our relationships with nature. For instance, Kimmerer emphasizes the importance of building relationships based on reciprocity between humans and the natural world, and suggests that it is only when we meet our responsibilities towards plants that they can meet their responsibilities and grow. Kimmerer brings attention to the tradition of the "honorable harvest," which is a model of harvesting only what *should* be harvested, minimizing harm to the Earth, and celebrating all that is given to us from nature.[96] Furthermore, Kimmerer highlights the importance of practicing gratitude through offerings within Indigenous traditions and spirituality.[97] Kimmerer demonstrates that resisting environmental destruction and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and practices to restore the health of lands, waters, and all living beings is an essential step towards decolonization in Canada.

While the Group of Seven's expressive brush strokes may evoke the grandeur of the Canadian landscape, their lack of detail obscures the individuality of each species and the interconnectedness of the ecosystem. In addition, their style not only diminishes ecological complexity but also aligns with the colonial narrative of *terra nullius*, reinforcing a nationalistic vision that erases Indigenous presence and relationship with the land. For instance, J.E.H. MacDonald's 1920 oil painting, *Algoma Waterfall* [Figure 6] is a landscape painting of a waterfall, painted in MacDonald's signature style with visible brush strokes and dynamic movement. This piece works well as an example because while the waterfall in the middle ground is central to this work, the foreground features several plant species painted in shades of green, orange, red, and yellow. These plants have been painted with bold colours and expressive brush strokes which results in plants with loose borders, unnatural colours, and minimal defining characteristics. The

[96] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, first ed. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 187.
[97] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 187.

expressive brush strokes used to create these stylized plants make it impossible for the viewer to clearly identify the plant species being depicted. As a result, the individuality of each plant and their role within the ecosystem becomes obscured, deemed as irrelevant. Furthermore, MacDonald's romanticized representation of the landscape, which appears as wild and untouched, reinforces the colonial narratives of Canada's environment as available for extraction, rather than an interdependent ecosystem. Another example is Frederick Horsman Varley's *Mountain Sketch* (1935) [Figure 7], which is a painting of a mountain, featuring various trees and plants across different planes. However, like MacDonald, Varley's emphasis in this work is not on representing the ecosystem; instead his focus is on the aesthetic. Rather than using precise details, Varley depicts the trees, shrubs, and other plants in a simplified, almost abstract form. In addition, Varley has completely stripped the landscape of any indication of animal or human presence living on the land. While the vastness of the landscape is conveyed, his approach results in a static landscape that appears to be lacking life because the individuality of the plant species has been overlooked and indications of an active ecosystem have been erased. What is being put forward in both MacDonald and Varley's works is not the ecosystem itself, but rather the artists' nationalistic style and a deeply colonial view of the landscape.

In contrast, Belcourt's ecological aesthetic challenges traditional representations of nature in Canada by emphasizing the interconnection between all living beings and capturing the individuality of each species represented. Unlike traditional landscapes that portray nature as a passive and romantic resource to be extracted, Belcourt's works depict nature as an active, living force shaped by complex ecosystems. Her intricate compositions allow viewers to easily identify each species represented, including each plant's individual characteristics and their interconnection within the ecosystem. For instance, in *Wisdom of the Universe*, Belcourt has chosen to depict over

200 species of animals and plants from Ontario that have been classified as endangered or extinct.[98] Each of these plants has been rendered which such detail and accuracy that they are recognizable to those who are familiar with them. Even viewers with limited knowledge of plants can recognize some of the species depicted. Belcourt has also chosen to paint the roots and branches in a bold cobalt blue color which leads the viewer's eye across the composition, drawing attention to the interconnection between all living beings. The blue color of the branches and roots is deeply symbolic as it resembles the appearance of blood running through human veins beneath the skin. This visual parallel emphasizes the profound connection between humans and the natural world. As the blood sustains our bodies, the roots and branches sustain the life of the ecosystem. This connection made by Belcourt highlights that humans are not separate from nature and as a result, like all members of the ecosystem, we play an important role in the ecosystem's survival. Another significant element is that each branch is represented with several plant species emerging from it. While this is an unrealistic portrayal of nature, Belcourt uses the branches to symbolize the deep interdependence of ecosystems and how each species relies on others to survive, including humans. As stated by Belcourt:

> The roots in the painting show that there's more to life than what we see, in the spiritual sense. And also that our roots, our heritage, have great influence over our lives. […] The different species of plants that emerge from the same stem show that we are all connected in some way, shape, or form. The little brown, copperish reflective areas are the spirit world

[98] Art Gallery of Ontario, *Multisensory Moments: Christi Belcourt's Wisdom Of The Universe*, (Ontario: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2022), YouTube.

