

TRULY TRIBAL

CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS TATTOOING

Edited by
Dion Kaszas



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Copyediting: Lisa Frenette

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Introduction

Coyote Juggles his Eyes

Dion Kaszas

In the time before this time, Coyote and his wife lived by the lake where they subsisted on roots and berries they harvested from the land.¹ One day, after a harsh year of poor harvesting due to bad weather, forest fires, and low water in the rivers, Mole and Coyote ran out of food, “so Mole packed a lunch for Coyote and he left to go hunting.”² As Coyote travelled to his favourite hunting grounds, he heard singing in the distance and stopped to listen carefully. As his ears tuned into the melody, he heard the words, “I throw you up and you come down in!”³ Upon hearing this song Coyote thought to himself, *What a strange song*. His curiosity was piqued and he slowly and cautiously followed the tune. He peeked over the crest of a small hill and there in front of him was Blue-Grouse laying on their back, tossing their eyes into the air. When the eyes reached the peak

Nlaka'pamux professional tattoo artist Dion Kaszas tattoos the rib cage of Sylix photographer Billie Jean Gabriel during a Nlaka'pamux Blackwork session in Lac Le Jeune, BC, in 2022. Photo: Wesley Wilson (2022).

of their trajectory Blue-Grouse would sing the song, “I throw you up and you come down in!” With this song the eyes of Blue-Grouse would return to their sockets as if nothing had happened. Coyote watched in amazement at such a fancy trick, until Blue-Grouse noticed Coyote. Upon noticing Coyote, Blue-Grouse hastily ran in fear of the old Trickster, Coyote.

As Blue-Grouse disappeared over the next hill, Coyote yelled, “That is my way, not yours.”⁴ Of course this was not Coyote’s way, however he was fascinated by what he had just witnessed, and he wandered down the path a short distance and lay down on his back in the sun and began to juggle his own eyes. He threw his eyes into the air just as he observed and sang the song, “I throw you up and you come down in!” and his eyes returned to their sockets; however, each time they didn’t return completely perfect. He exclaimed, “What wonderful playthings!” As Coyote continued to juggle his eyes, a pair of Ravens flew in his direction and observed what was happening, exclaiming to each other, “Let us steal his eyes and take them to the Sun-dance. Perhaps then we can find out his medicine-power.”⁵ Being Tricksters in their own right, the next time Coyote tossed his eyes in the air and before he could call them back again, one Raven swooped down and grabbed the first eye and the other Raven grabbed the second eye. “Quoh! Quoh! Quoh!” they cried out with glee as they flew off. Coyote desperately called out again and again as he heard the Ravens fly away. Being completely blind, Coyote sadly exclaimed, “What a fool I was to attempt doing a thing I knew nothing about!”⁶

Coyote soon became embroiled in rage, and he frantically scrambled and crawled across the ground, eventually bumping into a patch of kinnikinnick or bearberries. He selected two of the plumpest berries and placed them in his eye sockets. With these berries in the place of his original eyes he could barely make out what was what, and he stumbled through the world trying to focus on vague, almost imperceptible shapes and forms. He soon became bruised and battered from walking into rocks and trees, and falling into holes and gullies. As Coyote paused to quench his thirst in a stream, he heard some laughing; it was Bluebird and Bluejay. Bluebird pointed at Coyote and said, “Look sister, [Coyote] is pretending to be blind, isn’t he funny?”⁷ Wisely, Bluejay admonished her sister not to pay any attention to Coyote because he was a Trickster and a bad person who had many mean tricks. Coyote launched himself towards the laughter and intentionally ran into a tree, then whimpered, playing up his injury.

Laying on his back and facing the sky, Coyote called out, “Come, little girl ... Come and see the pretty star that I see!”⁸ Being a naturally curious being, Bluebird wanted to see what Coyote was describing; however, the warnings of her sister Bluejay made her hesitant. Despite her sister’s warnings, the seductive words of Coyote coaxed Bluebird to hop a bit closer and look into the sky in search of Coyote’s bright star. In a soft gentle voice Coyote said, “I cannot show you while you are so far away. See, where I am pointing my

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finger!” With this, Bluebird hopped closer and closer, and Coyote swiftly snatched naïve Bluebird in his grasp and pulled Bluebird’s eyes from her head. He tossed them in the air and sang out, “I throw you up and you come down in!” Bluebird’s eyes lodged themselves into Coyote’s eye sockets and he taunted Bluebird as he ran off by saying, “When did you ever see a star in the sunlight?”⁹

Bluebird cried from the terror of Coyote’s assault and the resulting blindness. Bluejay gently took two of the berries she had just picked and placed them in her sister’s eye sockets. Bluejay’s act of care and love restored Bluebird’s vision; however, her being was forever altered due to the ordeal. As Coyote ran through the bush, Bluebird’s small little eyes rolled around his big eye sockets, only allowing for a glimpse of what the world was truly like. Even though Coyote had slightly improved vision, he continued to hunt for the two Ravens and his own eyes.

