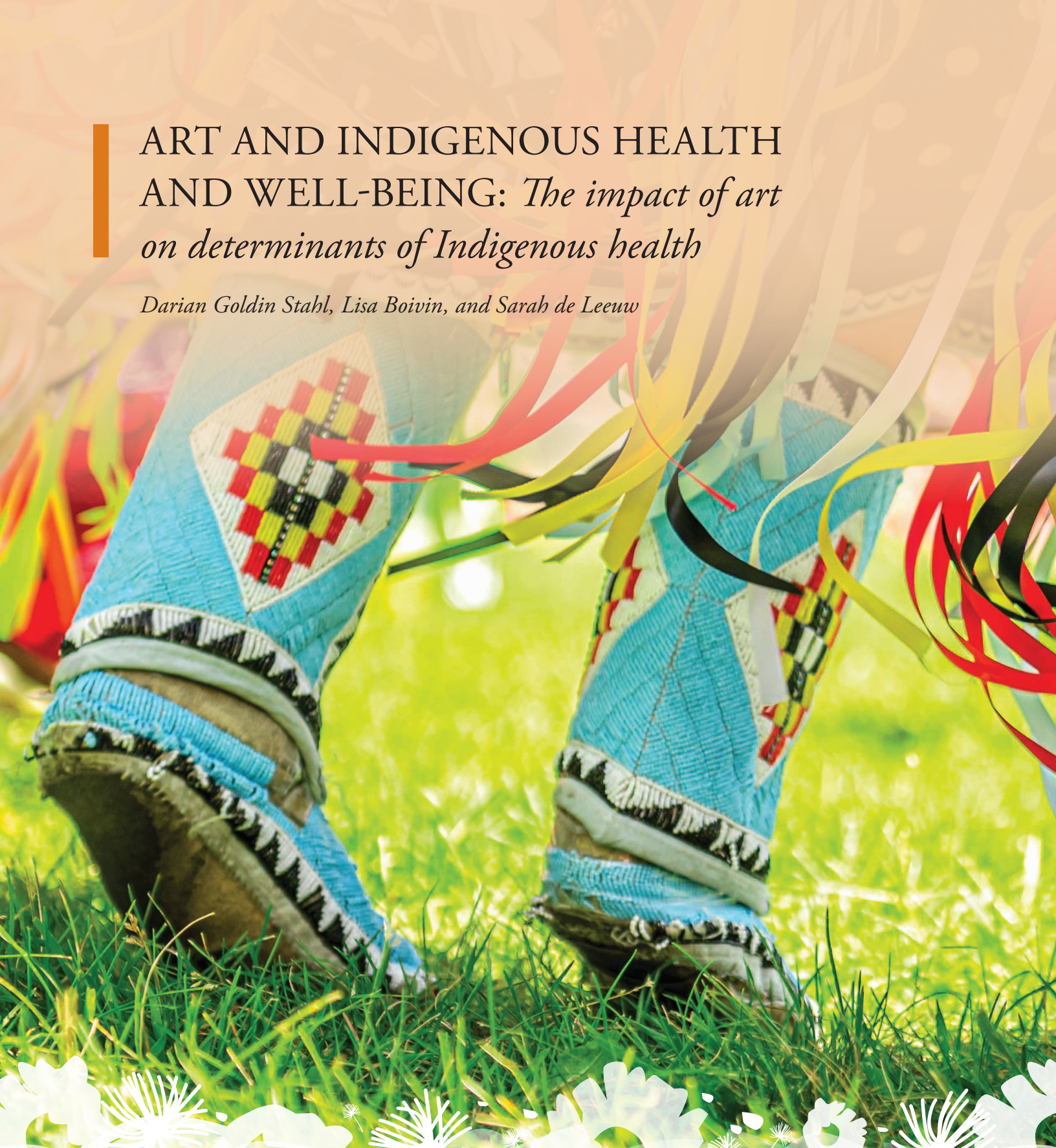




ART AND INDIGENOUS HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: *The impact of art on determinants of Indigenous health*

