

In Conversation with Christi Belcourt

Panelists: Christi Belcourt, with Sage Paul
and Riley Kucheran

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Abstract

Riley Kucheran and Sage Paul talk with panelist Christi Belcourt about her work with camp Nimkii Aazhibikong reclaiming traditional arts and practices used when creating Indigenous clothing and accessories. Christi discusses how she brings these traditional items and material cultures into her contemporary designs through her own arts practice as well as collaborating with independent brands and high-end fashion houses. Belcourt is widely known for her collaboration with Valentino for their 2016 spring resort collection. The collection featured vibrant floral embroidery and prints based on Belcourt's "Water Song" painting on permanent exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada. Belcourt then went on to collaborate on a handbag collection with Ela Handbags and Holt Renfrew in 2017.



RILEY

Boozhoo, hello, and welcome back to the Fashioning Resurgence panel series, co-presented by Indigenous Fashion Arts and the School of Fashion at Toronto Metropolitan University. My name is Riley Kucheran, and I'm an Assistant Professor of Design Leadership at the School of Fashion. Today we're sitting down for "In Conversation with Christi Belcourt." Thank you everyone for joining us and gchi-miigwech, thank you, to our incredible guest, I am so excited to sit down with you. I do wish we were in person, sitting by a fire with a big cup of bush tea, but hopefully we'll be able to do some of that today. And so, hi Christi, how are you?

CHRISTI

Hi everybody. I'm doing really well. It warmed up this week, which was kind of a blessing. It was good to get some more winter prep in.

RILEY

We're joined today by Sage Paul. Hey Sage, how are you?



SAGE

Hi, I'm doing good. I'm really excited.

RILEY

I don't even know where to start. How have you been doing Christi? How is Nimkii going? Are you still full steam ahead in the pandemic? Give us an update. How is Christi Belcourt doing?



CHRISTI

That's three huge questions, I'm doing great! The camp Nimkii Aazhibikong is also doing really well.¹ We shut everything down in terms of having regular visitors come and go since COVID, but that's also given us a lot of time to try and finish the language learning centre and traditional art studio that we're building. We're still fundraising for that, but it's full steam ahead. Also, we're still doing language and lots of traditional arts with the core group that's there year-round. I learned how to tan fish skins, which was a dream, and I'm not sure if I ever would have slowed down enough to do that if COVID wasn't here. I'm making earrings with the tanned fish skin. It's thrilling to claim back some of these traditional arts and practices that would have been used in our material cultures, within our clothing, our accessories, and all those things. To see people bringing those traditional items into contemporary designs has been thrilling. So, I'm doing well. I'm busy doing all sorts of design stuff, which I really had a dream of doing for many years. That's what's going on.

RILEY

That's so awesome. As an aside, I'll be working with Amber Sandy in a studio class this upcoming winter for fish skin tanning. We originally wanted to do tanning and get out on the land, but all courses are being conducted over Zoom right now, so we figured that fish skin tanning is something that everyone could do in their kitchen. That's really cool that you've been doing fish skin tanning as well.

CHRISTI

We've been watching Amber Sandy videos closely.

RILEY

We jumped in here, but for those who are not familiar, you're a nationally renowned artist, but I think a lot of Indigenous people know you more as an activist and as an environmentalist. Could you give us a little bit of insight into the work that you do at Nimkii and what is that camp all about?

¹ <https://nimkiaazhibikong.com>.

CHRISTI

It's a year-round land-based language and traditional cultural reclamation camp. What that looks like is people doing things seasonally. They do things according to what the weather dictates. We're less focused on workshops that are scheduled in a calendar mode and more interested in the long-term reclamation process of becoming masters at things. For example, you could go to a workshop and learn how to do quill baskets, but if you just do that once and all of your materials are provided for you, you haven't really reclaimed that back within your family line. What we're looking at is if we do hide tanning, how many times a year can we do it? Can we do it in a way where we become skilled? Young people are learning these things so that they can carry these foundational traditional arts forward.

