

# The Weaving is Us: Decolonizing the Tools for the Feminist Imagination

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## Abstract

This article documents weaving as a decolonizing epistemic tool for feminist futures that emerges from the work of our collective – the Feminist Imaginary Research Network. As a collective of feminist adult educators who work in both the academy and women’s museums, weaving challenges the centrality of rationality over other ways of knowing and being. Following the teachings of Indigenous women thinkers and artists, including the work of some of our members, we frame weaving as an epistemic tool and aesthetic language for future-making. Weaving acts upon us as a mirror of our history, as an antidote against the supremacy of rationality, and as a tool for collective projects of transformation. As a decolonizing tool, weaving gathers us around Indigenous women’s traditional knowledge, but also confronts us with the question of our obligations when the teachings of weaving have been offered to us – what is our responsibility to the work, to each other, and to this emergent knowledge?

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**Keywords:** Coast Salish weaving; decolonial pedagogies; feminist imaginary; settler colonialism; heteropatriarchy; gender justice.

## Introduction

When we teach our weaving, we honour our ancestors and let people know that we are here today, not just surviving but thriving. We went into hiding for so many years, and now it is time to share and to educate.—CHEPXIMIYA SIYAM’ Chief Janice George, Guest Curator

(Janice George, 2021)

Chief Janice George’s words epitomize not only the role of weaving as traditional knowledge in identity-building and healing, but also, it signals its power to imagine otherwise futures. Colonial attempts to eliminate Indigenous culture by confiscating regalia and mechanizing weaving techniques that originally involved hand spinning, dyeing, and weaving, partially succeeded, dispossessing Indigenous women of their birthright, including weaving practices that incorporated traditional knowledge around governance, culture, and spirituality, and included positive economic and community benefits (Tepper et al., 2017). Today, Coast Salish weavers are revitalizing and reclaiming this critical practice and knowledge.

We propose that weaving is an epistemic tool for feminist futures through knowledge production and future-making. We situate weaving in the context of the Feminist Imaginary Research Network (FIRN). This feminist collective gathers feminist adult arts-based educators, researchers, and women’s museum practitioners from around the world - Canada, United States, Argentine, Costa Rica, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Albania, South Africa, India, and Nigeria. Women’s museums and arts-based practices are the places and tools the collective uses to mobilize the feminist imaginary (Clover et al., 2022). The collective is committed to varied forms of feminist practice inside and outside of academia that provide opportunities for community-led work, feminist activism, and feminist care. One question at the centre of our work is: How can we move towards a decolonized gender-just world? In other words, how can we imagine and create an alternative decolonized future? The collective acknowledges our different and unique positionalities and the complexities of this question in a context where feminism has been accused of complicity with colonialism (Lugones, 2010; Purewal and Ung Loh, 2021; Ramos & Roberts, 2021).

Among the FIRN’s members are the authors of this piece: Dorothea Harris and Thea Harris, mother and daughter, and Claudia Diaz-Diaz. Dorothea and Thea are from a family of Coast Salish artists in Snuneymuxw First Nation, an Indigenous community on Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada. Dorothea is also a Ph.D. candidate who works in post-secondary education and Thea is a Master's student who works in Indigenous language revitalization. Claudia is a Latina scholar, educator, and

settler in Coast Salish territories. We bring our positionalities into conversation following the work of other Indigenous and women of color feminists, as we further elaborate. As Simpson (2017) reminds us, knowledge is relational. Each author has contributed equally to this manuscript, and we do this work together as an approach to epistemic justice in which we see the world in a new light through the eyes of our companions. In this way, we aim to replace the centrality of Eurocentric notions of rationality with Indigenous concepts of relationality (Blackstock, 2011; Wilson, 2008) in knowledge production.

Grounded in Coast Salish teachings, the future we envision through weaving builds on alliances between Indigenous and settler women who acknowledge the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy and gender-based violence (Arvin et al., 2013; Green, 2007; Mendoza, 2015). As a system of oppression, settler colonialism has displaced Indigenous Peoples and imposed a gender binary that diminished Indigenous women's knowledge and roles in Indigenous governance structures. We start by recognizing the pervasive nature of settler colonialism and its continuing role in erasing Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and knowledge production, to avoid celebratory and tokenistic forms of recognition that center Indigenous culture without addressing land restitution, sovereignty, and decolonization. The field of feminist studies has been complicit with the modern-colonial episteme when it avoids "the dismantling of its tools and edifice as a necessary step for epistemic change" (Purewal & Ung Loh, 2021, p. 1). If feminists put their imagination to work without interrogating the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy, they will fail at creating the future they wish. For us, decolonizing the tools for feminist futures means uncovering the colonial structures, narratives, and spaces that inhabit women's imagination and recentring Indigenous ways of knowing and being in those spaces.