> because there are spirits inside each plant, inside each living thing, inside the earth, and inside the universe.[99]

While the Group of Seven places settlers in the position of the consumer of resources, separate and even superior to nature, Belcourt places all viewers as an equal to all other living beings, with responsibilities to protect, nurture, and respect the ecosystem. This urges viewers to reconsider their relationship with nature and to consider working towards a more reciprocal and respectful relationship. Belcourt pushes this even further by suggesting that the pointillism technique used not only represents traditional Métis beadwork, which will be discussed in the following section, it also represents the molecules that make up life.[100] The reference to molecules is significant because it further emphasizes that all living being are interconnected, even in ways that may not be immediately evident or understood.

By emphasizing the interconnection between all living beings, Belcourt is also bringing attention to the *fragility* of the ecosystem and the importance of recognizing the delicate intricacies of these systems. When one part of the ecosystem is struggling, the entire system is impacted. For instance, in *Wisdom of the Universe*, Belcourt's symmetrical composition establishes a sense of harmony and balance, while the intricate details capture the complexity of these ecosystems. The symmetry of the composition is not only aesthetically compelling, it underscores the delicate balance of nature and emphasizes that the loss of even a single plant or animal would disrupt the entire composition. Through the symmetry of her composition, Belcourt exemplifies the

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[99] Mary Beth Leatherdale and Lisa Charleyboy, *Dreaming in Indian Contemporary Native American Voices*, (Toronto: Annick Press, 2014), 69.; Please note that in this text, Belcourt was referring to her work *Water song* (2010-2011); however, her comment can also apply to *Wisdom of the Universe*, which has been painted in the same style.

[100] Christi Belcourt, Rita Flamand, Olive Whitford, Laura Burnouf, Rose Richardson, Ellen J Lehman, and Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use: Study Prints & Resource Guide*, (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007), XII.

devastating impacts of environmental destruction, species extinction, and climate change on the balance of ecosystems in Canada. As mentioned by Belcourt's close collaborator and friend, Ojibwe artist Isaac Murdoch, all the elements in Belcourt's compositions are highly intentional as she aims to bring attention to the importance of preserving the balance of nature:

> She's trying to bring light and show the beauty of something that is suffering. She wants to show the beauty of certain types of caterpillars, moths, birds, or different plants that are so beautiful but that are having a hard time. Some might be facing extinction. And so those conversations are had and the pieces that are created are very intentional.[101]

It is the highly aesthetic qualities of Belcourt's works that allow her to address difficult issues and bring attention to something that is suffering in a way that is accessible to wide audiences. As seen in both *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World*, Belcourt uses her work to emphasize the beauty of nature through intricate detail, vibrant colours that are accentuated from the contrast against the dark background, and harmonious compositions. The aesthetic quality of Belcourt's work serves as an entry point, encouraging her audiences to not only connect with her work but also to recognize the beauty of nature itself. As viewers engage with her works, they may begin to uncover the more difficult issues that she is bringing forth, such as the consequences of environmental destruction, plant and animal extinctions, and the impacts of climate change on Indigenous communities. Murdoch emphasizes that, while Belcourt aims to make her works accessible to the broadest possible audience, she "has always maintained that she wants her art to be seen by the people who need it the most, which would be front line people and people who are completely disconnected from the land."[102] By connecting her viewers to the beauty of nature,

[101] Isaac Murdoch, interview by Emilie Contant, August 29th, 2024.
[102] Isaac Murdoch, interview by Emilie Contant, August 29th, 2024.

Belcourt urges them to build a relationship with the natural world and to recognize the importance of protecting Mother Earth for the survival of all beings.