Today, modern tricksters are intrigued by the sound of a hāhau striking a moli, the singing of an ancestral song, or the recounting of an ancestral prayer. Their curious noses are filled with the sweet fragrance of burning sage, their so-called refined sensitivities are moved by the elegance of curvilinear designs as they perfectly move around the chin, nose, and forehead of a Māori face. Still some modern coyotes are moved by the powerful impact of perfectly balanced ovoids and u-forms. Others sit at our sacred fires and listen to the recounting of our coming-of-age ceremonies, our journeys to find our powers, helpers, and connections. These tricksters are not content to sit and observe, to admire and marvel at the beauty of our ancestral practices alive in this contemporary world. No, they observe, take notes, sketch and rehearse, and eventually they call out to us, “That is my way, not yours.”

Modern Tricksters Juggling their Eyes

This Coyote story uses a Nlaka’pamux storywork methodology that asks you to carefully examine your life, practices, and actions and determine which character you are and what lessons are revealed from this story that you need to hear. Are you like me and my colleagues – Blue-Grouse Indigenous tattoo artists, cultural tattoo practitioners, or ancestral skin markers – minding our own business and using the ancestral knowledge, practices, and transformational vision gifted to us by our ancestors? This story reveals to me the importance of who we let into our circles, being conscious of those who may be watching, and being careful what we reveal. Are you a Bluejay warning others not to pay any attention to the tricksters of this world, and when your friends or family are blinded by the violence of coyotes you help to restore them and bring them back to wholeness? Or are you Bluebird, needing to learn the lesson of being careful who you listen to and who you trust, and watching out for those seductive words?

Are you the coyote who has peeked over the top of the hill into the world of Indigenous tattooing and decided these are your ways? Be careful! One day you may join Coyote and exclaim, “What a fool I was to attempt doing a thing I knew nothing about!” Are you one of the Ravens swooping down, stealing another person’s eyes in hopes of finding the secrets of their magic? Are you the coyote who is stumbling around in the wilderness of your own deception, bumping into trees, falling into holes, and banging your head into rocks? Are you the coyote who has bearberries for eyes, trying desperately to make sense of the barely visible shapes and forms of the Indigenous world and experience? Are you the coyote who sees dimly through the self-righteous colonial project of documenting the other, using cunning words to seduce those whose curiosity is piqued by your charade into believing you are the expert? Are you the coyote who uses seductive words and insists people come ever closer to you so that you can take advantage of them, abuse them, steal their innocence, and take their vision of the world to fuel your own pursuits? Are you the coyote wandering around with eyes of another rolling around in your head, seeing the world clearly only occasionally?

Maybe you are a coyote that is not described above, or a combination of the characters found in this story. The reality is that we have all been or can be any number of these characters; the important part of this methodology is to learn the lesson you need for today and make the shift or change into alignment with who you are. Maybe you didn’t know better, maybe you are willfully ignorant, or maybe you are aware of your actions and their consequences. This story and your contemplation of it is an opportunity to shift, change, and transform. All I ask is that when you know better, you do better.

About Us, from Us

In 1840, Ellen and Reverend Elias Bond of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sailed from Boston, Massachusetts, to Honolulu, Hawaii, arriving in May 1841. This missionary family oversaw the building of the historic Kawaiaha’o Church and eventually the Kohala seminary.

The Kohala seminary, known as the Kohala Girls School, opened for its first classes in 1874 in the Kohala district of the big Island of Hawaii to educate Hawaiian women in christian living and housekeeping. After its opening, the school went through many ups and downs, closing and reopening multiple times until its final year of operations in 1956. It underwent renovations after 1999 and became the Grace Center. It is here in October of 2019 that I gathered with friends and colleagues from across the Indigenous skin-marking community for the Traditional Tattoo Festival.