RILEY

That's really incredible, I love that notion of not organizing one-off workshops but focusing on long-term commitments. And it goes to show you, even the words "seasons" and "seasonality" are so different in the context of Indigenous fashion. Seasonality for Indigenous peoples are the real seasons. In the fashion industry, it's this manufactured notion of coming out with a new look every single season. It's so beautiful that you are thinking about the real seasons out there. I also love what you said about working towards a mastery of these techniques, and how long that process is. We were speaking with Barbara Teller, a master Navajo weaver, and she's been doing that for forty-five years to gain that level of expertise with weaving. It's not just a technique, it's part of Indigenous life, right?

CHRISTI

What I think of as well is the importance of reclaiming these things as much as we can, and how that naturally ties us into protection of the land and waters. Moose hide tanning is a foundational traditional art and the foundation of our material culture in a lot of our nations. It causes us to look at the moose population and shows us how important it is to be protective of their habitats and that species. It naturally ties you into wanting to help. For example, the Algonquin people are trying to implement a moratorium on hunting moose this year to try and protect the moose populations from sports hunters. We're looking at how our current design work based on traditional materials is tied into land and water protection. If you don't have healthy fish, how are you going to tan fish skins? The birch trees are not as big as they used to be. How do you make canoes and teach that to the next generation if you don't have the birch? Land and water is everything. When you start to live on the land and live within the seasons and the rhythm of the land, you're using every single part of the moose. One of our young people got his first moose. Every

single part of that moose was used, and it was thrilling to watch how he distributed that among his community members and his elders, and then we have the moose hide and the bones to make tools with. Without healthy moose populations, how on earth would we be able to do that for the next generations? With climate change, it's even more vitally important that we step in and start to step up and help people who are on the ground, on the front lines, taking on the brunt of industry and the militarized police forces in order to be able to protect the land and waters on behalf of all of us.

SAGE

It's so true. It's been really amazing to get to speak with everyone in this panel series, the idea of reclamation is common in nations across Turtle Island. I think about the birch bark and moose hide and how integral that is to our nations. My people are from northern Saskatchewan, and it's quite similar. Poplar trees are more common up there than birch trees, but there's still that awareness of what you're taking from the land, how you return that, and making decisions on what you're practicing. I'm curious about the camp. How do you choose what's being taught there? There's so much to reclaim. Do you base the lessons on what's offered by the land or is it people bringing suggestions? What does that process look like?

CHRISTI

It's a combination. Somebody will come forward and say, "I really want to learn how to make clay and do traditional pottery." Which is something that I've done a couple times and have thoroughly enjoyed. There's something that speaks to my spirit about working with actual clay and earth. Then, a couple young people had the opportunity to go to a nearby community and learn traditional pottery in the past two weeks. They spent two weeks learning, and now we're going to be building a kiln by next year, because it's something that's traditional within this region. I live in Anishinabek territory, but I'm not Anishinabek. I'm Michif. My late grandparents spoke Cree and were from Alberta. I was never raised there, I was raised in Anishinabek territory. So, everything that we're doing here is based on Anishinaabe traditional knowledge and bringing back the things that the people here, particularly the young people, decide that they want to learn. It's very youth-driven in terms of what is next up, and it's within the scope of what's already practiced within this region. For example, birch bark baskets, quill baskets, harvesting the birch, harvesting the quills, getting the sweetgrass, all these happen at a different time of the year. In order to make birch bark baskets, you have to go when the birch are ready. When the blueberries are ready to pick, they don't wait for you. You can't schedule it in. At some point, when you're living on the land you have to make the decision to break away from the traditional calendar.

You have to ask yourself, is this what I want from my life? If it is, then the seasons begin to guide you on what is available regionally, what you do, and then you can begin to reclaim the traditional arts practices that were in the region. Hide tanning, moose, deer, fish tanning, making the tools, all of those things come hand in hand with the seasonal practices on the land and available here. That's basically what we're doing. In that sense, I'm a learner. I'm here, learning every day because I want to reclaim these things for my family line. It's the same moose hide tanning, beadwork, and quillwork that we practiced in Lac St. Anne in Alberta. Those types of things are all the same.

RILEY

What is your take on Indigenous fashion? I see how working with the land contributes to that resurgence and getting youth passionate about learning and reclaiming those skills for their families. Then we have to... translate that? Or do we? Because then we come up against consumption and the fashion industry. What's your take on that?