Lastly, Belcourt uses her practice to bring attention to the importance of building strong relationships with both the community and with nature as a foundation for environmental stewardship and cultural resilience. As noted by Murdoch, Belcourt is involved with her community: "She's with the people all the time. She's not disconnected from the people at all […] She's really grassroots."[103] Belcourt creates a different type of collective than the Group of Seven; she demonstrates that fostering deep connections with the land and with one another is an essential step toward not only healing from the impacts of colonization but also for building a stronger foundation for future generations. One of the ways that Belcourt represents her strong relationship with her community is by embracing oral traditions and practices in her work, knowledge that has been shared intergenerationally. As suggested by Kimmerer, it is essential for Indigenous people to preserve and embrace Indigenous ecological knowledge and practices, despite possible resistance from Western institutions. For instance, in *Offerings to Save the World*, Belcourt emphasizes the importance of gratitude and building reciprocal relationships with the land, water, animals, and other humans. As suggested by Murdoch, there is a progression that took place with *Offerings*; the composition does not have the same degree of detail or diversity of plants as *Wisdom of the Universe.* This shift indicates a different intent in Belcourt's work, which is to show viewers that making offerings is the solution for saving and healing the environment. This is illustrated by the two women depicted making an offering to the water. Their act of giving is mirrored by nature's generosity, as the land beneath them is abundant with wild strawberries, ready to be eaten. Through this visual narrative, Belcourt represents the concept of gratitude and reciprocity. As the women

[103] Isaac Murdoch, interview by Emilie Contant, August 29th, 2024.

fulfill their responsibilities toward the natural world, the land fulfills its responsibility and gifts them with strawberries. The principle of gratitude and reciprocity is foundational to Indigenous knowledges, as many Indigenous communities believe that giving back to the plants, water, soil, and animals is not only essential but also sacred. By preserving traditional knowledge and practices in her works, Belcourt contributes to the healing of Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women, across Canada who are working to reclaim oral tradition and culture.

Section 4 – Métis Beadwork and Traditions

History of Traditional Métis Beadwork

The early beginnings of traditional Métis beadwork can be traced back over two centuries ago to the fur trade era, when European fur traders settled in the heart of North America.[104] The rise in popularity in men's tall beaver hats in Europe and America is what first brought these traders to North America as they sought to acquire large quantities of beaver fur pelts through trade with Indigenous hunters. In turn, Indigenous hunters were motivated to participate in these trades in exchange for European goods, notably they were interested in obtaining gun supplies, cloth, and manufactured items, including glass beads.[105] As the European traders settled throughout central and western Canada, alliances and relationships started to develop between these two groups, from which the Métis community emerged. Being the decedents of Indigenous women and European settlers, primarily of French, Scottish, and English descent, the Métis found themselves trying to balance the cultural heritage of both their Indigenous and European ancestors, which resulted in a distinct new culture and identity.[106]

Having learned traditional quillwork, beadwork, and hide tanning techniques from their mothers and grandmothers, Métis daughters used these skills to express their dual heritage and vibrant cultural identity through art. Métis women had access to glass beads, silk thread materials, and to European silk embroidery.[107] While European embroidery is generally accepted as having some influence, it is important to highlight that Métis women developed a complex and distinctive

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[104] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, Second edition (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 151.
[105] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 151.
[106] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 151.
[107] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 151.

style for their beadwork, which cannot be attributed to the arrival of Europeans.[108] This beadwork style is known today as Métis floral beadwork. Métis beadwork became such a core aspect of Métis identity and cultural expression that the name given to them by other Indigenous communities is the "flower beadwork people".[109]

Traditional Métis beadwork can be recognized for its distinctive beading style, particularly for its vibrant colours and textured floral designs. The floral patterns are traditionally presented over a dark background, tanned hide or cloth are primarily used, which creates contrast and adds dimension against the colorful beads. Some of the flowers represented closely align with the natural forms of the species depicted, while others take a more creative form. An important characteristic of Métis beadwork is that all the elements of the composition, including stems, leaves, and roots, are interconnected. Another distinctive quality of Métis beadwork is balance, usually achieved through symmetrical compositions. Significantly, each beadwork piece is created with intention and purpose, drawing inspiration from meaningful themes such as nature, protection, storytelling, healing, and spirituality. For instance, in the book written by Belcourt about Métis beadwork, she explains that some beadwork patterns are created with the intention of honouring the spiritual world and to celebrate the sacred relationship between the spirits and physical beings. Over the years, Métis artists have applied floral beadwork patterns to various items such as clothing, belts, bags, shoes, and saddles, and these items became a way for Métis people to express their identity and pride as a nation.

During the early twentieth century, Métis beadwork became significantly threatened as a result of the *Indian Act*, more specifically the "culture ban," which restricted cultural expression,

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[108] Sharon Blady, "Beadwork as an Expression of Métis Cultural Identity," *Issues in the North* 1, no. 40 (1996): 136.
[109] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, Second edition (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 151.

ceremonies, and traditional practices for communities across Canada. While Métis women were allowed to create beadwork for the purpose of low-end tourist markets, they were discouraged from beading for ceremony, regalia, or for their own cultural expression until the 1960s.[110] In addition, during this period, Indigenous children were being forcefully removed from their homes and separated from their communities, to be placed into residential schools. Being removed from their communities, this generation of children were deprived of the opportunity to learn the cultural practices and traditions from their elders, including the art of beadwork. As a result of this injustice, Métis beadwork has been increasingly used by Métis artists as a form of political intervention and it has become a symbol of resilience and cultural continuity.