Darian Goldin Stahl, Lisa Boivin, and Sarah de Leeuw

National Collaborating Centre
for Indigenous Health



Centre de collaboration nationale
de la santé autochtone

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS



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INTRODUCTION

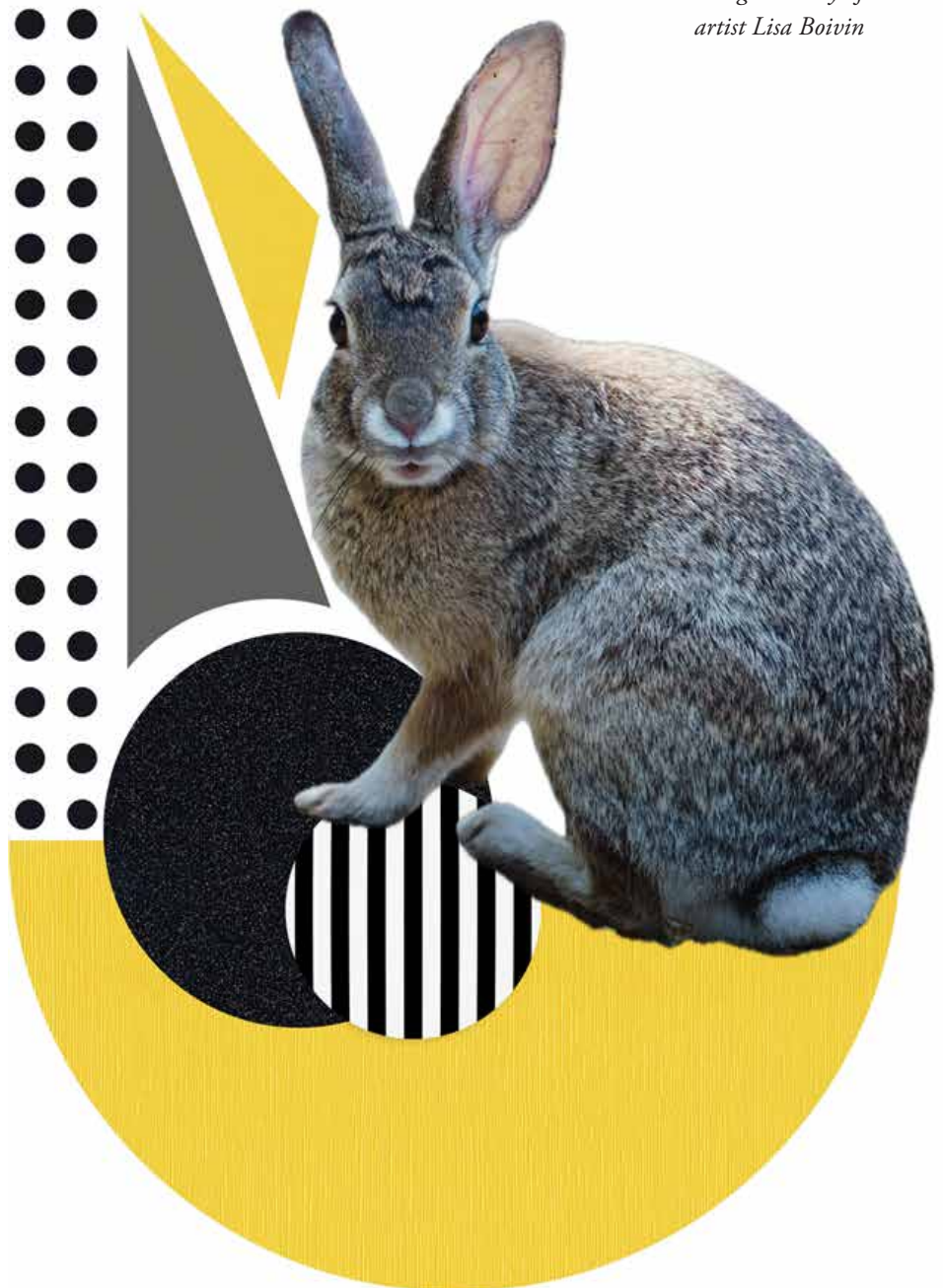


Dr. Lisa Boivin (member of the Deninu Kue First Nation) grounds our discussions about the impact of art on determinants of health with a digital collage entitled “Rabbit: She Brings Dance” (see Figure 1). In this image, Rabbit balances on and amongst geometric circles, half-moons, and sails. Boivin shares that Rabbit is a careful and observing figure, one who keeps a close eye and ear out for the dangers that might befall her kits and warren. Rabbit feels vibrations through her feet, enabling her to sense far beyond what she sees and hears. Rabbit is a gentle protector.

Since colonization, Rabbit has negotiated immense changes to her environment. Within Boivin’s collage, this change might be understood by the angular and concentric shapes surrounding her. Either as a nod to contemporary human constructed environments or nautical vessels that transported colonizers to Turtle Island, Rabbit persists amidst uninvited colonial forces. Although components of the collage appear keen to tumble, Rabbit steadily balances upon and within the pieces with an alert demeanor pulsing from the work. Rabbit’s paw rests on the image’s

FIGURE 1. LISA BOIVIN, “RABBIT: SHE BRINGS DANCE”
DIGITAL COLLAGE, 2025

*Image courtesy of
artist Lisa Boivin*





core. Her eyes focus outward. Her ears sense both what lies behind and ahead. Boivin's artwork reminds us of balancing acts Indigenous¹ persons enact in everyday efforts to persist, thrive, dance, and maintain health in states of never ending coloniality.

From millennia-old artistic practices like weaving, beading, storytelling, poetry, and dance, to new media like filmmaking, video games, digital art, and much more, diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Turtle Island today employ a broad array of arts to cultivate wholistic health (Archibald, 2012; France, 2020). *Wholistic health* encompasses the harmony of physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being, which

is a state of health that reaches far beyond the absence of illness or disease (Mushquash, 2021). Diana Steinhauer (Member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation) and James Lamouche (Métis and Cree) explain that Indigenous conceptions of wholistic health are particularly multifaceted, and “include Indigenous philosophy, cosmology, and conception of healing; ceremonial protocols; women's health and healing; *art*, identity, and knowledge; men's health and healing; lands and medicines; and environmental health” (Steinhauer & Lamouche, 2018, p. 89, emphasis added). In this report, we outline some of the ways that art plays an important influence on the determinants of Indigenous Peoples' health.

Unsatisfied with biomedical models of health and illness defined principally by white male-presenting actors from the Global North medicine, the World Health Organization (WHO) formalized the need for a broader conception of health in 1987 with the publication of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. This charter re-focused research and services on population-level determinants of health like education, income, a sustainable ecosystem, and social justice (de Leeuw et al., 2018; WHO, 1987; WHO, n.d.). However, the Indigenous Peoples of what is colonially called Canada have particular determinants of health based on their unique and diverse circumstances of living in a state of coloniality. Organizations like the

¹ The term 'Indigenous Peoples' is used throughout this report to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples inclusively.



Above: © Lily Hope (Tlingit), *Between Worlds*, Chilkat Dancing Blanket, Thigh-spun merino wool & yellow cedar bark warp, acid dyed and naturally dyed merino wool weft yarns, woven using finger twined Chilkat techniques, 72" x 44," 2022. Photograph by Sydney Akagi.

NCCIH² play an important role in addressing and ameliorating this gap by researching and supporting the public health needs of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples (Greenwood et al., 2022). The NCCIH prioritizes determinants of health research, and in the late 2010s published a series of fact sheets outlining some of the most pertinent determinants: employment, racism, poverty, economic development, culture and language, and more. The NCCIH also published a factsheet on Art and Wellness (Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2012), effectively linking art with health promotion. In this ongoing series of reports on art and well-being, we continue chronicling the ways

creative expression intersects and influences known determinants of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples' health.

Accounting for Indigenous diversity, colonization remains a pervasive root cause and most profound ongoing determinant of health for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples (de Leeuw et al., 2022; Greenwood & Larstone, 2022). Other downstream determinants of health can be traced back to coloniality, including barriers to cultural continuity, racism and social exclusion, and depressed economic opportunities. While art is not a determinant of health per se, artistic practices can be

powerful influencers upon factors of health and well-being. The arts are a means to:

- (re)vitalize culture,
- enact anti-racism, and
- promote economic sovereignty to enable individuals and entire communities to thrive.

This report highlights artists and communities who employ the arts to influence wholistic health. Throughout each of these topics, Rabbit dances, reminding us of feeling, of listening carefully, and of balancing.

² The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH) was established in 2005 but underwent a formal name change to National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) in 2019.



*There are innumerable ways the arts intersect with culture:
speaking one's mother tongue through song, conducting
ceremonies with and through sacred handmade objects,
and connecting with land through storytelling ...*

CULTURAL (RE)VITALIZATION



Cultural continuity, that is, the “degree of social and cultural cohesion within a community” (Reading & Wien, 2013, p. 21), is a known determinant of Indigenous Peoples’ health (Chandler, 2014). There are innumerable ways the arts intersect with culture: speaking one’s mother tongue through song, conducting ceremonies with and through sacred handmade objects, and connecting with land through storytelling, just to name a few. Cultural expression and continuity are so important to health, well-being, and identity that white-Euro settler colonists, consciously or unconsciously, understood that severing Indigenous Peoples from their creative practices was one means to accomplish cultural genocide (Akinleye, 2021; Mackay, 2021). The *Indian Act* (1876) codified several assimilationist laws aimed at cultural genocide: outlawing ceremonies, prohibiting Indigenous languages in residential schools, and deterritorializing Indigenous Peoples to harm both cultural connections to the land and ways of life since time immemorial. The historical and intergenerational trauma of cultural oppression is part of

the reason why First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations report a greater burden of poor health on average than their non-Indigenous counterparts (First Nations Health Council, 2011; Kitty & Funnell, 2020). However, throughout Canada’s attempts to eradicate culturally specific arts and ceremonies, the strength of resiliency of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples kept their arts alive.