This was a magical event; here we witnessed a former student of the girls school return to be marked by Hawaiian Kakau master Keone Nunes. This marking was a powerful



1. Top (left to right): Julia Mage'au Gray, Lane Wilcken, Dion Kaszas, Sarah Whalen-Lunn, Keone Nunes. Bottom row (left to right): Jody Potts-Joseph, Cudjuy Patjidres, Holly Mititquq Nordlum. Photo: Michael Conti (2019), taken at the Traditional Tattoo Festival in Kohala, HI.

testament to the transformational potential of ancestral skin marking and I am honoured to have witnessed it.

It was at this gathering, sitting in the large dining hall building of the Grace Center, that I heard a call to my heart from the words of Inupiaq ancestral skin marker Holly Mititquq Nordlum. During this presentation, Holly sat with Inupiaq traditional handpoke practitioner Sarah Whalen-Lunn and Hungwitchin traditional tattoo practitioner Jody Potts-Joseph. Holly said, “For me lately, I’ve found that I want to know about us, from us.”¹⁰

For me, Holly’s words share that the time has come for Indigenous voices to articulate Indigenous perspectives on our lives, customs, beliefs, cultures, and past and present practices. For too long, the world has been peeking over the hill at Indigenous ancestral skin marking through the omnipresent colonial eyes of the neo-primitivists, anthropologists, casual researchers, and culture vultures of the tattoo community.



Nlaka'pamux community member Ecko Aleck looks down at her freshly tattooed arm with emotion during an Nlaka'pamux Blackwork session on Shuswap Lake, BC. Photo: Billie Jean Gabriel (July 2021).

Introduction

Too often, scholars come to practitioners and Knowledge Keepers for interviews and then position themselves as the experts. Even though they came to us for the knowledge they claim to be experts in, the time has come for scholars to clearly acknowledge they are not experts in Indigenous knowledges. How does a colonizer understand what it is like to collaborate with a community member to mark their body with a design, pattern, or placement that has been dormant for one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years?

In positioning themselves or allowing others to position them as experts, academics, researchers, and scholars create categorical, theoretical, and methodological boxes around our ancestral practices. Then we as descendants look to these sources of information and find ourselves trapped in another of Coyote's tricks, trapped in a theoretical and methodological maze.

In my chapter¹¹ found in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Body Modification*, I present the words of Cecil King when he notes that:

We have been observed, noted, taped, and videoed. Our behaviors have been recorded in every possible way ... and I suppose we could learn to live with this if we had not become imprisoned in the anthropologists' words. The language that anthropologists use to explain us traps us in linguistic cages because we must explain our ways through alien hypothetical constructs and theoretical frameworks.¹²

It is through the process of doing the work that we as practitioners formulate ideas and questions and come to insights about this work. I am curious about these insights, ideas, questions, processes of knowledge creation outside the armchair, laboratory, or the position of an observer. This anthology insists on positioning the practitioner as the expert and gives space for each artist to express what they know and how they have come through the process of reviving their ancestral skin-marking practices.

Flattening Hierarchies of Authenticity

Like Bluebird in our Coyote story, we have been far too willing to offer our gifts and stories to coyotes who rehash and theorize about our practices. Then we hand over our time and our hard-earned money to purchase books and consume documentaries and television series about our practices. For far too long we have allowed ourselves to be seduced by the coaxing words of colonial coyotes who say, "Come and see the pretty star that I see!" When we hesitate because of the warnings of our relatives, the colonial coyote seductively tells us to come closer, saying, "I cannot show you while you are so far away ... See, where I am pointing my finger!" We have been programmed to mistrust our own ways, to question our peoples' knowledge. We have been convinced we need to rely on the colonizer and his experts, and their writings. We long to be whole and we look to colonizers' theories



hoping it will make us whole. The Native American poet and activist John Trudell says:

You are struggling to be who you are
You say you want to learn the old ways
Struggling to learn when all you must do
Is remember.¹³

It is time for us as descendants, now ancestors, to remember who we are. We don't need the seductive theories, philosophies, and books from the colonial coyotes. Our knowledge, our practices, the old ways are in our DNA. It's time to remember.

We struggle to break free from the linguistic cages imposed upon us by the anthropologists' words. This introduction seeks to address two linguistic cages as a way of clearing the way for the chapters that follow. The first is hinted at by Sean Mallon, senior curator of Pacific collections at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, in the blog

1. Ancestral skin marker Dion Kaszas tattoos a delicate Nlaka'pamux Blackwork collar on community member Ecco Aleck during a tattoo session in Qualicum Beach, BC. Photo: Steven Recalma (October 2022).