Unsettling Canadian Art History through Beadwork

In recent years, Indigenous beadwork has gained significant attention in both academic circles and in art galleries across Canada. For instance, the 2024 book, *Bead Talk: Indigenous Knowledge and Aesthetics from the Flatlands* brings attention to the rise in beadwork that has occurred in recent years, notably the rise of beadwork and beadwork circles that emerged during the COVID pandemic in the Flatlands. The authors emphasize that beadwork has traditionally been based in community and that beadwork can be understood as a carrier of local knowledges and relationships, which remains true of beadwork practices today.[111] In 2022, the MacKenzie Art Gallery organized and circulated the *Radical Stitch* exhibition curated by Indigenous curators Sherry Farrell Racette, Michelle LaVallee and Cathy Mattes. This major exhibition presented

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[110] Michelle LaVallee, Sherry Farrell Racette, and Cathy Mattes, "Beads that Speak: Acts of Visual Sovereignty," National Gallery of Canada, last modified May 16th, 2024, https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/beads-that-speak-acts-of-visual-sovereignty

[111] Carmen Robertson, Judy Anderson, and Katherine Boyer, eds. *Bead Talk: Indigenous Knowledge and Aesthetics from the Flatlands* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 14.

contemporary Indigenous beadwork to celebrate the beauty of beads and the innovative approaches used by the artists to connect the present with the past. While many Indigenous artists are working on reviving the sewing and technical skills of their grandmothers, some have also begun to innovatively merge traditional beadwork with contemporary art forms and mediums. Algonquin-Métis scholar Sherry Farrell Racette argues that although some may contend that the political art of Canadian feminist artist like Joyce Wieland or American feminist Judy Chicago shares certain characteristics with the works of female Indigenous artists, Farrell Racette asserts that it's essential to recognize the reclamation of Indigenous women's art, including the reclamation of beadwork, as a separate parallel movement.[112] According to Farrell Racette, this separation is warranted because of the distinct historical paths and the profound impact of colonization, which resulted in unique challenges for Indigenous women artists, especially Métis women. She explains that Indigenous women also faced limitations due to the categorization of their work, which were placed in the faceless and nameless classifications of "craft" and "ethnographic material culture."[113] Farrell Racette argues that the 1980s witnessed a shift as Indigenous artists who were previously working with traditional media started to incorporate traditional materials such as plant fibers, quills, and beads into their contemporary art practices. She states that Indigenous women artists have been working on innovative projects using traditional materials and techniques as a way of reclaiming the traditional knowledge and materials of their ancestors. In addition, she suggests that beadwork has allowed Indigenous women to reconnect with their community:

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[112] Sherry Farrell Racette, "Tuft Life: Stitching Sovereignty in Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 115.

[113] Sherry Farrell Racette, "'I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance' Writing Aboriginal Women into Canadian Art History, 1880–1970," in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 288.

"through beadwork we can literally sew ourselves back into the fabric of our communities, we can stitch the wounded parts of ourselves and mend broken chains of knowledge."[114]

Building on Racette's argument, I propose that Belcourt innovatively adapts the Métis floral beadwork aesthetic to the canvas space as a way to unsettle the legacy of the landscape tradition in Canadian art, by instead centering the perspectives and traditional knowledges of Indigenous women on nature in Canada. While glass beads are not used in the making of *Offerings to Save the World* or *Wisdom of the Universe*, both works draw upon the visual aesthetic of traditional Métis floral beadwork through their intricate floral compositions. To create this "beadwork" style, Belcourt creates floral compositions that are entirely composed of dots that she applies to the canvas using the end of a knitting needle or paint brush.[115] These works offer intricate and active floral designs over a dark base, where each small dot represents a glass bead and the base recalls traditionally tanned hide or cloth.