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates cultural continuity, including “efforts to preserve Indigenous languages [and] to promote the resurgence of ritual and cultural practices” (Chandler & Dunlop, 2018, p. 159), is a protective factor for mental health (Chandler, 2014; Chandler & Dunlap, 2018; Masotti et al., 2020; Snowshoe et al., 2015). For example, alongside her team, Angela Snowshoe, an Indigenous scholar with Anihšīnāpē (Ojibwe), Métis, and white-settler ancestry, developed a scale to measure the correlation between cultural connectedness and mental health (Snowshoe et al., 2015). They found that practicing one’s culture protects against mental health risks “associated with

historical loss and perceived discrimination by directly counteracting its negative impact on Native American youth, it has been associated with prosocial behaviors, and connectedness to and engagement in family, school, and community among FN [First Nations] youth” (Snowshoe et al., 2015, p. 250). These correlations held true between heterogeneous urban Indigenous populations in California as well as more homogenous communities typically living on reserves in Ontario and Saskatchewan (Snowshoe et al., 2015). Masotti et al. (2020) further substantiated these results by adapting the survey to a broad array of regionally specific arts, including beading, storytelling, drumming, and tattooing. Finally, looking more closely at the cultural continuity indicators of First Nations in so-called British Columbia, bands that are able to “preserve their heritage culture” have significantly less or even non-existent rates of suicide among their members (Chandler, 2014, p. 234). These studies indicate the importance, indeed the life and death stakes, of revitalizing and practicing culture. The arts play an essential role in these revitalization efforts.

(Re)Vitalizing language

Attempts to eradicate First Nations, Inuit, and Métis languages was a key assimilationist tactic for the settler-colonial Canadian government, most notably through residential schools (NCCAH, 2016). The Métis language of Michif is vulnerable to extinction, as only 0.1% of all Métis people, or 1,485 individuals, reported having a conversational level of Michif in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023). However, this number reflects a 44% *increase* in speakers from 2016, suggesting that Michif is in the process of revitalization.

Métis singer, songwriter, and actor Andrea Menard is a part of the Michif revitalization effort (see Figure 2). Her 2022 album, *Anskoonamakew lii Shansoon* (Giveaway Songs), contains eleven original songs written in collaboration with Métis Elders and Language Keepers and can be downloaded for free from her website (Menard, 2022). Menard states, “I wanted to make a contribution to save our language and to honor the different dialects from all across the Métis homeland” (Menard, 2022, n.p.). This album also comes with a translation guide and descriptions

of the songs’ major themes. The “Wolf Healing Song (*Mahican Kita Oyoo*),” for example, “calls out the pain and suffering in your heart to be released. ... And know the howling of the wolf [in the song] is powerful medicine to help you howl out your own pain” (Menard, 2022, n.p.). Menard places huge importance on recording and openly disseminating Michif songs because if she “can sing it and record it, it would always be in existence” (Menard, 2021, n.p.). As Menard shows us, practicing language through song is an accessible means to preserve and share one’s culture.

(Re)Vitalizing ceremony

Participating in ceremony promotes the spiritual aspects of wholistic health and is another focus of cultural revitalization (Anderson & Migwans, 2016; Hull, 2022; Kanerahtenha:wi Whyte, 2020). The protocols for ceremony for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are incredibly diverse but often feature exquisitely handcrafted items and regalia (Eddy, 2023; Pard, 2015). However, museums big and small across Canada and around the world have been participating in cultural genocide by “acquiring,” often through financial duress,



FIGURE 2. ANDREA MENARD

Image by Friday Eve Photo

Christian obligation, or plunder, countless examples of sacred objects used in ceremonial practices (Danyluk & MacKenzie, 2022). The return of these objects promotes reconciliation and cultural revitalization. Bentwood boxes of the Haida First Nations peoples (The Canadian Press, 2017); kayaks for the Inuvialuit peoples (Pasioka, 2021; Stefanovich, 2022); and beadwork hoods from the Cree First Nation (Bernstien, 2021) are all recent headlines of repatriation efforts for sacred cultural objects held captive by non-Indigenous institutions.

The theft of sacred and irreplaceable ceremonial objects has had innumerable impacts to cultural continuity through the generations. Repatriation liaison Allan Pard (2015) of the Piikani Blackfoot Nation states that the “biggest challenge with some of those bundles that were sold and ended up in museums, institutions, and private collections was the simultaneous loss of our culture” (p. 132). As older generations passed on, the younger generations are less able to learn the ceremonial protocols, spiritual significances, and skills needed to re-craft these missing items (Pard, 2015). Even if new ceremonial objects could be made, they may not hold the same cultural value. For the Blackfoot, ceremonial bundles, pipes, and headdresses are animated with specific spiritual protocols bestowed by their maker and the hands they passed through, processes that cannot be

Repatriation is an opportunity to reclaim the right to ceremony and culture, reincorporate the objects' spiritual and healing capacities, and continue working towards reconciliation with colonial states.



repeated (Pard, 2015; Potts 2015). Repatriation is an opportunity to reclaim the right to ceremony and culture, reincorporate the objects' spiritual and healing capacities, and continue working towards reconciliation with colonial states.

Until very recently, repatriation was a contentious effort headed almost exclusively by Indigenous activists through ceaseless letter campaigns and diligent reviews of museum catalogues from around the world (Conaty, 2015; Deer, 2023; Powless, 1989). Museum managers' central arguments against repatriation are that it would devalue their collections and that museums have a mandate to preserve items so others may learn from them in the future, which cannot be guaranteed by returning the items to their original creators (Bernstien, 2021; Potts, 2015). Not only does this latter argument discount the ways these items promote healing and well-being for communities, but it is also blatantly paternalistic and false. As Jerry Potts of the Iitskinaiksi Blackfoot Nation

retells, “In our culture, we look after the bundles. We smudge them every day,” whereas “the Black Rider’s Bundle was right in front of me [in the museum] with mould and in disarray” (Potts, 2015). Even if items might be damaged by mobilizing them once again in ceremony, in his opinion, Pard (2015) “would sooner see them being used than stuck in storage” (p. 131). The health promoting abilities of such objects are severed by their placement in static museum display cases or storage cabinets, and cultural continuity and revitalization are impeded by the ongoing colonial obstructions to reclaiming sacred items.

The onus of repatriation is now shifting to the collections managers themselves, who are increasingly asked to take proactive efforts to identify and repatriate the objects to their rightful homes. Activism by the Blackfoot people prompted the government of Alberta to enact the *First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act* (FNSCORA) in 2000, which

provides the legal framework for museums to return sacred items (Ingelson & Owosuyi, 2022). Since the publication of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007) and its calls for repatriation, the Canadian Museum Association (CMA) has acknowledged that museums' looting of sacred objects was "tantamount to genocidal practices" (Danyluk & MacKenzie, 2022, p. 12). The CMA has since put together a "Repatriation Toolkit" for museums to audit their own collections and return sensitive cultural items to their rightful homes (CMA, 2022).

The repatriation of sacred items is an opportunity to revitalize culture, ceremony, and the arts. What's more, the return of sacred objects is sparking a revival of interest in ceremonial life and inspires new generations of artists to learn these crafting traditions (Conaty, 2015; The Canadian Press, 2017). In addition to strengthening kinship networks by passing down intergenerational artistic and cultural knowledge, the recommencement of object-specific ceremony also strengthens language use – another determinant of health. The cascading benefits to well-being and health after repatriation, as Potts states, "definitely gave life to a lot of people" (Potts, quoted in The Canadian Press, 2017).