2. Closeup of Kaszas tattooing Nlaka'pamux Blackwork on Jamie Grismer. Photo: Wesley Wilson (October 2021)



post, “Opinion: why we should beware of the word ‘traditional.’” In this post Sean shares the words of Albert Wendt taken from an interview Sean conducted in 2008. Albert says:

I came to feel very uncomfortable with terms such as traditional, folk history, folk art ... Colonial scholars and researchers used them whenever they referred to us but not to their cultures. Such terms I concluded were part and parcel of the Euro-centric colonial vocabulary. Traditional inferred our cultures were/are so tradition-bound they were static and slow to change; that they weren't dynamic and growing and changing; that because they were slow to change and fixed in history they were “simple and easy to understand.” Traditional also had implications about how we were viewed as people even to the extent that, because we were tradition bound, we behaved out of habit and past practice and [were] slow to adapt to other ways or change our own ways, that we didn't want to think for ourselves, or were incapable of individual thinking and expression.¹⁴

I have personally struggled with this term; in the beginning of my journey into the revival of Nlaka'pamux ancestral skin marking, I used the term *traditional tattoo practitioner*, then moved to *cultural tattoo practitioner* and today use the phrase *ancestral skin marker*.



The thoughts of Albert Wendt have resonated with me for a long time now; however, through conversation, reading, and contemplation I have come to understand tradition is yet another linguistic binary that seeks to separate us from each other and ourselves. This binary becomes evident in the mind of the early colonizer when we substitute uncivilized and civilized in place of traditional and contemporary. The binary of traditional and contemporary is the latest cog in the juggernaut that is the Doctrine of Discovery.¹⁵ In the blog post “Out of Line: Nicholas Galanin Rejects the Traditional/Contemporary Binary,” he shares:

Early assertions that we were primitive, uncivilized people in need of white saviors and religion were used to advocate for our physical destruction. When such destruction was not possible, efforts turned toward destroying our cultures, removing us from the land, dividing our communities and forcibly removing our children. Today, due to the partial success of these violent and sustained efforts to remove, disperse, and dilute our cultures and communities, the attempt to control and erase us is based on grading and categorizing how closely we match the characters written into settler accounts of our ancestors.¹⁶

In many ways we have swallowed the gradual civilization and enfranchisement pill of the Indian Act of 1857; we use colonial yardsticks to measure and evaluate each other. Here is where traditional/contemporary reverts back to uncivilized/civilized.

This text is a broadening and development of the ideas I presented in the exhibition I co-curated with Mireille Bourgeois, *True Tribal: Contemporary Expressions of Ancestral Tattoo Practices*, which opened at the Museum of Vancouver in March of 2024.



In the curatorial essay for this exhibition, I can see that I was struggling with this concept when I stated:

Images captured at *True Tribal*, an exhibition co-curated by Dion Kaszas and Mireille Bourgeois held at the Museum of Vancouver in BC (March to September 2024).

1. Title panel invites guests into the first room of the show. Photo: Josh Doherty.

2. Two life-size, full-body portraits hang in the middle of the main gallery space. Photo: Josh Doherty.

3. Curators stand in the middle of the main gallery space. Photo: Josh Doherty.

4. Beautifully embroidered and beaded 1870s buckskin Plains Cree shirt displayed in the exhibition. Photo: Dion Kaszas.

Often, Indigenous tattooing is associated with the term “traditional,” and with the word traditional comes the rubric of authenticity. The authenticity rubric divides, separates, and builds hierarchies from our identities and ancestral practices. Generally, in the Indigenous tattoo world, “tradition” is associated with using hand tools. In this exhibition, the argument isn’t that “traditional” tools are not important. It is to bring the tattoo machine forward and to insist that it is a “traditional” Indigenous tool. In this exhibition, I wish to flatten and transform the authenticity hierarchy associated with methods of tattooing from a hierarchy to a circle. It allows room for each practice, nation, practitioner and community member to create and wear their marks without shame or guilt. This circle allows each method to influence each other. It permits each practitioner to speak their ancestors’ ancestral visual language on the world’s bodies in the way that best suits them.¹⁷

This paragraph brings forward the second linguistic cage imposed on us by the colonial coyotes of anthropology, christianity, and the imaginations of the colonial creatives of yesteryear.