Belcourt's innovative approach of bringing the Métis floral beadwork aesthetic to the canvas is significant because, like the Group of Seven, she takes on Canada's natural world as her subject. However, by using the beadwork aesthetic, she is completely rejecting the *terra nullius* narrative and the colonial and patriarchal meanings associated with the empty landscape tradition, instead centering Indigenous women's worldviews and relationships with the lands and waters. She demonstrates that the landscape tradition, which has been framed by the National Gallery of Canada as representing the Canadian nation as a whole, does not reflect the perspectives of all Canadians, especially not the perspectives of Indigenous women. Furthermore, while the

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[114] Sherry Farrell Racette, "If the Needles Don't Break and the Thread Doesn't Tangle: Beading Utopia," in *Bead Talk: Indigenous Knowledge and Aesthetics from the Flatlands* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 164.

[115] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University. Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 84.

landscapes of the Group of Seven and Tom Thompson erased the presence of Indigenous peoples and their deep connections to the land and knowledge systems, Belcourt's use of beadwork on canvas can be understood as a reclamation of these knowledges and practices. By reclaiming the traditional form of beadwork in her paintings, Belcourt's work can be read as a symbol of cultural continuity and the resilience of Métis women.

In the article "Bead in the Blood: Curating Ruth Cuthand's Art," curator Felicia Gay and Carmen Robertson suggest that beads can be used strategically to address "ugly" topics through beauty. They suggest that viewers tend to look away from difficult histories or knowledges, however, the beauty of beadwork allows Indigenous artists to get the attention of viewers and encourage them to think about pressing issues, some of which can be challenging to address.[116] The beadwork style used by Belcourt allows her to challenge established representations of the natural world and to present nature from a new perspective through the beauty of the beadwork aesthetic. As viewers engage with her work and look beyond the beauty of the work, the more difficult issues that are raised by Belcourt become apparent through the associated meaning of beadwork, such as issues over land rights, environmental sustainability, and Indigenous sovereignty. As suggested by Belcourt: "Beadwork is not simple decoration of material goods. It is an expression of identity. It is an art form that connects us to the skills, the sacrifices and the creativity of our ancestors. Beadwork carries images that are ancient and reflect spiritual beliefs. And even more than that, beadwork is a healing art."[117]

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[116] Carmen Robertson, Judy Anderson, and Katherine Boyer, eds. *Bead Talk: Indigenous Knowledge and Aesthetics from the Flatlands.* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 103.
[117] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University. Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 38.

Lastly, I propose that Belcourt's "beadwork" style of painting is an ideal technique to convey her environmental message as the dotting approach allows her to capture the intricate details and interconnections between all the plant and animal species she depicts and more importantly, the fragility of these diverse ecosystems. The expressive brushstrokes in the works of the Group of Seven and Tom Thompson, such as Thompson's *The Jack Pine* (1916) or J. E. H. MacDonald's *The Tangled Garden* (1916), lack the necessary details for viewers to be able to identify the plant species depicted, causing the plants to lose their individual characteristics and purpose within the Canadian ecosystem. In contrast, Belcourt's beadwork style allows her to capture the intricate details of each species she represents, making it possible for viewers to recognize the species depicted. Furthermore, the interconnection between all the living beings represented, including the land, water, plants, animals, universe, and humans are made explicit to the viewer through the Métis beadwork style. For Instance, in *Wisdom of the Universe,* Belcourt makes visible the branches and roots of the plants depicted to emphasize the connection that is present between all living things. These branches and roots are the base of the composition, which demonstrates that without a healthy ecosystem, it is not possible for any living thing to live because everything is connected. In Racette's article "Speaking for the People, the Plants and the Earth," she highlights that Belcourt now perceives each dot or bead as an atom "pulsating with energy".[118] This makes Belcourt's message even more powerful because the composition can be read as one living ecosystem that connects all living beings, including humans.

[118] Christi Belcourt, Nadia Kurd, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Carleton University. Art Gallery, Musée d'art de Joliette, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Guelph, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 38.

Conclusion

While the landscape tradition led by the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson, and the National Gallery of Canada's promotion of their work as "art for a nation," holds historical significance in the early twentieth century, it is crucial to recognize the patriarchal and colonial values embedded in this tradition and its lasting impacts on Indigenous communities in Canada. The construction of the empty wilderness scene not only presented Canada's environment as available for expansion but also erased the presence of Indigenous people and culture from the land. In this thesis, I positioned Belcourt's acrylic paintings as an essential intervention to the landscape tradition which not only reclaims the cultural identities of Indigenous people but also unsettles the legacy of the landscape tradition and its prominent position within the National Gallery. While Belcourt takes on the subject of nature in her work, she innovatively uses an ecological aesthetic to challenge the established representations of Canada's natural world and encourage viewers to not only recognize the biodiversity present in Canada but also to become aware of the fragility of these ecosystems. Taking on two of her works as case studies, *Offerings to Save the World* and *Wisdom of the Universe*, I demonstrated that Belcourt's practice aligns with the principles of Indigenous feminisms by centering the perspectives of Indigenous women and reclaiming Indigenous traditions. By incorporating elements of storytelling in her works, Belcourt not only reclaims the cultural identities of her ancestors, but also performs an act of healing. While healing from the impacts of colonialism and ongoing forms of oppression is a process, Belcourt's work represents an opportunity for Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women, to recognize themselves in her art and to reconnect with their ancestors and find a sense of community and support. Furthermore, by centering an Indigenous perspective on nature that is rooted in the principles of Indigenous ecologies, traditional Métis knowledge, and the teaching of plants,