(Re)Vitalizing relationships with the land

The arts play an influential role in preserving and revitalizing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis relationships and stewardship with the land, which is a determinant and core feature of health. Indigenous scholars Margo Greenwood (Cree) and Rosann Larstone (member of the Manitoba Métis Federation) explain that "Indigeneity has several characteristics, the most paramount being a close relationship with the land, territory, and natural world" (Greenwood & Larstone, 2022, p. 17). However, the confines of reserves, deterritorialization, industrial encroachment, and pollution resulting from settler-colonial exploitation of the land, air, and waterways has impacted the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples in immeasurable ways (Richmond, 2018; Robin, 2022; Tes et al., 2022; Women's Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2018). Chief of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, Terry Teegee (2018), explains that the goal of colonization is "to take our people, Indigenous peoples, off the land to access the resources. ... What happens in the end is that we suffer genocide of our culture and heritage" (pp. 225-6). The arts play an important role in both legally protecting lands from further encroachment and (re)vitalizing spiritual connections with ancestral lands.

Songs recounting the contracts and treaties between First Nations peoples and settlers have been legally recognized as evidence in land claims since the groundbreaking court case *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997) (Lysyk, 2006). In this case, the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples took legal action against government-backed industrial clear cutting on the land where their peoples have resided for millennia. These two Nations have an oral culture where "many of [their] songs have their primary significance as law, history, teachings, or function as forms of doing" (Robinson, 2019, p. 3). In court, Gitksan hereditary chief Antgulilibix Mary Johnson testified with a "limx'ooy (dirge song) associated with her adaawk (formal, ancient, collectively owned oral history)" (Robinson, 2019, p. 5). Passing down oral histories of treaty negotiations through song is vital because, ironically, the settler-colonists' written documentations may prove to be unreliable accounts of the agreement: contracts might be orally described but then written differently by the colonists to coerce First Nations leaders into signing bad-faith agreements (Robinson, 2019).

However, Indigenous art and activism scholar Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) explains that it was extremely difficult for settler courts to accept song as legitimate legal proof of land claims as "the exact equivalent to a book, to written

title of land” (Robinson, 2019, p. 6). This was due to the willful ignorance of the function of song in Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en cultures and a false hierarchy of what counts as historical proof. After the original judge dismissed the case for a lack of “legitimate” land claim evidence in 1991, on appeal, the Supreme Court ruling of *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997) declared that oral histories and traditions could be included as evidence on a case-by-case basis, paving the way for future land claims. As exemplified by the 2014 land claim victory of the Tsilhqot’in Nation, the intergenerational transfer of cultural and historical knowledge through oral histories and song now successfully aids in preserving lands from further industrial harm.

Land is not simply where people live, but an integral element of cultural continuity and spiritual life (Richmond, 2018) – rights to cultural preservation that were legalized with the 1951 revisions to the *Indian Act* and protected by Canada’s adoption of UNDRIP in 2021. Teegee (2018) points out that evidencing the Nations’ continuous use of the land to perform their legally protected

cultural arts and ceremonies was another argument presented in the Delgamuukw court case against industrial encroachment. This is because, as Teegee states, “If you prevent us from doing that, you’ve killed a part of our culture and heritage, and there is no way that the government can replace that” (p. 232). The more access and freedom to practice land-based cultural activities, the greater potential for retaining the right to health, well-being, and spiritual flourishing. Song and storytelling assist in preserving these freedoms.

In addition to preserving and revitalizing land-based cultural traditions, contemporary artists also demonstrate how land is animate and evolving to meet today’s spiritual practices. Tania Willard (Secwépemc and settler ancestry) is a land-based artist whose practice focuses on revitalizing spiritual connections with diverse ecologies in First Nations’ territories. Her long-term collaborative project, *BUSH gallery*, conceives of a rural plot of land on the Secwépemc Nation reserve as a creative space where language, culture, and relationships thrive. As noted by Willard (2017), “one of the goals

of BUSH gallery is to articulate Indigenous creative land practices which are born out of a lived connection to the land” (n.p.). Land in this context is not a stage where arts occur, but an inter-relational member of the gallery.

Speaking toward the animacy of land, Willard’s *BUSH Manifesto* (2017) attests that the gallery is “living and breathing... BUSH gallery is not one place, not one territory, not one Nation, we trace out our family, our blood, our belonging in cities, on reserves, in the BUSH, in the suburbs, overseas and under mountains” (Willard, 2017, n.p.). Contrary to typically western ideas of land use as sites of extraction, Willard (2017) conceives of land as “idea(s), place(s), story(ies), mood(s), artist(s), farmer(s), fighter(s), kid(s), the four-legged, the fish, the birds and the bugs, the stars and the water that makes us” (n.p.). Such artistic activations of Indigenous lands provoke wider realizations of the intertwining of all human and non-human beings, which beckons everyone to steward the land respectfully for our collective health and well-being, now and into the future.



ANTI-RACISM



Anti-Indigenous racism is another core determinant of Indigenous health, with far-reaching and interwoven downstream determinants throughout daily life (Loppie et al., 2020; Reading, 2013). Anti-Indigenous racism is a direct result of colonization, as settler-colonial fantasies of inherent “hierarchies of race” between themselves and the colonized were used to justify the violent displacement, genocide, and suppression of Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island and around the world (Smylie et al., 2022, p. 1). White settlers created laws, structures, and systems to entrench social hierarchies based on race, the *Indian Act* and residential schools being primary examples (Reading, 2013). Although many of the more blatantly racist laws have been struck down, Métis physician and health researcher Janet Smylie et al. (2022) attest that racist “legacies persist and are a cause of power imbalance that manifests in ways which perpetuate, reinforce, and justify a racial hierarchy to this day” (p. 1). Disproportionate burdens

of poverty (NCCIH, 2020a), unemployment (NCCAH 2017), and geographic isolation (de Leeuw et al., 2012) are all downstream determinants of health for Indigenous Peoples that can be traced back to racism.

Indigenous persons are more heavily policed and surveilled than their white, non-Indigenous counterparts (Reading, 2013; Loppie et al., 2020). This is particularly true in heterogeneous urban spaces, where frequent interactions with white and non-Indigenous persons are a part of daily life. Negative stereotypes, biases, and a sense that Indigenous ways of knowing are “less-than” European epistemologies are racist holdovers from settler-colonialism that particularly affect the lives and mental health of Indigenous youth. Social exclusion due to racism predisposes youth to educational barriers like suspensions and involvement with the legal system, which can result in decreased rates of finishing high school or pursuing higher education (D’Hont, 2022; Gabriel et al., 2022).

In addition to suppressed economic opportunities, racism also affects the body. Regularly experiencing racism in the form of discrimination, suspicion, and social exclusion manifests in the body as anxiety and stress, which then contributes to comorbidities like cardiovascular disease, chronic illness, and decreased mental health (Reading, 2013; Reading, 2018; Smylie et al., 2022). The expectation of experiencing racism inhibits Indigenous persons from seeking healthcare services and higher education, both of which are factors to achieving and maintaining health (D’Hont, 2022; Greenwood, 2021). Racism is thus an insidiously splintering web of negative influences on the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. Although art is well known to be a meditative, stress relieving practice that may positively impact one’s well-being, we further argue that art can be a strength-based protective factor against other aforementioned effects of racism as well.

Culturally safe spaces

Identifying culturally safe spaces within urban landscapes, including those where creativity can flourish, is a respite and protective factor against the persistent effects of racism. A culturally safe space is one where there is no challenge to identity; it is a space of mutual respect and where inhabitants feel free and empowered to share and learn together (Greenwood, 2021; Kurtz & Nyberg, 2022; Williams, 1999). Culturally safe arts spaces are places of “refuge or solace from the daily struggles, but also a place of bonding, belonging, and an opportunity to create new networks of friends with similar backgrounds and identities” (Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020, p. 254).