As I move into this second linguistic cage, I feel it is important to define how I am using the word authentic. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines authentic as “real or genuine.”¹⁸ This is the way that the word authentic is used when referring to Indigenous people’s identities and also when it comes to what tools and technology are being used when engaging in ancestral skin marking. It is important to ascertain whether the person wielding the tools has rights, relationship, and responsibilities to the tools. In other words, are they from the nation, community, or culture that birthed this technology into reality? Once this question is confirmed in the affirmative, we then move into the second question, which to me is the question of whether it is appropriate, helpful, or useful for us to demarcate and separate ourselves as contemporary people living today into “authentic” and “inauthentic” in our ancestral and cultural practices. There are too many colonial coyotes in western tattoo shops and conventions using Indigenous ancestral tools and technology. Don’t be tricked into receiving marks from one of these charlatans. Honour our ancestors and your ancestors by being marked by someone who has rights, relationship, and responsibility to the marks you are receiving. When I use the term contemporary what I mean is that we are people alive today, and the Cree person or Nlaka’pamux person who is alive today is the most authentic, true, and real. These are our authentic selves. When I say contemporary, I mean we are the ones today reaching across time and holding hands with the past, present, and future, ensuring that the ancestors are honoured, and that those yet to come will inherit a world worth inheriting.

As I have begun to write for this publication and work through this introduction, I can see the words of Nicholas Galanin as inspiration, and I have to honour how my perspective



1. Curator Dion Kaszas addresses the audience at the opening of the *True Tribal* exhibition at the Museum of Vancouver in Vancouver, BC. Photo: Scott Alexander (March 28 2024). Used with permission from the Museum of Vancouver.

2. Indigenous tattoo artists Dion Kaszas and Tristen Jenni Sanderson prepare to record a podcast episode in Edmonton, AB. Photo: Billie Jean Gabriel (2023).

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has changed. I have had some intuitions and insights about this topic before; however, it is beginning to solidify why I think it is so important. Galanin says:

This line placed before me when presenting this conversation of “tradition versus contemporary” may seem fixed and solid to those who invent, believe, and enforce it. For me this line moves, disappearing and reappearing, shifting constantly in attempts to contain or disrupt the flow of creation and culture through categorization — attempting to control and exert power through variable exclusion or inclusion. Like colonial national borders cutting through land and people who have lived here longer than those invented lines, these lines drawn through creative production are also an attempt to control. I actively resist the authority of settler culture to define who I am or what I do. I resist the internalization of these lines and division in Indigenous communities, and work to affirm connection with land among all living things in everything I do.¹⁹

The line of demarcation in the conversation around traditional/contemporary and authentic/inauthentic is similar to the imaginary lines drawn on maps that demarcate





colonial borders. This anthology works to flatten hierarchies of authenticity and makes the firm statement that machine tattooing has just as much validity in the revival of ancestral and customary tattooing. I am not interested in the exotification of our contemporary practices; I am not interested in the continued repeating of the Doctrine of Discovery, manifest destiny, or terra nullius. Each of these sentiments play out in the world of ancestral skin marking and Indigenous tattooing in a variety of ways.

Gathering Voices to Find Intersubjective Understanding of Ancestral Skin Marking

This collection asks a simple question: What is contemporary ancestral skin marking for us and our communities? As the editor of this collection, I seek to answer this question using the Nlaka'pamux weaving methodology I developed in my graduate thesis, with larger portions of this section being taken from that document.²⁰ My people, the Nlaka'pamux, have been known as master weavers throughout history, and it is from this tradition of weaving that this Indigenous methodology comes. Shirley Sterling says, "The concept of basket weaving was given to the Nlaka'pamux by a sacred event. A Nlaka'pamux boy went to the moon and met an ancient couple there who taught him how to weave many things including baskets. When he returned home he taught Nlaka'pamux how to weave."²¹ I seek to weave together

1. Nlaka'pamux tattoo artist Dion Kaszas inks the back of Megan Samms during a Nlaka'pamux Blackwork tattoo session in the Codroy Valley, NL. Photo: Carolina Andrade (2022).

2. Nlaka'pamux Blackwork tattoo collaborator stands proudly showing their upper thigh and bum tattoo against a wall divider at HFX Tattoo Company in Bedford, NS. Photo: Dion Kaszas (2023).

3. Nlaka'pamux Blackwork full back piece completed in two days at HFX Tattoo Company in Bedford, NS. Photo: Dion Kaszas (2024).



Nlaka'pamux tattoo artist Dion Kaszas tattoos ripple patterns on Nlaka'pamux community member Ecko Aleck's leg during an Nlaka'pamux Blackwork session on Shuswap Lake, BC. Photo: Billie Jean Gabriel (July 2021).



narratives from ancestral skin markers across the globe into a cohesive knowledge basket that provides a glimpse into the question: What is contemporary ancestral skin marking today?