Belcourt emphasizes the interconnection between all living beings. Through this approach, Belcourt uses the beauty of nature to connect her viewers to the Earth and to emphasize our shared responsibility to preserve Canada's ecosystems, especially in the face of the current environmental crisis. Lastly, Belcourt's innovative use of the beadwork aesthetic in her paintings further reflects her rejection of the empty landscape aesthetic, as the beadwork aesthetic allows her to simultaneously reclaim the tradition of Métis beadwork and capture the intricate details of the plant species depicted while emphasizing the fragility of our ecosystems in Canada. Through her works, Belcourt not only reclaims Indigenous traditions and knowledge but also redefines the possibilities of contemporary Indigenous art, as a space for envisioning and working towards a more sustainable future for all.

Appendix A –Interview Transcript with Isaac Murdoch

In this section I have included the edited interview transcript of my conversation with Isaac Murdoch, which took place via Zoom in late August of 2024. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss with Murdoch and believe that it is important for his voice and contributions towards this research to be represented.

EMILIE CONTANT: I was curious if you have noticed any differences in the way the public reacts to the art that is produced for the "Onaman Collective", such as the banner *Water is Life,* and to Christi Belcourt's acrylic paintings such as *Offerings to Save the World*? These works are so different in style yet, I believe that they carry similar themes and messages.

ISAAC MURDOCH: Yes, there is definitely a different reaction. A lot of her paintings, are in galleries and being shown in high profile situations, and so of course you are going to have a different audience and you are going to have a different reaction compared to the works that are on the front line. There are two different demographics that are looking at her art, experiencing it and feeling it. But Christi has always maintained that she wants her art to be seen by the people who need it the most, which would be front line people and people who are completely disconnected from the land. And so, she's very strategic in what she does but she genuinely has a good heart for all of society and she wants to share the medicine from the earth through her paintings and through her art. It's incredible what she does, she's not only an inspiration to me but she's an inspiration to so many people that wouldn't have been inspired otherwise, and that is so important because that's what art does. It brings people in, of all demographics, and she has the chance to show beautiful and to teach beautiful through her art. And so, to answer your question, I do see a difference, but the end game is both the same.

EC: It seems like Belcourt is quite deliberate in creating art designed to share her message with the broadest audience possible, within the gallery space and outside of it as well.

IM: Yes, I mean Belcourt is definitely a grassroots artist. Even though she is an internationally acclaimed artist, she is still just so grassroots. If you knew her, she's digging in the ground with her hands and she's with the people all the time. She's not disconnected from the people at all but she's not this ritzy artist that has a plan to convert royals to the cause. It's not like that. She's really grassroots, hands on, works just endlessly. She's a hard worker. That's how I know her and if I was to describe Belcourt in a few words, she is down to earth, even in the earth.

EC: I am interested in the role that collaboration plays in your practices and what the collaboration looks like when you are working together. Could you describe what the collaborative and creative processes looks like when you are working on an acrylic painting with Belcourt?

IM: The creative process is that we will start discussing what is going on in society. We discuss what's right about society, what's not right about society. We discuss current issues, issues of the past, issues that we foresee for the future, and then we start to feel the image before its even created. We talk about ceremonies, plants, and animals, such as the declining of a certain type of butterfly, the turtles that are making a comeback, or whatever the case is. We also talk about world affairs, international politics, the environment, language, and land back. We discuss all of these different things and that usually tends to unfold into visual art pieces. And so, everything is very intentional when we collaborate and I think that, that's why I love working with Christi so much. She's a perfectionist and she has to be with her style of art, but with it, it looks so organic.

EC: When Belcourt is working on a subject revolving around environmentalism, are there specific influences that are represented such as specific locations, plants, animals or landscapes? Belcourt

works with such detail that she seems to have a close relationship with the plants and animals that she is representing.