Overly Creative Minds (OCM) is a brilliant example of a culturally safe arts space. OCM is a part of the Urban Native Youth Association located in Vancouver. Their mission is to “explore arts and culture, and to find and strengthen your voice” (OCM, 2024, n.p.). OCM provides Indigenous youth with access to a broad range of specialized arts equipment as well as the opportunity to learn about traditional arts from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Recent workshops include screen printing, dream interpretation, making ribbon skirts, carving whale tail necklaces, and

improvisation. While connecting with their cultural heritage, youth also gain access to disseminate their work through exhibition and performance showcases like the Talking Stick Festival. OCM enables youth to gain technical skills, mentor networks, and confidence to resist multiple systems of oppression and racism.

Community theatre is another opportunity to inhabit culturally safe creative spaces. The Circle of Voices program at the Gordon Tootoosis Nīkāñīwīn Theatre (GTNT) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan is one such space

(see Figures 3 & 4). Circle of Voices provides local First Nations and Métis youth the opportunity to learn and perform plays like *Pimâtisiwin*, which comments on “the complexities of expressing Indigenous identity in the urban landscape and the role of traditional cultures, spirituality, and a sacred vision of life in modern society” (Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020, p. 243). In their research with youth, Andrew Hatala & Kelley Bird-Naytowhow (Cree) found that in addition to avoiding the pressures of engaging in unhealthy behaviors, regularly accessing



FIGURE 3. PERFORMANCE OF PIMÂTISIWIN, GORDON TOOTOOSIS NĪKĀÑĪWĪN THEATRE, FEATURING HEAVEN ADAMS, BAILEY PROSPER, AND MONTANA COCHRANE

Image by Cory Dallas Standing



FIGURE 4. YOUTH IN THE CIRCLE OF VOICES PROGRAM, GORDON TOOTOOSIS NIKAÑIWĪN THEATRE

Image by Ezra Forest



collective arts environments provides an opportunity for youth to creatively grapple with the negative effects of racism they encounter. Acting in plays like *Pimâtisiwin* enable them to “contend with, resist, and challenge the racist activities and normalized ways of socializing brought about through historical and contemporary processes of colonization” (Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020, p. 247).

Performing characters provides an opportunity to reinforce or challenge different identities and actively shape who youth actors want to be through role playing. Putting on theatre performances about, for, and with your community, potentially in collaboration with Elders, also vitalizes intergenerational bonds

and cultural pride (Pandey et al., 2021). Access to oases of play and creativity with others of similar backgrounds enables youth to uplift one another in the midst of oppressive wider worlds.

Indigenizing public life

Although creating culturally safe spaces is a vital method to mitigate the embodied effects of racism, Indigenous artists are also reclaiming public spaces to counter racism at the source. Disseminating Indigenous arts within the broader Canadian landscape has been met with countless forms of racist resistance. Excluding Indigenous arts from exhibition in major museums and galleries (Cooley et al., 2015; O’Neill, 2020; Verjee, 2018), barriers

to achieving equitable arts funding opportunities (Canada Council for the Arts, n.d.), the lack of mainstream art criticism (Garneau, 2019), and cultural appropriation (Elliott, 2017; Soule & St-Louis, 2018; Xhignesse, 2021) are just some of the ways anti-Indigenous racism is seeped into the kinds of artwork we encounter in daily life. Such erasure can leave a sense that one’s presence is not welcome. However, systemic unbelonging may be overcome when First Nations, Inuit, and Métis arts are celebrated as expected and respected aspects of moving through public spaces. Encountering and celebrating the wealth of diversity in the public sphere directly opposes the exclusionist attitudes derived from Canada’s settler-colonial roots.

Public spaces across Canada increasingly feature “Every Child Matters” art installations, from short-term aerial art to bright orange crosswalks, that call attention to the racist and genocidal Indian Residential School system (see Figures 5 & 6). In 2013, Phyllis Webstad shared her powerful story about her new orange shirt being taken away on the first day of Residential School during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimonies. Since then, the “Every Child Matters” campaign has rallied Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists around renewed truth and reconciliation measures that address the legacy of ongoing Residential School trauma and the appalling abuse and loss of life that occurred at those institutions. To keep the matter at the forefront of our collective consciousness, community groups gather to paint bright orange commemorative and galvanizing works of art in public spaces. Non-profit organizations like the Orange Shirt Society supply grants for community groups to create “murals, mosaics, memorials, sidewalk designs, or other semi-permanent installations that are highly visible and significant” (Orange Shirt Society, n.d., n.p.). Exposing the truth of this atrocity, painted larger than life for everyone to see, not only initiates a site of healing for survivors and the families of the lost, but also evokes an invitation for learning and conversation.

Publishing is another means for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to insert their authentic perspectives into the daily lives of their non-Indigenous counterparts. There has always been an appetite for Indigenous stories; however, cultural appropriation has shut out the

efforts of Indigenous authors to share their authentic perspectives and stories. Intentionally or not, writing First Nations, Inuit, or Métis characters in artistic media without lived experience of that identity risks upholding racist settler-colonial fantasies and stereotypes against these peoples.



FIGURE 5. “EVERY CHILD MATTERS” CROSSWALK COMMITTEE
CITY OF KITCHENER AND ORANGE SHIRT SOCIETY

Image courtesy of the Orange Shirt Society



FIGURE 6. AERIAL ART
INSTALLATION
ORANGE SHIRT SOCIETY

Image courtesy of the Orange Shirt Society

As Haudenosaunee author Alicia Elliott (2017) writes, “when people outside of the culture attempt to represent it, they will inevitably use inaccurate stereotypes to reinforce our dehumanization before a large public audience” (p. 43). When false representations are written as fact, then “discrimination sustains itself, in an endless loop of ignorance propelled by cultural misrepresentation and miseducation” (Elliott, 2017, p. 43). Misrepresentation has real consequences to health and well-being, such as emboldening the racial biases that result in increased stress and anxiety for already marginalized persons. The ceaseless activism of Indigenous authors like Elliott to rally Canadian literature leadership and readership against cultural appropriation breaks the general public out of the echo chamber of racist stereotyping.

Indigenous writers have more shelf space in bookstores and libraries today than ever before. According to BookNet Canada, the national consumer tracking

site for English language books, Indigenous-focused book sales have increased 527% from 2012 to 2021 (Zara, 2022). Sections like “Indigenous Collection” now feature prominently in the front of bookstores and libraries because, as the manager of collections at the Vancouver Public Library, Inness Campbell, explains, “It’s a place for that reconciliation to start to happen, or certainly the learning that you might need to have that reconciliation” (Campbell, quoted in Zeidler, 2020, n.p.). The cross fertilization and collective strength of writers, poets, playwrights, and screenwriters, a path forged by literary matriarchs like Lee Maracle (Stó:lō First Nation), Jeannette Armstrong (Syilx Okanagan First Nation), and Maria Campbell (Métis), has resulted in a groundswell of voices speaking back and gaining traction against structural and systemic racism aimed at oppressing Indigenous cultural expression.