CHRISTI

Sherry Farrell Racette is a professor out in Manitoba. She's a historian who is well respected for her knowledge on traditional Metis material cultures, which is basically historical clothing and accessories. One thing she said that stuck out to me about 15 years ago, was that Metis people were always on the cutting edge of fashion. What are historical items now were cutting-edge fashion of the day. When we look at the beadwork and other objects that people were making, the bandolier bags and clothing designs, all of that was always fashion. Things went in and out of fashion too, the same way they do now. Maybe not so fast, but they did.

What I'm noticing now is that designers have incredible opportunities with technology to be able to create on smaller scales. We no longer have to go to huge, or be such an expensive and environmentally degenerating industry in order to produce what we have dreamed of creating. We can do things on smaller scales. Now designers are able to print their own fabrics, which was not available on smaller scales before. Technology is allowing Indigenous fashion designers to dream these things into reality. I admire and like that. I think there's always a way to figure out how to do this in a way that is respectful to the earth. We have always done that traditionally. There's no reason why we can't figure out how to do it now. For example, when we're sourcing materials, is sourcing organic cotton from overseas ethical when dyeing those materials might ruin their waters? The fact that we have organic cottons doesn't necessarily mean that it's ethical. Is it more ethical to source it locally, even though we're printing on materials that might not be fully biodegradable?

These are the questions that, as designers, we have to ask ourselves. What makes the most sense for us? Are we sourcing things locally? How can we do things in small batches? What kind of traditional materials can we use? Are we paying people fairly? All those things.

I think that like Indigenous art, Indigenous fashion design is on the cutting edge. Indigenous artists are powerful and have amazing things to say. There's stories within our visual art, our clothing, or whatever it is that we're designing. There's deeper meaning that I find incredibly moving and spiritually powerful. I don't see that there's these two worlds. I see that it's all really one and that as an artist, I can do whatever I want. I can fully be an activist, I can fully be a designer, I can fully be an artist, I can be all of these things that I want to be. So can everybody else. The old way of looking at things where people were confined into boxes is ending. Indigenous People are multi-talented, multi-faceted, complex beings that have these amazing, immense gifts. And the weight of the world is on our shoulders, we have the next generations that we're thinking about, what's going to be left for them. We have our lands and waters to defend. We have traumas we have to overcome. There's a lot of pressure. At the same time, we're creating these amazingly inspiring, powerful works of art, whether we wear them or put them on the wall. That's what I'm seeing. I'm thrilled by what I see in terms of Indigenous fashion right now.

SAGE

I love that you bring up the... silos, essentially. We are everything. You can be an activist, you can be an artist, you can be a designer, and that blending happens so often. I know especially for people who do craft, it's a constant struggle between being an artisan, an artist, a craft person, a hobbyist, a designer. You can be all of them. I love that. Speaking about being multifaceted, can we talk about your Valentino collection?² I think most people in our fashion audiences will most know you for that project.

CHRISTI

What is it that you would like to know?

² <https://en.vogue.me/archive/legacy/valentino-resort-2016-water-song-christi-belcourt-collaboration/>.

RILEY

Well, we also have a panel on collaborations, specifically between Indigenous artists, designers, and the fashion industry. I've been talking about this Valentino collaboration in my classes for four years now, and I think the main message has changed? Originally I was saying, this is an example of a really strong, ethical collaboration between fashion and an Indigenous person. I'm wondering, is that still your opinion? Are you still really happy with how that collaboration played out? Are there ways that we could do collaborations better when we do integrate with the mainstream industry, or those big luxury brands? How do we ensure those collaborations are equitable, sustainable, reciprocal for our young Indigenous designers who are coming up and hoping to be the next Valentino collaboration?

CHRISTI

What was good about the collaboration was that I felt respected throughout. I felt like my opinion was valued and listened to. But this is Valentino, they know what they're doing. It's not like I needed to go, "No, this is what I want and that's what I want." They came with their designs based on my art, and then I met with their fabric designer in Toronto. We went over the fabrics and there were some tweaks. He showed me the designs and there wasn't a whole lot that I would ever dream of changing in that collection. There were some stunning pieces and I couldn't imagine my artwork being used any more beautifully than that. The thing is, my art comes from a tradition of fashion. It comes from a tradition of clothing, so it's been transferred to canvas and then it was transferred back to clothing. It was done in such a tasteful, beautiful way. As it was going forward I had conversations with them about the designs, about the fabric. It was a great relationship. At the beginning, I asked those questions that are important to me, like have you ever been accused of appropriation? What is your stance on the environment? Every answer that they came back to me with was more than acceptable and it was something that I felt very comfortable with. It was a brief relationship and they knew what they wanted. There's nothing I disagreed with them on. It was good.

