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# Review: Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto 2020

By Nigel Lezama

## Abstract

Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto (IFWTO) shifted to a virtual space in the last days of November 2020 without losing any of its energy or its impact. The event featured panel discussions with Indigenous scholars, curators, and makers, and showcased the work of 15 Indigenous designers from across Turtle Island as well as one Māori designer from New Zealand. IFWTO felt like a four-day master class in Indigenous material culture that foregrounded the ways that history informs and guides makers' hands and motivations, but that also cast light on the future-looking creatives who are making the culture. The IFWTO team, founder and artistic director Sage Paul, Development Director Kerry Swanson, and Producer Heather Haynes with Ryerson School of Fashion partners, Riley Kucheran and Ben Barry, put together an event that was cutting edge yet grounded in tradition, intimate but firmly web 2.0, radical and rigorous, all in equal measure. This review shares some of the thematic highlights from the 2020 iteration, such as the decolonizing power of Indigenous materiality, the place of collaboration in Indigenous culture, and the threads that unite past, present, and future Indigenous makers. This review also calls attention to some of the fashions—from the traditional skins used to the glamorous statement jewelry worn to the timeless garments blending futuristic textiles with ages-old adornments—that featured in the films and materialized the key themes of IFWTO 2020.

## KEYWORDS:

INDIGENOUS FASHION

INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGIES

DECOLONIZATION

LAND-BASED FASHION

FIRST-NATIONS' TRADITIONAL ARTS

## Has fashion ever been more righteous than in recent years?

Declarations of allyship to BIPOC communities, almost exclusively non-white (or non-cis-gendered!) bodies glistening on the covers of fashion magazines, renunciations of the artificially inflated fashion cycle by some of the most successful fashion houses, the frantic search for directors of diversity and inclusivity for the C-suite of many a luxury brand... One could be forgiven for thinking that the entire fashion field had heard the gospel. But then, it's likely that the *Business of Fashion*, who invited a black gospel choir to sing at their 2019 annual shindig, had not invited actual POC to the party.

However, Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto 2020 provided a harbour in the last dark days of November that cast light on the ways that Indigenous making and methodologies challenge the dominant fashion system and inherently decolonize thinking about fashion. Because of the pandemic, founder and artistic director Sage Paul, a Toronto-based, Dene woman and member of the English River First Nations moved this second biennial event online.

**IFWTO 2020 offered four days of intimate discussions, compelling panels, and dramatic fashions that highlighted the radical currency at the heart of Indigenous culture and cultural practices.**

Each of the four days consisted of two or three events that drew from academic tradition but were rooted in Indigenous methodologies. Paul and Riley Kucheran, an Assistant Professor at the Ryerson School of Fashion and member of *Biigtigong Nishnaabeg*, expertly facilitated a masterclass in branding, a number of themed panel discussions, and a fascinating interview with artist Christi Belcourt. The evenings were capped off with spectacular fashion films that featured club and streetwear, high fashion, and avant-garde design in an oneiric world of Indigenous iconography and atmospheric music by mixed-heritage Cree and Mennonite composer, Cris Derkson. The IFWTO team, including Paul, Development Director Kerry Swanson, and Producer Heather Haynes with Ryerson School of Fashion partners, Kucheran and Ben Barry, put together an event that was cutting edge yet grounded in tradition, intimate but firmly web 2.0, radical and rigorous, all in equal measure. The days' panels offered a broad swathe of topics central to Indigenous culture and material practices and to the business of Indigenous fashion. The richness of these panels came from the roster of excellent speakers from across Turtle Island and abroad, all gathered in the spirit of sharing ideas.