The rapid growth of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis media promotes health and well-being in many ways. First is the increase

in economic opportunities, particularly for those living in remote areas where other kinds of careers may be limited. Next, writing presents an opportunity to disseminate culturally specific stories and teachings and revitalize endangered languages in one’s own community and the broader public alike. Finally, sharing first-person, authentic narratives opens the hearts and minds of non-Indigenous readers to learn and reconcile with the histories and current realities of living in a state of coloniality.

Louise Flaherty (Inuit) founded the Inhabit Media publishing house, the only literary publishing house in the Canadian Arctic, in 2005 to serve Inuit book media on their own terms. Inhabit Media began as a way to preserve Elders’ stories and help young readers learn Inuktitut and now publishes a broad range of books by Inuit and non-Inuit authors in Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English, and French. With the opening of the Inhabit Books storefront in the heart of Toronto in 2023, Flaherty hopes “to educate the

rest of Canada and the world about who we are because a lot of stories that have been written about Inuit contain stereotypes” (Flaherty, quoted in Ritchot, 2024, n.p.). As one of ten Indigenous-owned and run bookstores in so-called Canada, Inhabit Books provides authentic stories and narratives to non-Indigenous urban readers. The dissemination of first-person perspectives of Inuit life, history, and culture is vital to counter racism and the once-common practice of cultural appropriation in Canadian publishing.

The dissemination of film and television media is another way First Nations, Inuit, and Metis creators portray to mass audiences what it is really like to be Indigenous today and, in the process, dispel racist stereotypes. The critical acclaim of television series like *Reservation Dogs*, which portrays the misadventures of a clique of Muscogee youth living on reserve, and *North of North*, a romantic comedy set in a tiny arctic Inuit village, give non-Indigenous audiences a glimpse

into Indigenous worldviews and locales. The universal familiarity of an ensemble cast, complex family life, or romantic pursuits tends to break down barriers to understanding and empathy. The creators of *North of North*, Stacey Aglok MacDonald (Inuit) and Alethea Arnaquq-Baril (Inuit), explain that they “wanted to portray very nuanced, messy, beautiful, funny characters that are empowered” (Arnaquq-Baril, in Aglok MacDonald & Arnaquq-Baril, 2025, n.p.) to the Canadian nation as well as the other 190 countries where *North of North* is broadcast. The three-dimensionality of the characters, authentically written and portrayed by Inuit and other Indigenous persons, “are showing our lives how we perceive it, and just by doing that, we are undoing a lot of stereotypes” (Aglok MacDonald, in Aglok MacDonald & Arnaquq-Baril, 2025, n.p.).

Once audiences engage with Indigenous-made media – witnessing the humanity of these stories – it is difficult to

retain a sense of “otherness” for their creators. When the non-Indigenous public sees First Nations, Inuit, and Métis arts on large building facades, in storefront windows in busy downtown corridors, dedicated local library sections, or on their living room televisions, an inherent sense of value is placed on this work. The more this art is seen, the greater the understanding that diversity is a valued aspect of nation building. In a country that sought to extinguish expressive Indigenous arts and culture, simply creating identity-specific artwork at all exemplifies anti-oppressive resiliency. Beyond survival, the proliferation and popularity of Indigenous arts seen in recent years forges pathways to flourishing. The momentum of arts in the most visible areas of society provides evidence of greater institutional and societal inclusion of Indigenous Peoples’ unique perspectives, instilling pride in one’s Indigenous identity and positively impacting well-being.



EMPLOYMENT AND THE ARTS



The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health published a report in 2017 detailing how employment is a determinant of Indigenous health. For example, un- or under-employment correlates with living at or below the poverty line, and with that comes poorer health indicators like food insecurity, lower nutrition, inadequate housing, stress, and the erosion of self-esteem (Greenwood & Larstone, 2022; NCCAH, 2017; NCCIH 2020b; Polanco & Arbour, 2018). However, the arts offer entrepreneurial opportunities for economic self-determination that help to buoy the health and livelihoods of individuals and entire communities. As book sales indicate, there is an increasing enthusiasm for the unique arts of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples (Zara, 2020; Garneau, 2019). Selling artwork, licensing culturally specific design motifs, and establishing arts cooperatives are all examples of how the arts enable First Nations, Inuit, and

Métis artists to overcome difficult economic circumstances set before them.

Indigenous identity and employment rates intersect in numerous unique contexts. First, the deterritorialization of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples from their ancestral lands and settler-colonial efforts to sever traditional livelihoods nearly destroyed many Indigenous people's original economies (Adams, 2018; NCCIH, 2020a; Reading, 2018; Reading & Wien, 2018). Next, the often rural and remote colonial partitioning of reserves means that employment opportunities are sparse for First Nations persons living on reserves (de Leeuw, 2018; de Leeuw et al., 2012; NCCAH, 2017). Remote geography, in combination with less internet availability, networking opportunities, access to higher education, and transportation all suppress one's earning potential (NCCAH, 2017; Reading, 2018). These

factors result in nearly double the unemployment rate (and lower income) for First Nations persons living on reserves as compared to the general non-Indigenous Canadian population, and Inuit and Métis peoples are similarly impacted (Fiscal Realities Economists, 2016). Next, unfair hiring and promotion practices rooted in racism and stereotypes against First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples impact career progression (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2000). Finally, "the burden of poverty of Indigenous women is double that of non-Indigenous women" due to the lack of caregiving support and forcible dislodgment of matriarchal governing structures that was typical for many First Nations prior to colonization (Boyer & Leggett, 2022, p. 40; see also Loppie et al., 2020). Cottage art businesses may offer those excluded from other lines of work an opportunity for self-employment, particularly for women.



Art sales

A vibrant and growing industry of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis crafts persons and artisans who sell to customers through retail partnerships or directly through tabling events, e-commerce sites, and social media is lifting many out of poverty (Galloway, 2021; Schwientek, 2024). In addition to full time work, these economic activities also help to fill employment gaps for those who have caretaking responsibilities, as these small businesses are primarily run out of the home, are not overseen by the government, and have flexible hours (NCCIH, 2020b). Online networking and marketing platforms also open new markets for remote and rural Indigenous artisans to reach viable, sustainable customer bases.

The Indigenous Arts Collective (IAC) of Canada is one such platform. IAC is an incorporated, charitable, and volunteer-run collective of over 500 artists. According to their website, the IAC's mission is dedicated to the "reclamation, preservation, revitalization, and protection of endangered Indigenous art forms" while sustaining the cultural identity, cultural content and economic advancement of artists (IAC, n.d., n.p.). The IAC exists to inspire Indigenous communities through the transmission of cultural knowledge and to ensure that the decisions made today will benefit seven generations into the future (Haudenosaunee 7th Generation Principle). IAC nurtures the concept that "Indigenous relational expressions ('art') has roots and grows from origins and relationships with the living world who is understood as family" (IAC, n.d., n.p.). Their

mandate ensures that artists in communities encourage youth to remain grounded in cultural history, identity and individuality so they collectively continue to elevate intercommunity conversations, equity, pride and cultural unity.