As an Nlaka’pamux and Interior Salish sovereign knowledge activist, I take seriously the way that we as a community have in the past and into the present made major decisions about important questions. We simply bring the question we have in mind to every person who has a stake in the actions we are about to take to join into a discussion; this was done by sitting in a circle and asking for all relevant voices to be heard.²² In the summer of 2011, I was first exposed to this collective decision-making process formulated as a research methodology as I entered the course *Examining an Indigenous Methodology: En’owkinwixw* with Dr. Jeannette Armstrong. In this course, I was introduced to En’owkinwixw, as the course title suggests, as a research methodology modelled after a collective decision-making process. Armstrong states, “The requirement of en’owkinwixw is to take the responsibility to be informed by differing views.”²³ This collection takes this imperative seriously and has sought out as many voices as reasonably possible for the scope of this project. Each person was asked to contribute their

1. The featured artists from the *Body Language* exhibition stand in front a beautiful mountain in Whistler, BC. From left to right: Nakkita Trimble, Corey Bulpitt, Nahaan, Dion Kaszas, and Dean Hunt. Photo: Aaron Leon (2017).

2. Hawaiin Kakau master Keone Nunes and a client share a moment after the completion of a hand-tapped tattoo done at the Traditional Tattoo Festival in Kohala, HI. Photo: Michael Conti (2019).

3. Nlaka’pamux community member Simon Ross post-tattoo in Lac Le Jeune, BC. Photo: Wesley Wilson (2022).

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voice to answer the question: What is contemporary ancestral skin marking for you and your community in the spirit of “about us, from us”? Some of the voices in this collection may contradict each other and even contradict this introduction and the sentiments it shares. This is needed and encouraged, for it is through the gathering of as many voices as possible that we come to the fullest understanding we can.

Why am I the Guide?

My name is Dion Kaszas. I am a Hungarian, Métis, and Nlaka’pamux ancestral skin marker and podcaster. I have been at the forefront of reviving Indigenous tattooing in Canada since 2012.

Within this role, I train, mentor, and teach the next wave of revivalists.

My work has been featured in documentary films, newspapers, and scholarly and popular articles. In January 2024, I launched the Transformative Marks podcast, which journeys through the world of Indigenous tattooing, amplifying the voices of ancestral skin markers, Indigenous tattoo artists, cultural tattoo practitioners, and those who wear the marks.

In 2019, I began developing Nlaka’pamux Blackwork, a contemporary customary practice rooted in my ancestors’ visual language and worldview, and my understanding of ceremonies that celebrate and enhance the lives of all human beings.

Since the defence of my MA thesis in 2018 I have written chapters and articles for both popular and academic publications. I am one of a handful of contributing Indigenous researchers for *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Body Modification*. I have just completed my book *Nlaka’pamux Visual Dictionary: A Knowledge Basket*, which includes 2031 designs, symbols, and motifs from my nations with design, description, and interpretations for well over half of the designs.



In 2018, I co-curated the exhibition *Body Language: Reawakening Cultural Tattooing of the Northwest* in collaboration with the Bill Reid Gallery in Vancouver, BC. This exhibition was focused on the revival of ancestral tattooing of nations from the cultural area of the Northwest Coast, specifically the Haida, Tlingit, Nisga'a, and Heiltsuk.

In 2021, I opened my first solo exhibition *Nlaka'pamux Blackwork: Tattooing for Transformation, Healing, and Adornment*, in the ROGUE Gallery in the Eastern Edge Gallery. This exhibition looked at my work creating Nlaka'pamux Blackwork as the next step in the resurgence of my ancestral embodied mark-making practice using the modern electric tattoo machine, pigments, and techniques. This exhibition included two of my collaborators' internal and external transformations in receiving Nlaka'pamux Blackwork. It is a group of photographic prints, a sculptural piece, paintings, and a single-channel video installation.

In March of 2024, *True Tribal: Contemporary Expressions of Ancestral Tattoo Practices* opened at the Museum of Vancouver. This exhibition looked to the work of contemporary Indigenous tattoo artists reaching back into their ancestral visual lexicon, creating contemporary embodied artistic masterpieces on the bodies of their clients, collaborators, and community members.