In terms of the deal, because you're talking about young people wanting to know what kind of things to expect, don't be afraid to ask for what you think is fair. For me, I didn't actually make any money off that collaboration. That might be surprising to some people. The reason why I didn't is because I chose to donate my money to Nimkii Aazhibikong instead. I didn't make an income off of it, but our camp benefited. That was amazing because I really do want to see our languages spoken as first languages again, so that was the deal that we arranged. That was satisfactory to me. I felt good about it and I still feel good about it.

Afterwards, what I thought was terrible was that they were accused of appropriation in the line following mine. Clearly the discussions that we had about appropriation didn't sink in enough for them to understand what appropriation is and why it's not acceptable to be ripping off Native people. They proved that message had not permeated their business. I was very disappointed because I thought this company was different from the rest. The other thing that I was very disappointed in, and it wasn't Valentino's fault, was the knockoffs. Of course because it's the house of Valentino, there were an amazing number of knockoff companies overseas that began to bastardize the designs and steal the artwork. I was playing whack-a-mole with them. I was trying to report them, saying it was stolen work, but they would take one site down and another site would come up. People were sending me messages all over the place saying, "I think this is your design." They not only took the Valentino designs, but then altered them, and the knockoffs looked like shit. They were tacky and cheap. These companies had basically ripped off my art. At one point I just said, hands up, "I'm done." I'm just not going to spend my energy trying to track all this down and stop it because it's like water leaking out of a bag with a bunch of holes. There's nothing you can do at that point. I just had to accept that they had ripped off my work, and I don't know where it went and how far it's gone. But fashion only lasts for a few seasons, so I also knew that it wasn't going to last forever. It would go out of fashion.

So that's what happened with Valentino. It was a good experience. I would say be aware that your work could get ripped off by knockoff companies and there's basically nothing you can do about it. You could spend all of your energy trying to sue them to stop it, but life is too short for that kind of thing. Go into it with open eyes about what could happen. Understand that these companies are European-based companies who have no real understanding of Indigenous people, and there's going to be a very steep learning curve for them. There is a chance that you and your work will be disrespected. I am way more interested in collaborating with other Indigenous people, other Indigenous designers. Technology has made it so that we don't actually need to collaborate with big fashion houses. We can do incredible and powerful work on our own and in collaboration with each other. Go for it if you want to go for it. I have nothing but good things to say about my experience with them. It was the aftereffects that weren't great.

For me, I have been working a lot with hides. I first started learning how to tan deer hides and I've been working with moose hides and furs now. Fish skins have been my most recent obsession. It's a lot of fun. One of the things that connects me back to land, and even food, has been sourcing those fish skins to learn how to make fish leather. While living in Toronto, it's a little hard.

We don't really go out fishing for dinner that often, so I started building relationships with local sushi restaurants and getting extra skins from them because they're typically just tossed in the garbage at the end of the day. Utilizing materials that are typically thrown out has been really important in my work.

SAGE

I have so many questions. More questions. I did see so many of those knock-offs after the collection came out, but I would think in a position like that, Valentino would have the power to try to shut down those copycats? So many Indigenous designers will end up doing a collaboration, not on the scale of Valentino, but they'll do something with another company or they'll release something and then it gets ripped off. But they don't have that power to try to take their work back. For some of them, this is a question of their livelihood, of being able to eat, especially if people are taking money from them. I'm just wondering, did Valentino make any effort to try to stop that? Or to try to protect your work specifically? What did that look like?

CHRISTI

I messaged them, and said, "Hey, this is happening." I'm sure that they were fully aware because they have teams of people who monitor that. I was told that it would be forwarded to the legal department, and that was the last I heard from it. I imagine that they also choose to spend their time and energy in other ways. Perhaps it wasn't as important to them as it was to me that the pieces were being ripped off. There was no follow up to say, "We did this and we're trying" or anything. That was pretty much the last correspondence I had with them.