To engage our feminist practice in the decolonizing of the tools for the feminist imagination, we now turn to the teachings that weaving as a visual language brings to us. We intend to be guided by the weaving rather than by what we call our reason. We are wary not to create false binaries that situate reason on one hand and something else like intuition on the other. Instead, our attention is on what we can learn from the practice of weaving as an epistemic tool as it has been framed and used by Indigenous Peoples across the globe, and Coast Salish Peoples in particular.

In August 2022, the Feminist Imaginary Research Network held a conference called The Feminist Imaginary: Creative Pedagogies and Methods for Gender Justice and Change. Dorothea and Thea travelled from Victoria, Canada to Lancashire, UK, where the conference took place, with looms, wool, and all the materials to demonstrate weaving as an Indigenous feminist aesthetic work and cultural revitalization and reclamation practice. As we further elaborate through the following passages, the weaving presented itself as an unexpected gift confronting the collective with the question: What are the collective's responsibilities to this generous gesture? We undertake this question not as a romantic invitation to experiment with ourselves and arrive at common better futures; instead, we aspire to do justice to the gift offered in a spirit of reciprocity, by being open to decentering the mind to tune in to our desires for a healthy decolonial future (Tuck, 2009).

While we draw on Coast Salish weaving in settler colonial Canada, the insights proposed are not limited to this context. Decolonizing our minds is a practice that must be connected to place, and the place where we situate our work brings different futurity projects into being, depending on where these projects occur. As a collective that gathers women from around the globe, we acknowledge that 'internationalism' (understood as a political principle of solidarity) and "our local place-based existences are intimately intertwined" (Simpson, 2017, p. 57). Endeavoring to make sense of how Indigenous and feminist internationalism continue to be situated in our distinctive geopolitical contexts, we are drawing on the Coast Salish teaching of Nuts'a'maat which "teaches us that we are all one" (Thomas, 2018, p. 26).

### ***Weaving as a gift: "It belongs to all of you."***

Dorothea didn't grow up with weaving, as many Coast Salish aesthetic and cultural practices either went underground or were almost lost due to the impacts of colonization, and it has only been revitalized in their family in the last few years. Her relationship with weaving began when she was

engaged in work as a manager of education and programs in a local Indigenous community, and she had partnered with the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC), which offered weaving classes as a method to revitalize traditional parenting practices. Dorothea saw the profound impact that Coast Salish weaving had on the community, observing how the weaving acted as a teacher of embodied learning and traditional knowledge.

Thea had always been artistic and interested in culturally-based practices, so she asked if she could participate in the weaving classes, and the community welcomed her. She took to it immediately, quickly learning the spinning and weaving process. Moreover, the weaving often took her on a journey, teaching her new patterns and designs, revealing things about herself that she wasn't aware of and bringing back old teachings. She started studying books on weaving, looking at historic weavings in the museum, talking to weavers and watching weavers on YouTube. She developed a passion for it. In Dorothea's words, watching Thea, and others in the Nation, it was like the weaving was inside of them, in their DNA, and it was being brought back to life. Since then, Thea has taught weaving in schools and in various youth programs.

Dorothea invited Thea to present *Facilitating Uy'skwuluwun: Indigenous Feminist Aesthetic Work as Cultural Revitalization* with her at the conference. The plan was that Dorothea would share her PowerPoint presentation on weaving as a pedagogy that supports cultural revitalization and the embodiment of teachings such as uy'skwuluwun – "to be of a good mind and heart" (Thomas, 2005, p. 249), and Thea would do a weaving demonstration while Dorothea was presenting. Afterwards, Claudia would present on *Decolonial Feminist Pedagogies and Artistic Production*. In preparation, the three of them briefly discussed the possibility of Thea continuing to weave as Claudia presented as well.



On the day of the presentation, what was initially planned as a weaving demonstration became a form of documentation or record of the knowledge production process women were participating in and contributing to. After the morning presentations wrapped up, Thea moved with her loom and materials toward the back of the room next to our graphic note-taker (Nicola Dickson), where they could gather a full perspective of the rest of the conference, taking in the thoughts, ideas and energies

of each presenter and incorporating them in their work. The collective's members had varied experiences with weaving as well as other forms of aesthetic practices, so they felt attracted to come to the back of the room and contemplate Thea's weaving and learn from her. Quite literally, Thea's weaving felt like it was covering us with her textile – blanketing the room. For Coast Salish people, this is a form of protection.