IAC also acknowledges that economic health contributes to mental, physical and spiritual well-being and their values support Indigenous artists who wish to elevate their entrepreneurial aspirations, expand their audience and grow their artistic practices. Through in person and virtual sales platforms such as IndigenARTSY.com, Indigenous Arts Auction, and Indigenous Women's Arts Conference, the IAC removes the technological and financial barriers so artists can focus on arts production (see Figures 7 & 8). IAC offers Indigenous artists free sales



©2025 IndigenousArtsCollective.org
Indigenous Women's Arts Conference
Porcupine Quilling Workshop with Amy Willier

FIGURE 7. ARTS WORKSHOP
HELD AT THE INDIGENOUS ARTS
COLLECTIVE'S INDIGENOUS
WOMEN'S ARTS CONFERENCE

*Image courtesy of the Indigenous
Arts Collective*





FIGURE 8. ARTS WORKSHOP HELD AT THE INDIGENOUS ARTS COLLECTIVE'S INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S ARTS CONFERENCE

Image courtesy of the Indigenous Arts Collective

opportunities, employment and workshop pathways, marketing tools, grant writing assistance, personal profile pages, advertising, advocacy, mentorship and prospects for collaboration. The combination of entrepreneurship and platforming of artists demonstrates a strengths-based method to protect cultural knowledge, make a living, and showcase the brilliant creativity of Indigenous Peoples.³

Taking the reins of entrepreneurship to participate in national and international

economies is a relatively new option for First Nations Peoples. Until the 1951 reforms to the *Indian Act*, First Nations Peoples were banned from freely participating in the greater Canadian economy and consequently had very little control over how their cultural designs and objects were appropriated and circulated in non-Indigenous markets. Cultural appropriation of Indigenous arts and styles by and for settler economies began in the early 1900s, which established an exploitative market of First Nations Peoples' artistic

goods without their guidance, consent, or remuneration (Roth, 2018). Although Indigenous artists can market their own work today, rampant cultural appropriation for inauthentic arts and souvenirs persists, harming income opportunities for original Indigenous artists. Aside from potentially proliferating racist stereotypes detailed previously, cultural appropriation in the arts also deflates the economic power of selling authentically Indigenous arts.

Artists Jay Soule (Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Deshkaan Ziibing Anishinaabeg), aka CHIPPEWAR, and Nadine St-Louis (Mi'kmaq, Acadian and Scottish roots) started the Reclaim Indigenous Arts campaign to discourage cultural appropriation and return artistic rights to Indigenous Peoples. They explain that cultural appropriation:

... is when one person from one culture takes culturally distinct items, aesthetics, or spiritual practices – and in this case artwork – from another culture and mimics it. They adopt it as their own without consent, permission or any cultural relationship to the object or practice, in order to make money or just because they admire it. (Soule & St-Louis, 2018, n.p.)

³ In the ethos of relationality, the previous two paragraphs concerning the Indigenous Arts Collective (IAC) of Canada were written collaboratively between the authors and the President of the IAC, Dawn Iehstoseranón:nha (Kanienkéha'ka [Mohawk], Wakhskaré:wake [Bear Clan]) so that the IAC can be authentically represented in this report.

Cultural appropriation for cheap knockoffs of Indigenous craftworks and motifs is particularly rampant in urban tourist centers like Vancouver and Montreal (Roth, 2018; Soule & St-Louis, 2018). Souvenir, gallery, and museum gift shops import industrially mass-produced “Indigenous” cultural items, such as dreamcatchers, plastic totem poles, and moccasins, using exploitative overseas labor to sell these items at extraordinarily cheap price points.

A 2010 study commissioned by the Aboriginal Tourism Association of British Columbia found that 88% of “Indigenous” trinkets and souvenirs sold at tourist attractions were created and sold without any Indigenous participation (Fionda, 2018), whereas the Reclaim Indigenous

Arts initiative puts this number closer to 100% (Soule & St-Louis, 2018). Artistic cultural appropriation is yet another form of unregulated and unfettered extraction-based capitalism that ultimately harms Indigenous Peoples, only this time, ironically, by exploiting the very same cultural and artistic expressions previous federal policies hoped to extinguish.

However, it is not only gift shops where cultural appropriation occurs. Beader Melody Markle (Algonquin from Long Point First Nation) reports that marketing her original jewelry designs online makes them vulnerable to appropriation and thus sale at drastically reduced prices through foreign third-party retail websites (Schwientek, 2024) (see Figure 9). In addition to removing

these items from their original cultural contexts, such practices further harm Indigenous artists by undermining the expectation of paying the full, fair price for handcrafted items. As well, the quality of knockoff items is poor, leaving buyers with a negative impression of Indigenous arts (Schwientek, 2024; Soule & St-Louis, 2018). Authenticity protection measures would not only safeguard small businesses like Markle’s but also enable Indigenous artists to control and preserve the cultural contexts and meaning behind their work.

A lack of regulations, trademark laws, or national labeling systems for quality assurance means there is very little legal redress against appropriators or to reliably signal authentic arts to consumers. Reclaim Indigenous Arts advocates for outlawing unethical and fake “Indigenous” souvenirs. Fining unscrupulous shops may push them into licensing agreements by and for real First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists. As well, this advocacy group proposes a labeling system, such as adopting the Aboriginal Tourism of British Columbia (ATBC) authenticity program, as a nation-wide initiative to help consumers make ethical choices about the arts they buy.



FIGURE 9. MELODY MARKLE,
BEADED KINGFISHERS WITH
BASKET OF FISH
SIZE 11 & 15 SEED BEADS AND
PORCUPINE QUILLS, 2025

Image courtesy of Melody Markle



Authenticity aligns with current art market trends for ethical consumption. As with publishing, acting, and other creative arts, it is no longer generally acceptable to participate in cultural appropriation to the detriment of those who would benefit by representing themselves. Likewise, art consumers today want to purchase goods, watch the films, and read the books that would support the creators and cultures represented.

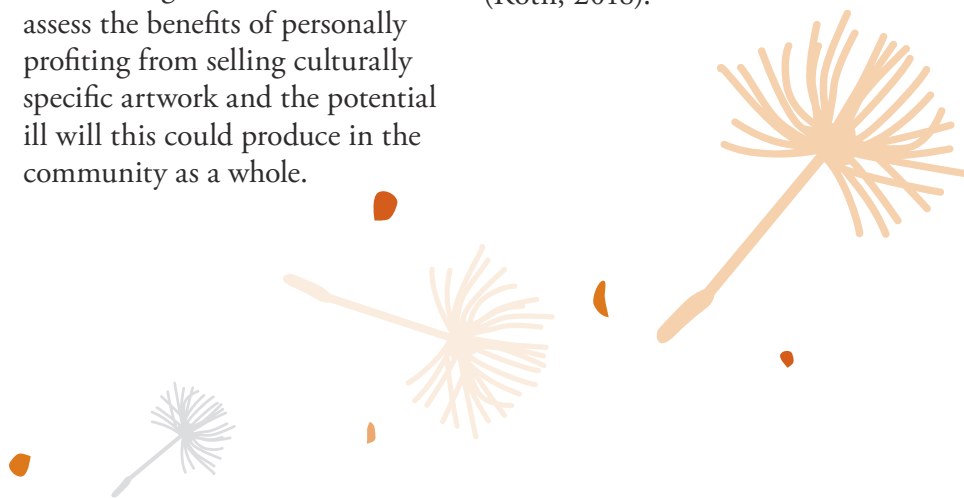
Licensing art

Licensing culturally specific motifs and wears may be one method to control who can reproduce and profit from First Nations, Inuit, and Métis arts. Eighth Generation is an art and homewares company owned and operated by the Snoqualmie Tribe in Seattle, Washington. This lifestyle brand exclusively licenses designs created by Indigenous artists to print on a wide range of products like shoes, bags, towels, pillows, and more. Eighth Generation takes pride in being the first Indigenous-owned company to produce wool blankets – one of the most pervasively faked Indigenous products in North America. They seek to counter cultural appropriation and so-called “Indigenous-inspired” products that flood tourist centers by opening their own authentically made Indigenous goods storefront in Seattle’s famous Pike Place Market (Eighth Generation, n.d.).