RILEY

I imagine that they were also fully aware of what you just said, that fashion is trend-based and seasonal? Probably in their minds, it's going to go away in six months, so to even devote the legal resources, which they do have, they might just not. I want to mention so many things from your talk about the collaboration. I loved what you were hinting at, that we don't necessarily need to uphold a collaboration with a luxury fashion house as a measure of success for young Indigenous designers. Yes, you could pursue that route, but a better approach might be collaborating with other Indigenous entrepreneurs and designers. I know you have a couple of collaborations in the works and have done some collaborations since Valentino. I also appreciated what you said about being fully aware of what you're getting yourself into. You're going to be talking with Europeans who know nothing about our culture, know nothing about our values of respect and reciprocity. So, don't go in thinking they will be as respectful as you would hope, because they're not. They don't

share those histories or cultural touch points with us. Also, I think you were hinting that the relationships need to be longer. From start to finish, this was a tiny collaboration, a blink in terms of how many collections they have a year. Maybe part of the answer is just slowing down and taking time to build a relationship before you even start thinking about the product or the collaboration.

CHRISTI

I agree. You said everything. You stated it so well, better than I think I did, so thank you for that. One thing I want to say is that they did offer to fly me to Milan so I could work with them. I suppose if I had done that, it would have made me feel like I had more input at the beginning of the process rather than just in the middle stages. At the same time, I was extremely busy and didn't really want to travel that far. I was happy that they were taking their first crack at things. I also couldn't imagine spending that kind of money flying me to Italy just to have the pleasure of working with them in their own house, so to speak, and I decided that it would be better to donate the money to the camp. It was a decision that I made, though I kind of wish that I had gone. I would have been able to give more insight as to what that relationship would look like, if you did get a chance to physically be in the rooms, designing with them from the get-go and spending quality time there, and, like you said, developing more of a relationship. That's a regret that I have. But I don't really have that regret because at the same time, maybe that money built our outhouse or some other essential building at the camp.

SAGE

Which lasts much longer.

CHRISTI

Not everybody understands the importance of outhouses when you're at the camp.

RILEY

I'm also wondering about the narrative. Did you have a say in how your art was represented? Indigenous fashion is so much more than the aesthetics, like your paintings. It's not just a painting, there's a world of knowledge in that image. Did you have some say in how it was represented, and did they speak to the significance of your art in the marketing of the collection?

CHRISTI

Yeah, I did have a say in the representation. I presented that painting as an

option for them and told them what it was about. The conversation started with them saying, “We’d love to collaborate with you on a line, what artwork do you have that would suit this?” I immediately thought of that painting because it would allow me to speak to the importance and sacredness of water and how we are facing a crisis over water all around the globe. That painting was a good foundation to start that conversation. One thing that a lot of Indigenous artists and designers are doing is doubling down on what the meanings of these works are. What is the importance here? How does my work benefit the advocacy of issues that are important to us and our communities? I chose that painting for this collaboration and they were very happy. We did have discussions about it. I had discussions with them about residential schools and what had happened here, why Indigenous languages are at a crisis point, why I didn’t want to fly to Italy, and why I wanted that money donated to the camp. It was their first time hearing about these things, so you can imagine, it was a lot to absorb in a first conversation. But they were moved and wanted to help.

RILEY

Miigwech. You’ve since gone on to collaborate with a few other brands. I think the next one might have been Ela Handbags and the Holt Renfrew project. What else have you been up to in terms of collaborations?

CHRISTI

Yeah, I did the Ela Handbags with Holt Renfrew, and again, a portion of that went to the camps.³ So, that was really beneficial. Recently, I did the Katrin Leblond collection.⁴ It has been a long relationship with Katrin and we coordinated on designing clothing that was comfortable, moveable, a little bit dressy, and a little bit casual. The other day, I was in my kitchen and somebody brought over deer meat that had to be cut up. I was helping butcher a deer, and I was wearing a dress from the collection. I’ve tried on all the pieces and they work for my body. The thing is, I’m not a skinny minny and I don’t have the body of a 20 or 30-year-old anymore. I’m 54, am probably on the plus side, and I still need clothing that’s going to be beautiful and flattering. That’s what I wanted to do, create clothing that would be good for everybody. So, we worked on this collection and I actually really love it.