At the end of the conference, Thea shared the meaning of the weaving, offering it to us as a gift: “I don't think it is mine; I think it belongs to all of you.” Thea passed it over to our collective leads to be held and shared by them as a representation of our collective and documentation of the conference and our time together.

## The two sides of the weaving

The weaving offers a story through, what Thea calls, the two sides of the weaving: the one that is most often perceived, the front side of the weaving, and the one that is woven behind that tells another part of the story. Elders will often approach a piece of art, like a weaving, and flip it over to see what is on the other side. The weaving presented to the collective offers a story in the present moment, what we can see and touch, grounded in the teaching of Coast Salish weaving techniques and practices, and the back side that represents what is happening in the spiritual realm – the ancestral connection. The weaver brings those two stories together, almost as if they were two worlds woven together. The messages at the front and back of this gifted textile are important to decipher.

Weavings have a life of their own. Coast Salish weaver Chief Janice George, of the Squamish Nation, elaborates on the life of woven blankets: “You should think about blankets as merged objects. They are alive because they exist in the spirit world... they are part of the weaver; they are part of the wearer” (Tepper et al., 2017, p. xiii). Thea explains how her weaving took on a life of its own:

When I first started, I created a plan, but the plan got totally flipped on its head quite literally. I was weaving from the top down intending for this to be the top and quite quickly I realized it needed to be flipped so I feel that this has happened here in a way, there are a lot of flips in the kind of stories we tell or the way we tell them – and a lot has flipped for me, so having that kind of flip [in the weaving], I was shocked to see that come forward - not my intention.

Informed by Indigenous Elders' oral history and stories, weaving has been used to document their laws and systems of governance and had considerable trade value. For example, treasured goat hair blankets were used as standardized currency as well as objects that represented wealth and status (Tepper et al., 2017). Thea highlights the value of documentation as she presents the weaving to us:

In our culture, as you may know, we didn't have a written language, but my grandfather says, we have a visual language. All of our stories were visually depicted. We can look at a totem pole or a weaving and know the story of that place or the peoples who live there, so I feel that this weaving is very much a story of what happened here [at the conference] over the last several days.

Weaving, particularly blankets, has also been central to Coast Salish culture for its ceremonial and spiritual relevance. As Tepper and colleagues (2017) document, Squamish Elder Lena Jacobs (1910 to 2008) explained that robes and blankets provided spiritual protection for the leaders of their communities from the “negative thoughts that came from enemies or strangers” (pp. xvii-xviii). Today's leaders describe wearing a woven blanket as giving them a sense of “strength and focus and a feeling of calmness” (Tepper, 2017, pp. xvii-xviii).

It is in the spiritual value of the weaving, where the gift of the Coast Salish textile resides. As Tepper et al. (2017) reminds us: “Every aspect of Salish textile production is bound by an awareness of the spirit world and a respect for the Ancestral gifts of knowledge” (pp. 1-2). Traditional teachings highlight the power of woven garments, particularly their importance in spiritual protection. They also emphasize the responsibilities of the weaver and the obligations of the wearer. Weaving a blanket is seen as an act of spiritual responsibility in which the weaver is a channel of the ancestor's company

and protection and both the weaver and the wearer's obligations, including honouring the traditional knowledge and carrying themselves with uy'skwuluwun (a good heart and mind), are conferred through the gift.



The Salish worldview understands that robes and blankets already exist in the spirit world and it is the weaver who brings them into the human realm as we further elaborate through Thea's gift of the weaving. In a way, the weaving doesn't belong to, or is produced only by the weaver. Many people

have spoken of feeling their grandmothers or great-grandmothers near them and of having their hands guided during the creation of the work. Thea reflects:

This bottom piece was really energetic. This was the first day of the conference. I didn't mean to weave this. It was just what came forward and it was high vibration with lots and lots of energy and even though it was kind of the beginning when I first started weaving, because it is now flipped it is at the end as well. That kind of high energy is very representative of what has happened up to today.

At the beginning of Dorothea's and Thea's presentation/demonstration, Thea had handed out small pieces of wool to each of the participants so that they could both connect with the fibre and learn thigh-spinning, a basic form of twisting the wool into weavable strands by rolling it on your thigh. Several of the participants became very engaged in the activity, with one participant saying that she would use the piece as an exhibit in her women's museum and another one giving her strand to Thea to be used in the weaving that she was creating. Notably, the only spun wool that was given to Thea came from this woman who later became quite ill and could not participate in the rest of the conference, but according to Thea, she was still there as her work, her energy, was woven in.

In this way, the weaving transcended the individual, containing ancestral knowledge and wisdom, standing as witness to the powerful work that each woman is doing around the world in the present, and channeling their energies to signal what a decolonial future can be. The art and symbolism in the weaving became a metaphor for the weaving together of past, present and future, and the weaving together of a feminist collective. Moreover, this took place on both a physical and spiritual plane, with the potential for the energy in the weaving – the energy of each participant, to guide our future work together.