Selling artwork to non-Indigenous collectors or tourists is not without controversy. Not everyone wants to commodify wares, motifs, or imagery to people outside of their community (Roth, 2018). Curator heather ahtone (Choctaw and Chickasaw) tells us that “not everything should be commodified and Indigenous agents must actively protect what is at the heart of our identities and cultures in order to prevent these from becoming measured, bought and sold” (ahtone, 2019, p. 4). Taking a historical perspective, selling artwork to non-Indigenous tourists who have very little knowledge about the significance and meaning of the work could be seen to parallel the forcible sale and theft of First Nations peoples’ cultural items detailed at the beginning of this report (Danyluk & MacKenzie, 2022; Pard, 2015; Potts, 2015). The theft and continued oppositional display of culturally sensitive artworks is not the same as harnessing the economic self-determination that a career in arts can have today, but these histories cannot be ignored. Artists must assess the benefits of personally profiting from selling culturally specific artwork and the potential ill will this could produce in the community as a whole.

Arts cooperatives

Collective and cooperative ownership, like Eighth Generation exemplifies, is a model that requires the group’s consensus on the parameters of business. Although cooperative models are more typically applied to forestry and mining operations on reserves or unceded territories (NCCIH 2020b), this model can also benefit the wealth potential of artistic exports (Roth, 2018). Arts cooperatives are groups of artists who pool their talents, resources, studio spaces, equipment, and networks to create a supportive environment and reach wider customer bases. When arts cooperatives are owned and operated by the Indigenous Peoples whose culture they represent, then the community is able to control if and how to share their cultural knowledges and arts to outsiders, as well as reap the economic benefits for themselves. Cooperatives have the potential to lift entire communities out of poverty when enough members own a stake in the business (Roth, 2018).



*...“not everything should
be commodified and
Indigenous agents must
actively protect what
is at the heart of our
identities and cultures
in order to prevent these
from becoming measured,
bought and sold”*

(ahtone, 2019, p. 4).



A trail-blazing example of collective ownership is the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset), Nunavut. This is an Inuit arts collective established in 1959 to take ownership and control over the sale of its members' increasingly popular original prints in southern Canadian markets. The prints from this studio are world-renowned, and over a dozen members have since been inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. The artists here take pride in not only sharing their ways of life and cultural productions with their patrons, but also in establishing a community-owned business. This model “would simultaneously allow them to learn ways to generate income in a changing economic atmosphere, and, in

concert with other community members, ensure that the organization met community needs in a democratic and transparent way” (Alsop, 2010, n.p.). It is said that there are more artists per capita in Kinngait than any other place in Canada, as the art studio provides a significant means of livelihood for this small remote Inuit community.

Having a reliable source of income that matches or exceeds the costs of living aligns with reduced rates of stress, cardiovascular disease, food insecurity, substance abuse, and domestic violence (Kolahdooz et al., 2015). As well, employment is linked with higher rates of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-identity (Marshall et al., 2013). Entrepreneurial initiatives

in the arts are a means to circumnavigate the barriers to economic participation many Indigenous persons face. Online markets expand one's reach and earning potential, while cooperatives have the potential to uplift entire communities. Although the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island are a minority group as a whole, the diversity of distinct cultures offers unique artistic perspectives that, according to arts professor David Garneau (Métis), “have developed a critical mass that exceeds the limits of its own communities and has begun to take on the larger artworld” (Garneau, 2019, p. 2). For these reasons and more, the arts can have a significant impact on economic participation as a determinant of health and well-being.

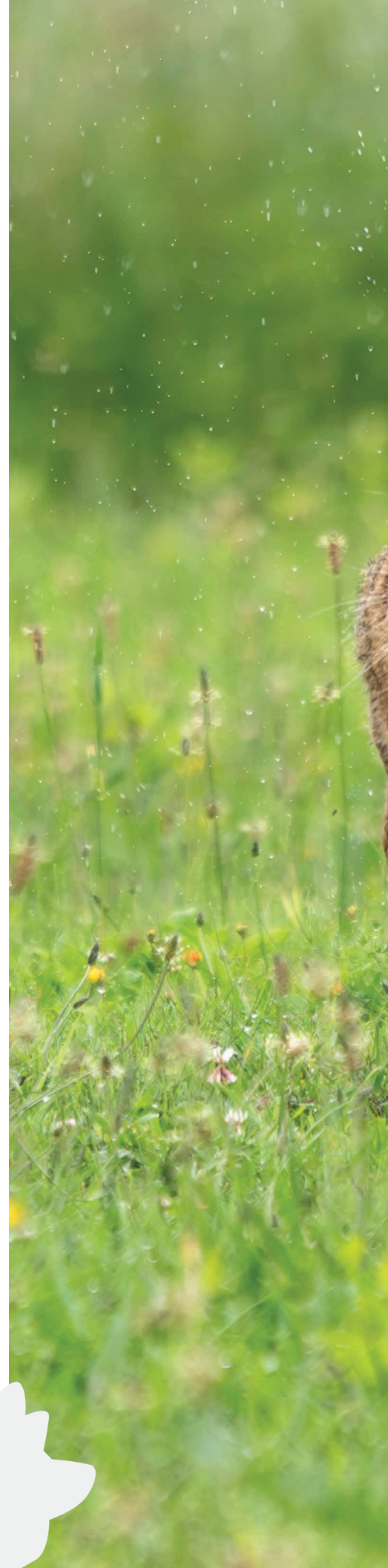
CONCLUSION



Returning to Boivin's digital collage, we offer one last reflection on this iconic figure by way of its title, "Rabbit: She Brings Dance" (see Figure 1). Boivin explains that Rabbit uses her sensitive feet and nimble body to effortlessly change directions and dance. Rabbit has given humans the gift of dance. In addition to lessons about familial care, gentleness, and observation, Rabbit teaches us that the art of bodily expression in dance is medicine. Arts connect us to lineages of cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge teaches about how to be nimbly alive and how to live well – lessons that intimately intertwine respect for all people, creatures, and lands with wholistic health.

From revitalizing cultures harmed during and from colonization to disseminating authentic perspectives against racist stereotypes, and from harnessing economic benefits of collective ownership to the works of individual artists like Dr. Boivin

creating "Rabbit: She Brings Dance," First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples mobilize the arts to carve multiple pathways towards wholistic health. Arts are a means to (re)vitalize intergenerational bonds, spirituality, and connections with lands fragmented by attempted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples. Returning cultural artworks to their rightful communities plays a vital role in reconciliation, and crafting new authentic Indigenous arts reassert and reclaim cultural agency. Public-facing arts, including Rabbit in this discussion, offer non-Indigenous settlers strength-based insights into First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures. Encountering these works as an expected aspect of daily life in any city or rural town shapes a nation where diversity is respected and valued. Rabbit moves hearts and minds, possibly unseating colonial biases in the process. Arts are strength-based means of breaking stereotypes, taking pride, and promoting health.





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