Then Jenn Harper of Cheekbone Beauty and I worked on the packaging for her latest Sustain collection.⁵ What I really like about Jenn’s company is that everything is recyclable, so you can even break down and recycle her lipstick

³ <https://elahandbags.com/products/ela-x-christi-belcourt-editors-pouch>.

⁴ <https://store.katrinleblond.com/collections/belcourt>.

containers. Everything is vegan, not tested on animals, her cards have seeds embedded in them that you can plant, and she's doing all of the production locally, which is an environmentally sound way of doing things. All of her efforts are always giving back to the community. She's always thinking of ways to help, and again, our agreement is that five dollars from each set goes to the camp, specifically for language revitalization efforts. So, you can work in a way that benefits your people. I think that's really important. You don't have to, nobody's twisting your arm saying you have to. But I really believe in raising us all up, being excited for one another, and showcasing one another's strengths, designs, and gifts. It makes me so excited to see what people are doing nowadays, from accessories to fashion to everything that they're involved in.

Another collaboration that I just did was with Manitobah Mukluks.⁶ This is the second year that we've been able to put together some mukluks and I based this design off of old Metis embroidery patterns. It's not exact, it's not a rip off of anybody's work, but it's based on the colour palette of the silk embroidery with pinks, purples, and greens. There was just something about the colour palette that really got me this time. These mukluks, I'm really pleased with them. Then there's things that I'm working on like fabric designs. I have fabric up on Spoonflower available for people to ship to themselves in small batches and sew with.⁷ There's some other things that I'm working on too, which I can't tell you about yet, because they're not out. I'm thrilled with all the things that I've been doing lately.

SAGE

You've worked with a lot of people, at a community level, at a grassroots level, right up to Valentino. I'm curious to know what those differences are, specifically working within our community compared to working with someone like Valentino, because it's your work being represented in so many different ways. Whether it's with mukluks or on purses, Valentino, lipstick,

⁵ <https://www.cheekbonebeauty.com/collections/types?q=SUSTAIN%20Lipstick>.

⁶ <https://www.manitobah.ca/products/christi-belcourt-gatherer>.

⁷ https://www.spoonflower.com/profiles/christi_belcourt.

and the fabric, there's so many ways for your work to be shared and for us to learn more. Is there a type of collaboration that you prefer to see your work be represented in?

CHRISTI

I'm now looking at the big picture. I'm looking at, what is fun to do? What have I always wanted to do and not been able to because I lack those skills? I always look at people as being equal in every respect. Whether I'm dealing with somebody who is making bank at their job because they work at Valentino, or somebody who is hustling their earrings because they're trying to feed their kids, I don't care about that. What I care about is: can we do something that's fun and are we both going to enjoy it? Is it going to be providing something that's missing?

For example, in fabric design I've been finding out that most of those fabrics presented as "Native fabrics" are coming from one designer based in the United States who is a white woman. They're being printed and distributed by a guy based in Vancouver, who has a relationship with this woman in the midwestern United States. He's been telling her what his vision of Native fabric is, she's been fulfilling the designs for him, and he gets them sourced overseas and shipped to all of the fabric stores. That's why that beadwork fabric that we see doesn't look right. It's not our stuff, and you can tell. When you're a beadwork designer, you look at it and know there's something about this that doesn't quite look right. A bead worker would never make this mistake in this design. So that's when I realized that this was not designed by an Indigenous person. Then you look at some of the other typical designs, and there's horses mixed with geometrics mixed with all those typical fabrics that we've seen for so long. It fulfills a need in our communities, because we have eagle feather cases, ribbon skirts, and regalia to make, but unfortunately, it's not being sourced or supplied by Indigenous artists. Now, technology has made it so that we are able to fulfill our own fabric needs. That thrills me, the idea that anybody who wants to can create fabric, pop it up on Spoonflower, and make it widely available to our communities, to our people.

We know what we like and what we need, so I find that within Indigenous communities, whether you're designing regalia or contemporary fashion, we understand each other. When I'm collaborating with Indigenous people, I would say that the relationship is a bit easier. That said, it's not always true. I guess on the human level, connecting with people and making the project fun is the number one thing. If it's not fun, I'm not going to do it. As my

mom would say, I'm looking at the shorter end of the stick right now, at the age of 54. I'm not looking at the long end anymore, so I'm going to pick and choose the things that are important to me, are fun, and are worth my time. If I had to follow that motto all the way through, from when I was younger, I probably would be better off right now mentally and emotionally. So, I would say, follow your heart. Do what's enjoyable, and once it stops being enjoyable, stop doing it. This is your life. You get to choose what you want to do, and don't let anybody put you in a box. Don't let anybody decide for you what you can and can't do or where you're supposed to fit or not fit. The sky is the limit.

