

# Beadwork Circles as Resurgent Practices

Discussant: Shándíín Brown

## Logline

Shándíín Brown, a jeweller, fashion enthusiast, curator, and citizen of the Navajo Nation discusses the Beading Circle as Resurgent Practices panel facilitated by Justine Woods featuring beadwork artists Jaymie Campbell, Adam Garnet Jones, Tania Larsson, Katie Longboat, Christine Tournier-Tienkamp, Theresa Stevenson, and Brit Ellis. She focuses on beadwork as an expression of Indigenous culture, stories, and life as “good medicine and a resurgent practice.”

Indigenous people are facing many challenges in our current world. The effects of the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, and continued colonization are felt to a great extent throughout Indigenous communities. Indigenous people need good medicine to survive these modern times and the correlating challenges. For Indigenous people across North America, medicine is a concept that expands beyond notions of Western science. Good medicine encompasses positive modes of healing and it includes many things. For example, laughing with one's aunties, being served a warm bowl of stew, engaging in a heartfelt conversation with an elder, smudging oneself, or attending ceremony.

Beading circles are havens for good medicine where artists bead works, receive feedback on their techniques as well as designs, and talk amongst each other. Beading circle conversation topics can range from casual to heartfelt. They often transcend to a space of emotional support and healing. Before the coronavirus pandemic, beading circles were customarily in-person. Now, beading circles across Turtle Island have transitioned to the virtual realm. Artists utilize virtual platforms like Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime to fellowship and bead while socially distanced from one another.

The Facebook flyer for the Beading Table Discussions: Resurgent Practices panel features seven selected beadwork artists and moderator Justine Woods (Métis), a garment artist, designer, creative scholar, and educator. She is pictured wearing a black graphic tee by the Mohawk brand Reclaim Your Power. The text printed on the tee reads "Beading is medicine". This phrase encompassed the panel well. As a part of the online programming for Indigenous Fashion Arts and in collaboration with Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Fashion and the Fashioning Resurgence panel series, the Beading Table

Discussions: Resurgent Practices panel premiered on November 29, 2020. It featured beadwork artists Jaymie Campbell (Anishnaabe) of White Otter Design Co., Brit Ellis (Onondaga) of Blu Hummingbird, Theresa Stevenson (Cree) of Iskew Rising, Christine Tournier-Tienkamp (Métis) of SS River Designs, Katie Longboat (Mohawk/Cree) of Katie Longboat Beadwork, Adam Garnet Jones (Cree/Métis) of A Beaded Boy, and Tania Larsson (Gwich'in) of Tania Larsson. Prompted with questions from Woods, these incredibly talented beadwork artists dialogued amongst each other in the virtual beading circle while audiences at home beaded along with them. Each artist brought their own good medicine to the collective and enriched listeners with their diverse stories, teachings, and wisdom.

The panel conversation was in-depth; when each artist spoke, they were grounded in the concept that their process of beading and the beadwork they create are very personal. Longboat showed the panel and audience the first beadwork project she made, two flower hair ties. Growing up as a fancy shawl dancer, she was motivated to learn to bead so she could make her own accessories. Beadwork is centered in one's own individual stories and cultures. Woods said, "It's really special to hear how everybody got into beadwork because everybody's story is so personal and different. I think it's a story that is reminded every time we go to bead. We think back to that first time that we beaded and look at our process from when we first started to where we are now, and all of the memory that is tied to that." This memory then lives on in the pieces that beadwork artists give, trade, or sell to others.

When the topic of selling works came up in conversation, the artists discussed the complexities of pricing. Historically, Indigenous art has been monetarily undervalued. Campbell shared how in the past, her grandmothers created

and sold large quillwork baskets for “five or ten dollars” to a gallery on their reserve. Nowadays, some beadwork artists experiencing financial instability undersell their work. Stevenson mentioned that she noticed beadwork artists on social media underselling their work to make a quick sale. She said, “The ones like me and you who are in this position, maybe if we start selling high and being like ‘No. This is my worth, what you’re buying is my worth.’ I think eventually the single mothers who are doing it to get food, maybe they can start selling higher too.” Unique handcrafted Indigenous fashion is valuable in many ways and pricing should reflect that. Yet it can be hard to appropriately price work, particularly when fast fashion markets push low priced pieces.

Pieces made by beadwork artists are slow fashion. In the modern world where fast fashion is abundant, Indigenous beadwork designers stand out. Larsson said, “Beadwork is so intentional. You’re literally making a decision at every single millimeter on your canvas, which is moose hide for me... It’s so intentional, everything is placed the way you want it to.” This intentionality is implemented not only in the bead placement, but also the gathering and processing of materials. Larsson said, “It starts far before I even draw a pattern, it’s all about connection to the land and being able to build community with community members and hunters and elders and young people that you mentor and teach. In that way it is very sustainable because it’s about rebuilding the connections that residential schools and colonialism tried to eradicate.” Colonialism aimed to destroy many aspects of Indigenous lifeways including art, fashion, and kinship.

The Indigenous decolonization movement aims to heal and resurge Indigenous lifeways, and beading circles fit into the broader decolonization movement. Bri shared how exciting it is that

beadwork pieces express and celebrate modern Indigeneity. Furthermore, Tournier-Tienkamp shared that by building her business, SS River Designs, she also aims to serve her community and support other Indigenous creatives and artists. It was apparent throughout the panel that Indigenous people supporting and connecting with each other is vital. Moreover, Indigenous people practice the art of beadwork across the North American continent. Garnet Jones said, “When you have these online circles where spaces and nations and countries and borders don’t play into it, as far as preventing people from gathering, it’s so easy for people to log on to these different online supportive spaces from no matter where they are. That’s really erased those colonial borders for myself in a way that feels really important... I feel like I have built kinship and family with people across borders in a way that I hadn’t before.” Kinship is empowering, especially kinship that crosses the colonial borders that governments have imposed on Turtle Island. As the Indigenous decolonization movement evolves across North America, more Indigenous beadwork artists will resurge.

To express one’s culture, stories, and life through beadwork is good medicine and a resurgent practice. It is also good medicine and a resurgent practice to ethically buy and wear Indigenous beadwork. Campbell said, “Beadwork has a way of finding the person it’s supposed to get to and I think there’s a lot of magic in that for me.”

You can follow these artists and their beadwork on Instagram. Their handles are as follows: @WhiteOtterDesignCo, @Blu\_Hummingbird, @IskwewRising, @SSRiverdesigns, @KatieLongboat.Beadwork, @AdamGarnetJones, and @Tania.Larsson.



**Shándíín Brown**  
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Currently, she works at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design as the Henry Luce Curatorial Fellow for Native American Art. She is a graduate of Dartmouth College, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts majoring in Anthropology as well as Native American Studies and minoring in Environmental Studies. Shándíín's jewelry brand, T.B. Designs, can be viewed on Instagram @T.Begay.Designs.

#### **DISCUSSANT CITATION**

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