This anthology emerges from over a decade of relationship building through my work as a leader in the first wave of revival in Canada. This book emerges from my personal observations of what is missing for us as practitioners and how we are represented, how our voices are edited and shaped to fit a standard way of speaking, how our work is positioned in a way that supports the editors and the publisher's agenda, and how the voices of the Indigenous experts are not always heard after the refining process.

This book and this introduction are a call to publications, institutions, and universities to start positioning Indigenous voices as the experts of our traditions and practices. The time has come to put away old ways of doing things and to position Indigenous voices in relationship to Indigenous practices and knowledges. This collection assumes that Indigenous Peoples have the ability and capacity to possess knowledge and that each author is a knowledge carrier. I am no longer interested in reading books that have Indigenous Peoples as objects of knowledge to be colonized into the curriculum vitae of non-Indigenous scholars.

Before You Continue

As stated, my people, the Nlaka'pamux, have been known as master weavers throughout history. As an editor, I have endeavored to construct this collection from this tradition of weaving.²⁴ As you venture into this book, you will notice that it does not flow as might be expected from a colonially configured collection, and that many chapters are formatted slightly different from others in the collection. This collection, like our basket making, starts at a central point, and as you weave your way through each chapter,

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your understanding will begin to coil up and around the central question of this collection: What is contemporary ancestral skin marking for us and our communities?

I have intentionally formulated the central question of this collection in this way to privilege the autonomy of each author to decide what should be included and what should be left out. My curiosity as an editor and reader, hoping to learn more about a particular topic shared by one of the authors, has had no bearing on this collection's contents. It is important to remember that our curiosities and desires are our own, and we should respect each author's and community's sovereignty and boundaries to decide what is essential today and for the future. This collection is an archive of each community where we are in the present moment and a reminder that it is our responsibility as members of Indigenous communities to imagine where we are going in the future. Each chapter is written specifically for the community and culture it has emerged from, for we, the authors of this collection, as descendants of our ancestors, have felt called to share what we have for reasons beyond this realm. In some cases, it is beyond our comprehension.

As you read each chapter, if you are not from that community or culture, you are reminded that you are a guest into the beauty of the treasures we share. These treasures are and remain the property of each culture. Be careful if you are tempted to follow in the footsteps of the colonial coyotes of the past, to steal, possess, use, be inspired by, or any other way take these treasures. This sentence is a warning that these things are not from this world, and we cannot protect you if you take what is not yours. If you take, one day, you will call out, "What a fool I was to attempt doing a thing I knew nothing about!" Readers who are not from the community or culture of the artist authoring each chapter are not welcome to use it as a resource for your inspiration shelf or reference for your next flash sheet. Remember you are an invited guest to this collection, and you are not welcome to treat it as your land and your intellectual property. We are not vanishing, we are not dying races, we are alive, we are thriving, and we will be the future!



1. Close-up photo of a woven cedar root basket shows how each row of weaving supports the next layer, creating a strong basket. Photo: Dion Kaszas (2014).

As you can see from the photograph of a coiled cedar root basket taken at the Lytton Museum and Archives as part of my research, a cedar root basket starts at a single point and grows from that place. Each coil is supported and connected to the next one by strands of cedar. This collection is similar in that each chapter supports the one next to it on either side and, in turn, helps build the support for the knowledge basket you are constructing from this collection. Each paragraph, photograph, illustration, quote, and caption coils, circles, and weaves with this book's other components to create a basket of knowledge.

In *Baskets Carrying a Culture*, Karen Petkau describes the process of creating a coiled basket:

Wrapping either bundles of fine cedar splints ... with the smooth split root of the cedar tree through a process of whip stitching or overcast sewing which lashes the coils together. As the coils are laid around in the shape desired, they are wrapped ... An awl is used to split apart the lower splint, which was wrapped on the previous turn.²⁵

In the photo you can see the central bundles of cedar splints that create the foundations of the basket. In this collection, the central bundles are each author's contributions, thoughts, ideas, experiences, and community work to reinvigorate their cultures. It is important to remember that, like each splint, each author and community is separate and distinct from the other authors in this collection. Each chapter is an assertion of the author's intellectual sovereignty.

This is why no attempt has been made to erase or minimize contradictory ideas or conflicting testimony. The bundle of individual cedar splints reminds me that our strength comes from our individuality and differences as individuals, communities, and cultures. In this collection, I am more interested in hearing about our differences than our similarities. Our similarities are part of what helps bind us, but the foundation is found in our peculiarities. I have also not made any attempt to force authors to translate every utterance from their Indigenous languages into English. Neither have I attempted to move their chapter's cadence, substance, format, or flow to fit my tastes. Forcing authors to fit into standardized title structures and formats is a form of intellectual colonization. I am not interested in enacting a colonial structure on the knowledge of my friends and colleagues.