RILEY

We're backtracking a little bit, but I definitely honed in on you mentioning the importance of body inclusivity when you were working with Katrin Leblond. That's so key because I imagine that the Valentino collection did not have a very diverse size run, so do the clothes even fit us? Focusing on the full spectrum of body, age, diversity, is so important. I also loved when you were speaking about how you appreciate Jenn Harper and her mission of uplifting and supporting community members. That is such an Indigenous value, in stark contrast to a fashion industry that is predicated on individualism and the notion of being an entrepreneur. Everyone is in it for themselves and they want to be a star designer. But for us, it is about collaboration. Finally, I think about fashion sovereignty, if we can think about a *truly* Indigenous fashion that is ours and that we're in control of, it would include production. It would include the supply chain; it would include us printing our own fabrics. I'm also reminded of Anishinaabe Bimishimo, an Indigenous owned company that has been producing the jingles for jingle dresses.⁸ We can't rely on someone else's manufactured buttons and fabric. What I'm hearing is that taking control of the supply chain is also incredibly important for our young designers. You began touching on one of my last questions as well. What advice would you have for the two of us? We have a young Indigenous fashion professor, myself, and a young Indigenous artistic director of a fashion week. What advice do you have for us as we continue in this movement?

CHRISTI

I think you would have more advice for me than I have for you. The benefit of being older is that you've made enough mistakes to be smarter. I always tell people, learn from my mistakes, because I've made some doozies. Just follow your heart, that's all I can tell you. You are a spirit here, living a human experience. You and you alone are here to fulfill your own spiritual journey

⁸ <http://www.anishinaabebimishimo.ca>.

and your own purpose. Follow your heart, and you can't go wrong. You'll make mistakes, everybody does, and it will be heartbreaking. You'll have heartbreaks, but mostly, don't forget the joy. Don't work yourself to the point where you wake up at 54 and you realize, shit, I forgot how to be joyful. I've worked 14-hour days seven days a week for the past 15 years and it's only now that I'm beginning to say, slow down, have these moments of joy. Go visit your family, for god's sake. Take some time for yourself. There's no shame in that. You can get a lot done in a day, as the late elder George McDermott told me. He said, "if you wake up early and you turn off the phone, you turn off the TV, you can get a lot done in a day." He's right. The only thing that I would say is make sure you add your family to that. Whatever family that is, whether it's your biological family or your spirit family, make time for them. It's important. There's no going back. You can't reclaim time. Your life is finite. You only have a certain amount, so make time for the people in your life. That's all.

SAGE

I'm so happy to hear that because it really resonates. I've worked 14-hour days, and that's what I feel like I do sometimes. Of course, I want to work hard to try to be successful within my own version of success, but I still end up working a lot. I think a lot of young designers. We are always seeing an industry and people working in a certain way, seeing things online that appear to have been produced because of extremely hard work or extreme wealth. There's a lot contributing to making it seem as though that's how this work is done, but it's really grounding to be reminded that you need to slow down. You need to be re-energized, be with family, and enjoy the work that you're doing. I don't want to wake up and have rushed through it all trying to do everything and not remember any of it. Go back on my Facebook and be like, oh yeah, I did that. Thank you so much for reminding us of that. We're getting close to our time. I was just wondering if there's any final things that you wanted to share with us? Any upcoming projects or any new work?

CHRISTI

There's some things that I have that are coming out, small projects that I'm working on with others that are exciting. I don't know what the next year holds. We're looking at societies that are deeply divided. We still have to eradicate white supremacy, that's something huge to do. We've got to save the planet.

There's some pretty big thing coming up that we all have to participate in, and I encourage everybody to do what they can in that regard. There's always some people on the front lines that are taking the brunt and are putting their bodies at risk in land and water defense, so find ways in which you can support them. If they do fundraisers, pitch in, just whatever we can do. Hopefully 2021 will be a lot better than 2020, and we'll see control of the coronavirus. That's what I'm really hoping and praying for so that people can go and start to live their lives and see their families again.

