

Catherine Blackburn: *with these hands from this land*

IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE ME AT MY BEST, YOU DON'T DESERVE ME AT MY WORST

Essay by Lindsay Nixon

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I grew up in Regina in the southern reaches of Saskatchewan. When I was a kid, I remember the world seemed about as big as the edges of the city, and everything beyond that appeared so far away and different than anything I had ever known. There is something so isolating about growing up and living in the prairies; an isolation that can breed racialized panic among the increasingly aging population that represent the white demographics of Regina. What we now call Saskatchewan and the people who call it home exist in a microcosm community with its own social orders. For instance, among these social orders is a general valuing of hospitality and generosity: everyone you meet is a community member and should be treated with kindness. But prairie kindness can be so vapid because under the shiny veneer of social niceties there is a deeply felt culture of anti-Indigenous racism.

When Colten Boushie was murdered in 2016, Canadians sounded the alarm over communities of people who could witness the murder of a Cree boy and still contend he deserved to die. I could not feign surprise because I had grown up among the suffocating racism in the prairies against Indigenous peoples that willed me to die everyday. What I remember most about the prairies is the shame that came along with being Native there. It is precisely this shame—that began “with the arrival of the first Christian missionaries” who sought to decimate Indigenous life and language in the prairies, argues artist Catherine Blackburn—that Blackburn attempts to dismantle with her art practice.

If you head north of Regina on highway 11, past Saskatoon (where my Cree-Métis mother lives on the East side of town) and past Prince Albert (where my mother grew up), you will reach a northern town called Patuanak where Blackburn was born, and is registered as a member of the English River First Nation. Blackburn, too, has contended with the shame that comes with living through colonial traumas on the prairies. Responding to a photograph of her beadwork composition *But there's no scar*, Blackburn says,

The galaxy of shimmering beads forms a bruise. It holds trauma that cannot be generalized under the umbrella of 'residential schools,' but rather it's pain that belongs to someone, to my grandparents, to my parents, to me. At times, it can be an overwhelming calculation of how I navigate decolonization within my work, because it relates to collective experience. There is a fine balance between vulnerability and resilience within certain bodies of my work that's both challenging and important for me to formulate. It also forms a galaxy, a galaxy of a strength and truth and story and possibility, because Indigenous strength predates colonization and is not defined by colonization.

It's easy to frame the story of Indigenous peoples in the prairies as a traumatic one. As Colten Boushie's and Tina Fontaine's face spread across international media outlets and scholars were releasing books about the supposedly turbulent lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada's prairies, Indigenous peoples and settlers alike began to conflate Indigenous life in the prairies with violence, death and shame.

Of course, there is shame. I remember growing up experiencing daily anti-Indigenous microaggressions from community members, ranging from teachers and parents to other children, making me believe that I didn't even deserve to exist. The actions of racist community members made me believe I was dirty and wrong. I was made to feel shameful for years simply because I

was an Indigenous person living in the prairies. So shameful that I certainly wasn't trying to reclaim language or positive representations of my culture—I was trying to hide.

Blackburn calls this shame the suppression of Indigenous knowledge, and she is right. Because it wasn't until I went to a Cree class, and found a whole sisterhood of Indigenous women reclaiming their culture, that I understood everything my community is outside of our racist portrayals by non-Indigenous people in the prairies. Language is a constant thread throughout Blackburn's artwork. Blackburn remembers the shame and guilt her mother conveyed because she didn't teach the Dene language to Blackburn, though much of Blackburn's extended family speaks the language. But Blackburn recognizes the colonial suppression of the Dene language and the grief of her family contending with that suppression. Blackburn does not want to further portray her family as victims of a cruel, racist prairie order that devalues Indigenous life. Instead, Blackburn wants to focus on the strength and embodied knowledges that persist despite colonial imposition.