IM**:** Yes, 100%, there is always something intentional in there that is represented. She's trying to bring light and show the beauty of something that is suffering. She wants to show the beauty of certain types of caterpillars, moths, birds, or different plants that are so beautiful but that are having a hard time. Some might be facing extinction. And so those conversations are had and the pieces that are created are very intentional.

EC: In what ways, if any, do Belcourt's acrylic paintings encourage viewers to reconsider their perspectives on the importance of biodiversity and the fragility of ecosystems in Canada, such as *Wisdom of the Universe* and *Offerings to Save the World*?

IM: Well, I know both paintings very well and I've seen both of them being made, which was really cool. Both of these paintings are different in their own style and individuality, and there is a progression that took place between the two. When I mean progression, I don't mean better, I mean just her direction shifted. The *Wisdom of the Universe* piece, it's so elaborate and detailed, it's perfect, yet it's so organic that it just completely connects us as human beings to the stars, to the celestial world, to life here on Earth, and to our children. To me, it's a connecting piece that communicates that we are the Earth, we are the stars, and we have something very precious here and we need to do what we can to make sure that we love everything. Everything that she does is about the environment and if the environment is not involved, she won't do it.

EC: This point is quite interesting because even though there's no human figure in the painting, we really feel that the work implies a human connection with everything that is shown, like the universe, plants, and animals that are represented. The human presence is really felt.

IM: Absolutely. With *Offerings to Save the World* there was a progression and a shift in the style of art that she was doing and you can see it very clearly. It has a real deep texture to it that really fades off into the universe, it's like it's you can actually walk right into the painting and you could just keep walking forever. The idea of these offerings being made is so important to our philosophy as Indigenous people, to exist on this land and to co-exist with the animals, and nature and everything. If we want to live here, we have to make offerings and it's both beautiful and powerful. Making offerings and giving is probably the thing that can save everything. I mean these are also her lived experiences. She is actually doing these offerings in real life. She's stargazing, looking at plants, studying birds, and she always on the land. These are her lived experiences that are coming out on the canvas too. She knows these paintings inside-out because she is living them.

EC: Would you consider Belcourt's works as speaking for Canada's nature and wildlife?

IM: I don't think Christi's work speaks for Canada's nature and wildlife at all. I think that's the last thing she speaks for and the reason I say that is because colonial borders and colonial structures have forced title and laws on the lands that are not real to wildlife. These structures have caused genocides and destructions on the natural world and on Indigenous people. She believes that the world is one living entity and that everything is free on Earth except humans. Humans are the ones trapped in this colonial system that has land titles and power structures. We are a species of the ecosystem. She doesn't believe in any sort of land titles in that way and she believes people belong to the land.

EC: That's really interesting because for my research I've focused primarily on the nature in Canada but from what you are saying it seems like Belcourt is not only concerned with the preservation of nature in Canada. Rather, she has a broader concern for nature on an international scale, transcending borders. Is that right?

IM: Yes, it is more of a global perspective. When you consider Canada's history, including its treatment of Indigenous peoples, especially the Metis, it's clear that Christi's work is not a celebration of that history. She's more of a celebration of us being here right now and of all species of the ecosystem. She's a freedom fighter.

EC: When reading articles from Indigenous authors and scholars one of the common threads is the importance of intergenerational knowledge and setting up a better world for future generations. There seems to be a real focus on education and sharing of knowledge on preserving a healthy environment for future generations. Are these topics that you discuss with Belcourt?

IM: Oh, we talk about that all the time! We are constantly talking about different types of education because different types of education will have different types of outcomes. For example, when you look at the history of how the Métis were educated as a land-based people, you can tell that it's a highly intelligent form of education and it going to have a different outcome. Land-based education should be at the center of every education so that we never lose touch with Mother Earth because that's the very thing that sustains all beings and it's been extracted on purpose out of our education. Young people are being told by society to go to university, go to college, get a job, get a house, cash in on capitalism if you can, so on, to become a part of the mainstream. But when you look at society, if you can't drink the water out of the river beside you then that economy and education is not successful. Christi and I are always talking about how we can include Indigenous ideas and knowledges into our practices.

EC: Would you say that Belcourt's artistic practice aligns with or reflects Indigenous perspectives on nature and relationship to place, particularly in connection to Indigenous traditions and ways of understanding the land?