The variety of ways each chapter is constructed is a testament to the foundational land principles and philosophies that have inspired our oral and visual languages. These differences are partly due to our ancestors' experiences living in our lands, territories, and geographies, which have manifested unique languages, worldviews, subsistence strategies, and logic of understanding. Keep these things in mind as you read; do not impose your framework of knowledge on the authors you are reading. I suggest you read to understand what we say, feel, and emote. Good luck as you construct your knowledge basket from this collection.

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NOTES

- 1 This telling of the Interior Salish story “Coyote Juggles His Eyes,” is a composite re-telling by the author from four sources from the Nlaka’pamux, Secwépemc, and Syilx, including: *The Shuswap and Mythology Of The Thompson Indians* by James Teit, *Coyote Stories* by Mourning Dove, and *Shuswap Stories: Collected 1971–1975* by Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy.
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- 3 Mourning Dove and Heister Dean Guie, *Coyote Stories* (Bison Books, 1990), 141.
- 4 Dove, *Coyote Stories*, 141.
- 5 Dove, *Coyote Stories*, 142.
- 6 James Alexander Teit, *Mythology of the Thompson Indians* (AMS Press, 1975), 633.
- 7 Dove, *Coyote Stories*, 143.
- 8 Dove, *Coyote Stories*, 143.
- 9 Dove, *Coyote Stories*, 144.
- 10 Dion Kaszas, “Indigenous Tattoo Artist Travel Vlog to the Traditional Tattoo Festival 2019 in Kohala Hawaii,” YouTube, December 28, 2023, 24:47, youtu.be/7BPsMVScdC8?si=jFCDmdE_3bcvmYie.
- 11 Dion Kaszas, “Nlaka’pamux Skin Markings (British Columbia, Canada): Past Significance and Current Efforts to Document, Preserve, and Update Its Ancestral Meaning,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Body Modification*, eds. Franz Manni and Francesco d’Errico (Oxford, 2023), doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197572528.013.39.
- 12 Cecil King, “Here Come the Anthros,” in *Indian and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria Jr., and the Critique of Anthropology*, eds. Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman (University of Arizona Press, 1997), 125.
- 13 John Trudell, *Lines from a Mined Mind: The Words of John Trudell* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2008), 10.
- 14 Sean Mallon, “Opinion: why we should beware of the word ‘traditional.’” Te Papa Blog, *Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*, December 20, 2016, blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2016/12/20/opinion-why-we-should-beware-of-the-word-traditional/?cn-reloaded=1
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- 16 Nicholas Galanin, “Out of Line: Nicholas Galanin Rejects the Traditional/ Contemporary Binary,” Walker Reader Blog, March 26, 2018, walkerart.org/magazine/nicholas-galanin-indigenous-art-contemporary-traditional.
- 17 Dion Kaszas and Mireille Bourgeois, *Contemporary Indigenous Tattoo Practices: The Embodiment of Ancestral Knowledge, Wisdom and Resilience* (Museum of Vancouver, 2024), museumofvancouver.ca/true-tribal-curatorial-essay.
- 18 “Authentic,” *Britannica Dictionary*, accessed January 16, 2025, www.britannica.com/dictionary/authentic.
- 19 Galanin, “Out of Line.”
- 20 Dion Kaszas, “Embodying the Past in the Present for the Future: Practicing, Supporting, and Highlighting Indigenous Tattoo Revivals Through Indigenous and Creative Research Methodologies” (MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2018), 14–16.
- 21 Shirley Sterling, “The Grandmother Stories: Oral Tradition and the Transmission of Culture” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1997), 49.
- 22 James Alexander Teit, *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia* (Nicola Valley Museum Archives Association, 1900; reprint), 289.
- 23 Jeannette Armstrong, “Constructing Indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan Oraliture and Tmixwcentrism” (Doctoral Dissertation, Greifswald, 2009), 185, d-nb.info/1027188737/34
- 24 Kaszas, “Embodying the Past,” 13.
- 25 Karen Petaku, “Baskets Carrying a Culture: The Distinctive Regional Styles of Basketmaking Nations in the Pacific Northwest,” *Midden* 34, 4 (2003): 5, <https://www.tol.ca/en/salishan-place/resources/Explore/Exhibits/virtual-presentations/baskets/carrying-a-culture11.pdf>