Much like Blackburn's futuristic beadwork compositions, Blackburn seeks to know “the histories of our relations and of this land, we find the knowledge to recreate all that our worlds would've been if not for the interruption of colonization,” to cite Erica Violet Lee. Lee can often be found presencing Indigenous femininities in the prairies, as seen in the Sweet Moon Photography series led by Indigenous photographer Tenille Campbell. Lee and Campbell are both based in Saskatoon, SK, and Campbell is a frequent collaborator of Blackburn. It is networks of prairie Indigenous activists, thinkers, and creators who are turning to art, culture, technologies, and other material culture to do the work Lee describes as: *futureing new possible forms of livability for their community outside of colonial space, time, and place.*

Though we do live somewhat isolated, the infamous prairie sky—that stretches as far as the eyes can see—made me and my prairie Indigenous kin ever aware that something did exist beyond the horizon. We are ever sick wandering prairie NDNs, born ramblers, even if we can only manage to roam the highways in a 20 km radius around our respective Rez. It was this search for NDN joy that led Colten Boushie and his friends to go joyriding that fateful day they met the hatred of unbridled settler-colonial entitlement and rage. It's the same possibility that can be traced throughout Blackburn's art practice.

Blackburn's work is concerned with the contemporary tools and technologies that Indigenous peoples use to animate their traditions and knowledge systems. The photograph in Blackburn's installation *Tth'i konaḗḗdi ʔú (Can you say it again?)* situates her and her mother in a Saskatchewanian winter landscape, wearing earphones adorned with beadwork. The beadwork references language learning and the relationship between Blackburn and her mother, who has been Blackburn's sacred link to embodied forms of Dene knowledge since Blackburn's birth. Blackburn is contending with her own shame about language loss in her family lines, and the urgency and pressure she feels to revive the Dene language for fear of its extinction. However, in true form, Blackburn does not want the story of her and her mother to be one of pain and loss. Blackburn's installation includes audio of Blackburn's mother teaching her Dene words. First, Blackburn consults an online program that teaches her how Dene words sound. Blackburn then repeats the Dene words as her mother gently corrects her. Blackburn is storying her family's continuance as enabled through technological appendages such as the headphones that connect Blackburn to her language learning program. Blackburn beads the headphones to connote they are a vessel for the embodied forms of Dene knowledge Blackburn yearns for.

Of these embodied forms of Dene knowledges Blackburn seeks, she is particularly transfixed with the processes of piercing, stitching, and beading evoked during various forms of making and ceremony such as traditional tattooing and beadworking. The suppression of traditional tattooing practices, along with other forms of Indigenous ceremony and material cultures, was an oppressive tool of colonial forces who sought

to erase Indigenous life. But Blackburn wants to show how her hands hold Dene knowledges that constitute a defiant form of continuance when they evoke the making motions and techniques of her ancestors. Blackburn's practice contends that Dene processes of making are themselves woven into Dene bodies vis-a-vis traditional knowledges that are ingrained into Indigenous life. Further, for Blackburn, beadworking and other Dene forms of making are the oldest artforms of these territories, not just a domestic task. Indigenous beadwork is a form of rematriated sovereignties, not a feminized form of labour often degraded by a naturalized patriarchal lens.

The act of making, of using the body in tandem with technologies and objects, thereby making Indigenous knowledges tactile, is one of love for Blackburn. Says Blackburn,

Through beadwork, I explore how my hands hold deep love and also deep resistance ... This new work celebrates the way in which our hands, our bodies and our blood as Indigenous people both hold and tell stories of our survivance, of our resistance and most of all our love. I find that through my visual arts practice and as a jeweller that working with materials in this tactile way I am present in this survivance.

In her artwork ***Setsuné's tools*** Blackburn showcases her grandmother's hide scraping tools, bringing the spirit of Blackburn's grandmother into the gallery. Blackburn's grandmother would carefully scrape away at hides to make leathers and work bones to make needles, awls, and fish hooks to lovingly give family. Blackburn now does that same. Through their hands, generations of Dene beaders, gathers, speakers, tattooers, piercers, trappers, fishers, sewers, skinners, and tanners honour Dene life and futures through their bodies and the knowledges they hold and with the help of technological appendages and tools. It is in this cyclical love, together as prairie Indigenous peoples, that we are as free as Colten Boushie was that day he was driving around in his NDN car on the dirt roads of his beautiful, rolling territories. It's just as Keith Secola sang all those years ago:

We don't get old,
We just get younger,
When we're flying down the highway,
Riding in our Indian Cars.

We are living a future we were never supposed to realize, birthing new possibilities for Indigenous joy and freedom on the plains, with the help of our material cultures, technologies and objects that ground us radically in the Indigenous present.

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