The decolonizing power of Indigenous materiality was an idea that emerged from a number of panels. During the "Colours, Materials and Symbols" panel, which focused on the significance of Indigenous material practices, Dene land-based arts educator Melaw Nakehk'ó spoke about hide tanning as a tangible decolonial practice. For Nakehk'ó, "blood memory" is revitalized through land-based making. This foundational artform of the Dene is an opportunity to embody Indigenous history and to reconnect with the land. On the second day, Paul and Kucheran interviewed Métis artist and activist Christi Belcourt, who asserted that living on the land means "having to break away from the traditional calendar." Indigenous making, rooted in nature's cycle, challenges the colonial-based fashion system. Further still, during the compelling discussion during the "Land-Based Fashion" panel

on the last day of the event, one of the makers, Anishinaabe and a member of *Neyaashiinigiing*, Chippewas of Nawash First Nation, Amber Sandy shared her vision of hide tanning in urban settings as a powerful way to reclaim space, particularly for urban Indigenous people without easy access to their home communities.

## A question that emerged from various talks centered on the value and place of collaboration in Indigenous fashion.

While Belcourt felt that she wouldn't change any aspect of the experience of her well-known 2015 collaboration with the House of Valentino, she feels that it is more interesting and important to focus on collaborations with other Indigenous creators. The "Indigenous Fashion Education" panel, one of the more dynamic sessions, approached the issue of collaboration from the perspective of educational institutions. A lively debate ensued among the panelists. Adrienne Keene, member of the Cherokee Nation and Assistant Professor at Brown University, and scholar, curator, and activist, Regan de Loggans of the Mississippi Choctaw, acknowledged the problems of collaboration for Indigenous people. Having experienced the clashes with Indigenous values that occur in many collaborations with mainstream institutions, Keene expressed the way her thinking has shifted to wanting an educational institution built by and for Indigenous people. De Loggans asserted the absolute incommensurability of learning Indigenous methodologies in a settler institution. Dori Tunstall, Dean of the Faculty of Design at OCADU, and Ben Barry, Chair of the Ryerson School of Fashion, used the example of the ways that their respective institutions are creating space for Indigenous faculty or developing courses that center Indigenous worldviews and practices.

During the branding masterclass, Garvia Bailey and Andrew and Iain Foxall, spoke positively of collaboration for Indigenous brands. Andrew Foxall used the example of the “Made in Italy” brand as a model that could help bolster market presence for Indigenous designers. Foxall spoke of the potential of a pan-Indigenous agency that could function as a PR machine that would do the work of building an overarching brand story. Overall, the idea of collaboration was most strongly felt as an inherently Indigenous methodology, but one that should only be cautiously used with settler institutions.

## One of the strongest ideas to resonate in many of the discussions was the connection to both past and future generations.

During the panel “A Thread That Never Breaks,” for example, Paul moderated a rich discussion with artist and curator, and member of the Beausoleil First Nations, Lisa Myers and weaver Meghann O’Brien (who uses her Haida name Jaad Kuujus as an artist). The discussion centred on a 2020 art show co-curated by Paul and Myers that featured works by O’Brien, along with six other Indigenous artists and foregrounded the way that Indigenous making weaves together past, present, and future. O’Brien shared that “with those [ancestral] threads, [there is potential for] acknowledging that we carry those in our own hands and, being alive in the present, [acknowledging] that we are creating for the future as well.” Whether beading, weaving, or hide tanning, these creative practices are passed on from generation to generation. During the “Land-Based Fashion” panel, Bobbi Itta, an Inupiak fashion artist based in Alaska, acknowledged the importance of reciprocity in these relationships: when she wanted to learn tanning she went to an elder and asked if