### ***When a gift is offered: Our obligations***

As Jimmy and Andreotti (2021) poignantly argue: “In modern/colonial contexts and modes of relationality, the gifts of Indigenous Peoples are often perceived as part of settlers' colonial entitlements” (p. 6). For us, as a collective, Jimmy's and Andreotti's (2021) provocation begs the question: “What are our obligations when a gift is offered?” (p. 6). The question is not only about reciprocity, but most importantly, about the responsibility to work towards decolonial futures that appreciate this gift and embrace everything that comes with it.

We began this paper by stating our commitment with feminist imaginaries that work towards a decolonized gender-just world. Weaving as an epistemic tool offers teachings that Indigenous women weavers reclaim to mitigate and subvert the impact of colonialism on their lives, communities, knowledges, and governance. In this sense, by receiving the gift of weaving, we are compelled to understand the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy to build alliances that acknowledge, rather than overlook, our differences. Thea illuminates:

The decorative black motif here is ... actually a black butterfly, and I was questioning, what is that about? I've never seen a black butterfly coming through my weaving... again I did a bit of research and I found that for some people the black butterfly is a symbol of death, but for other cultures and other people it is a symbol of rebirth, so again, I thought it was very significant. I kind of chuckled to myself and I said maybe it is the end of the patriarchy and the rebirth of the matriarchy (laughs).

Coast Salish peoples are matriarchal, as the traditional teachings and cultural knowledge are passed down through the women (Thomas, 2018). As Thea, Dorothea, and Claudia reconvened to discuss and reflect on the weaving's story, Thea brought up that the weaving offers a story in search of cultural perpetuity (Blackstock, 2011) grounded in self and community actualization and the impact on future generations. Cultural perpetuity is aligned with the desire of Indigenous feminists to return to matriarchal societies where connections to land and identity are one. Returning to matriarchal societies after colonization is a vision of a future that demands reconfiguring colonial gender divisions that marginalize Indigenous women's contributions to governance, laws, leadership, spirituality, and relationship with the land. Importantly, matriarchal knowledges bring up the question of reparations for land dispossession and Indigenous epistemic erasure.

The gift of weaving also confronts us as a collective to center our work on reparations, land restitution and sovereignty in ways that do not happen on the same terms that colonialism has predicated. Rematriation brings a decolonial intention through the restoration of matriarchal authority grounded in Indigenous law, meaning that restitution of lands is not enough, but it must be accompanied by material and spiritual reparations (Maracle, 1996). One story that is brought to life through the weaving is about rematriation as an “embodied practice of recovery and return and a sociopolitical mode of resurgence and refusal” (Gray, 2022, p. 1). The work of the collective – in the written word as well as in the curation of collections in women’s museums – has refused heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and dispossession. What else must we refuse and in what terms? Furthermore, what can we embrace?

## The weaving is us

The two sides of the weaving show us that embodying our imagination challenges the centrality of rationality and centres the material and spiritual realms of knowledge production for the feminist imagination. Dorothea asks us to consider a crucial question: what will we do with the work our feminist collective does? What are the steps moving forward as we theorize and find ways of enacting the feminist imagination and decolonial feminist futures? As the weaving has been passed to us, it is our role to pass on and share the knowledge that has been embodied in the weaving, the lived experience and wisdom of the women in the collective, to the next generation. The question ahead is how we become responsible for making our imagination real by passing on the knowledge offered by the weaving and the weavers that came before us to those who will come after.

Now that we as a collective have received the gift of weaving, we are compelled to reflect on these questions: 1) How can we as a collective imagine a future where we are responsible for ensuring that reparations are made, renewal is protected, and cultural perpetuity is possible? 2) How can we, as feminist academics, educators, and practitioners, commit to a decolonial feminist future grounded in Indigenous theorizing? As we have elaborated, weaving revealed an essential teaching about the centrality of spirituality and the renewal of cycles. The weaving flipped itself, and the energetic red design that was embodied in the weaving at the beginning of the conference subsequently became the end of the weaving, so the energy became cyclical – both beginning and end, propelling us forward towards cultural perpetuity. The work at the end of the conference became the beginning of our journey together – the practice yet-to-come, guided by the gift of the weaving. In this sense, a decolonial feminist future means weaving the collective imagination as a practice that challenges the centrality of rationality and acknowledges the role of spirituality in collective projects of transformation. Spirituality becomes both the many threads in the weaving and that transcendent moment that weaves us – individuals – as a collective: The weaving is us.

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