IM: She lives and breathes the love of the Earth and the people. She really does carry it in her heart and it just bursts out of her in so many creative ways, whether it's her doing beadwork, making moccasin, clay pots, or her paintings. But it's also how she lives her life and how she acts. She is the prime example of how a human being connects to the Earth and just shares it with the world. I can't think of anybody who does it better than Christi. She will do it any way possible because that's her passion and path in life. She is changing the social conscious of society through her art and her art always has this big environmental message behind it, every single time. That's why I just think that, there's her art but to know her as a person too, she was born for this and she's never going to stop.

Figures

Figure 1. Belcourt, Christi. *Wisdom of the Universe*. 2014. Acrylic on canvas. 171 x 282 cm. Image source: Art Gallery of Ontario. https://ago.ca/collection/object/2014/6

Figure 2. Belcourt, Christi. *Offerings to Save the World*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas. 149 x 194 cm. Image source: Hudson Valley Museum of Contemporary Art. https://www.hudsonvalleymoca.org/truth-tellers/christi-belcourt

Figure 3. Belcourt, Christi. *Water is Life*. 2016. Illustration. Image source: Onaman Collective. http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/

Figure 4. Belcourt Christi. Close-up of Mishipeshu in *Offerings to Save the World*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas. 149 x 194 cm. Image source: Hudson Valley Museum of Contemporary Art. https://www.hudsonvalleymoca.org/truth-tellers/christi-belcourt

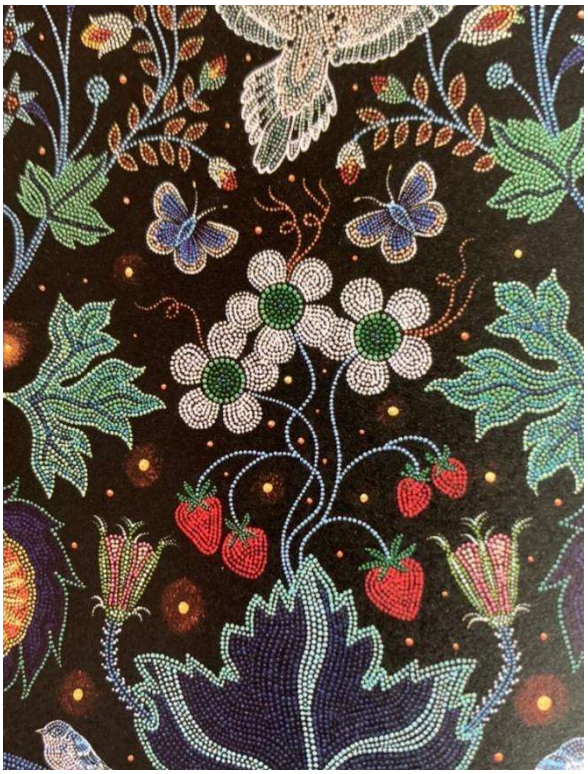

Figure 5. Belcourt, Christi. Close-up of strawberry plant in *Wisdom of the Universe*. 2014. Acrylic on canvas. 171 x 282 cm. Image source: Christi Belcourt, *Christi Belcourt* (Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2020), 57.

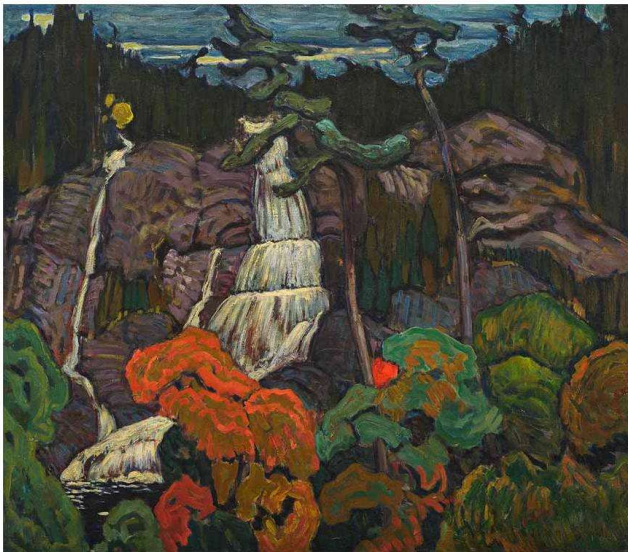

Figure 6. MacDonald, J.E.H. *Algoma Waterfall*. 1920. Oil painting. 121.9 cm x 152.4 cm Image source: https://thegroupofseven.ca/j-e-h-macdonald/

Figure 7. Varley, Fredrick Horsman. *Mountain Sketch*. 1935. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada. Image source: https://thegroupofseven.ca/frederick-varley/

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