she could help. Because of the cultural erasure by colonialism and its institutions, Indigenous resurgence requires passing down ancestral knowledge. However, sharing isn’t one-way. When asked how to help the burgeoning Indigenous fashion movement during the “Colours, Materials and Symbols” panel, Karen Kramer, curator of Native American and Oceanic Art and Culture at the Peabody Essex Museum, asserted that while it is imperative to make space in cultural institutions for Indigenous makers, “we need to be training the next generation of Indigenous writers, and makers, and curators, and designers, and graphic designers...” For Kramer, Indigenous fashion is part of a matrix that requires an influx of young talent supported by established cultural producers. This is a duty that Christi Belcourt, for example, also holds close to her heart. The artist co-founded the Nimkii Aazhibikong, a year-round, land-based, language and traditional culture reclamation camp for Indigenous youth. During her interview, Belcourt explained that for the young people attending Nimkii reclaiming their culture means learning the skills so that they can “carry these foundational traditional arts forward.” It is not just the current generation that benefits, but future generations that regain traditions that would have been lost because of colonization.

The end of each day closed with a fashion film featuring a number of contemporary designers from across, as well as beyond, Turtle Island. The feeling of the shows moved from anti-establishment to otherworldly, through lighting and music, the abstracted set design, and the fashions that ranged from club and streetwear to tailored suiting and reimagined iconic garments foregrounding Indigenous design. All garments highlighted the traditional skills that were central to the discussions of the day. Some of the most dramatic collections were shown in the third day’s fashion film, entitled Tu Gh’eg Tl’e’th, or “Streams,” in Dene. On a spare stone-lined path, invoking a stream, Warren Steven Scott, a member of the Nlaka’pamux nation,



**FIGURE 1** © Curtis Oland 2020. A look from Oland's "Delicate Tissue" collection

opened the film with a model in a brown and ochre smocked turtleneck and floor length skirt. Other models donned flowing dresses and a man's loose-fitting corset with shirring that highlighted the designer's skill. Curtis Oland of the Lil'Wat Nation showed raw-edged shirt dresses, coats, and pants for men and women. The inset organic wool pleating on the thigh of a linen pant, the blond horsehair along the hem of an elk hide coat, and leather fringe on the arms of man's asymmetrically buttoned deer hide jacket worked to dramatic effect. The collection, predominantly in beiges, tans, and browns expressed "the delicate balance of taking and receiving from nature," said Oland (Figure 1). The brand Indi City, led by Angel Aubichon and Alex Manitopyes, a two-spirit Cree, Métis, and Anishinaabe couple, brought a glamorous aesthetic of tailored and monochromatic skirt and pant suits with metallic and colourful statement earrings, necklaces, and chest plates, and coveted gold moccasins. Métis designer Evan Ducharme showed sophisticated separates and dresses for diverse body types in an elemental palette of black and red, embellished with the designer's signature hand embroidered mesh technique along the sleeve or down the middle of the chest. One striking black strapless sheath dress featured crystal beading that

fell like tears from the shoulders and empire waist. The film saved the most ethereal brand, Hand of Solomon, for last. Ojibwe designer Louise Solomon showed the first model with a golden turtle shell balanced upright above her head, while other models wore flesh-toned and clear plastic sheaths adorned with sorbet-coloured horsehair, braided across the

bodice and sweeping from the waist to the floor (Figure 2). Others still were draped in flesh-toned chiffon tunics and capes, with clear plastic mantles, hoods, and a remarkable bolero jacket, all adorned in gold or blue beadwork, trimmed with laminated feathers and bone, or fur. These fashions used traditional materials and methods to avant-garde ends.



FIGURE 2 © Hand of Solomon 2020. A look from Solomon's "Dodem" collection.

The fashion films made manifest the many themes that were fleshed out during the days' panels. A question at the heart of IFWTO centred on how to foster Indigenous resurgence. At the closing, Elder Pauline Shirt, member of the Plains Cree, Red-Tail Hawk Clan answered this question. "Our people are visionaries," she said. "[Our gift] is seeing the whole visual process. All over. Like my relative the eagle, who sees the whole view of the mountains, lakes, and trees. And then has the ability to zero in on the little mouse."

**Indigenous making entails seeing the whole process, from skills development to environmental protection. Indigenous vision also sees fashion as a tool for resurgence and decolonization. And it's ready for its close up.**

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