RILEY

I think a common thread I've observed through all of these collaborations you've spoken about is your ethical compass and how every collaboration supports the resurgence work that you are doing at the camp. That is probably something that young Indigenous designers should be focusing on, the *why*, rather than the technical aspects of *how*. Focusing on why and honing in on your family, land, and traditions. I'm so grateful that we've had a chance to sit down with you and thank you so much for laying it all out there about Valentino. That's so important because I think everyone in the Indigenous fashion community looks up to that as an example. So, thank you for being very forthcoming about that collaboration as well. Chi Miigwech.

SAGE

Máhsi-cho, thank you. It was so great to chat today, Christi.

CHRISTI

Hai hai, thank you. It was really nice to speak with you both. I appreciate this very much and I hope to see you both in person at some point.

SAGE

Me too. Thank you.

Panelist Bios



Christi Belcourt is a Michif (Métis) visual artist with a deep respect for Mother Earth, the traditions, and the knowledge of her people.

In addition to her paintings she is also known as a community based artist, environmentalist and advocate for the lands, waters, and Indigenous peoples. She is currently a lead organizer for the Onaman Collective which focuses on resurgence of language and land based practices. She is also the lead coordinator for Walking With Our Sisters, a community-driven project that honours murdered or missing Indigenous women. Her work *Giniigaaniime-naaning* (Looking Ahead) commemorates residential school survivors, their families and communities to mark the Prime Minister's historic Apology in 2008 and is installed at Centre Block on Parliament Hill commissioned by the Government of Canada. She was named the Aboriginal Arts Laureate by the Ontario Arts Council in 2015. In 2016 she won a Governor General's Innovation Award and was named the winner of the 2016 Premier's Awards in the Arts. Author of *Medicines To Help Us* (Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007) and *Beadwork* (Ningwakwe Learning Press, 2010). Christi's work is found within the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Gabriel Dumont Institute, the Indian and Inuit Art Collection, Parliament Hill, the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, and Canadian Museum of Civilization, First People's Hall.



Riley Kucheran is an Indigenous fashion researcher who supports a global community of Indigenous makers who are leading design resurgence.

Their experience in fashion retail, entrepreneurship, and Indigenous theory means they see fashion as a powerful tool for decolonization: Land-based Indigenous design relies on community relations to collectively make clothing in respectful and reciprocal ways. They are a member of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Pic River First Nation) and an Assistant Professor of Design Leadership in Fashion at The Creative School.



Sage Paul is an urban Denesuliné woman based in Toronto and a member of English River First Nation.

Her ethos centres family, sovereignty and resistance for balance. Sage is the Executive & Artistic Director of Indigenous Fashion Arts, which she also co-founded. She has been instrumental in establishing and leading projects for Indigenous artists working in fashion, craft, and textiles through several projects with Indigenous Fashion Arts, Inland, Ikea Canada, the International Fashion Showcase during London Fashion Week, Setsuné Indigenous Fashion Incubator, the Canadian Trade Commissions in South Africa and London, Artscape Launchpad and Canadian department store Simon's. Sage has contributed to *InStudio Magazine* (Banff Centre for the Arts), *Walker Reader* (Walker Arts Centre) and TEDx Toronto and has provided consultation for Toronto Metropolitan University, Urbani_T, Canadian Art and Fashion Awards, Harbourfront Centre and several others, including artists in the art and fashion sectors. Sage teaches the Contemporary Indigenous Fashion and Jewellery program at George Brown College, which she also developed. In 2019, Sage was nominated for the Premier's Award in Creative Art and Design and was recognized as "... leading Canada's Indigenous Fashion Movement" (*En Route Magazine*). Sage received the Design Exchange RBC Emerging Designer Award and was honoured by the Ontario Minister of the Status of Women as a trailblazing woman who is transforming Ontario. Sage likes to call herself a philosopher and artist. The ideas and process in the creation of her fashion and craft are catharsis of an urban Denesuline woman experience-resourceful, intentional, and resilient. She up-cycles fabrics and incorporates natural materials like raw hide and antlers into her fashion, which has been exhibited in a few art and fashion shows. Sometimes she retails it too. But, creating is her favourite part.

PANEL CITATION

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