

# Land-Based Fashion: A Leading Framework

Discussant: Laura J. Allen

## Logline

Laura J. Allen, interdisciplinary scholar and Curator of Native American Art at the Montclair Art Museum, discusses the Land-Based Fashion panel featuring Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, Bobby Itta, Tania Larsson, and Amber Sandy. She dives into the land-based materials used in Indigenous fashion design, the risks of sharing Indigenous cultural knowledge, and how Indigenous designers and entrepreneurs can offer an alternative to fast fashion.

“There’s nothing in fast fashion that could come close to the Indigenous work that I’m seeing online right now,” said filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril in her closing statement for the Indigenous Fashion Arts panel entitled Land-Based Fashion: A Leading Framework. “It’s incredible to see the cultural values and morals come through in this work that carries forward culture, language, and Indigenous ideas of beauty.” Arnaquq-Baril was referring in particular to the recent resurgence of land-based approaches in the spectrum of Indigenous fashion. The term describes both the techniques and the ethos of utilizing gifts from the earth — fur and skins, bones and baleen, ivory and antlers — in clothing and jewelry design.

The panel’s fluid dialogue between Arnaquq-Baril, designers Bobby Itta and Tania Larsson, and Indigenous science advocate and artist Amber Sandy demonstrated the power of centering land and people in a fashion framework. Beyond materiality, this approach reflects and sustains the relations that nurture culture and community. The insights shared in this conversation reveal meaningful networks, offer creative strategies to grow Indigenous processes in the larger fashion system, and suggest actions that any individual can take to support Indigenous sovereignty through land-based fashion.

As moderator, Fashioning Resurgence co-editor Riley Kucheran began with the question, “What does land mean to you?” At root, land means life, particularly in the far north. Lands and waters support animals for food — a means for survival. Materials from these beings can embody cultural and spiritual relationships. Seal, caribou, moose, deer, and fish (even from urban sushi restaurants) offer skins for clothing, bags, and other items, and wearing these materials is a source of pride.

Yet colonialism and non-Indigenous worldviews about animals impact access to some materials, and in the process, the perpetuation of skills like hunting, butchering, fleshing, and tanning. For example, environmentalist and animal rights movements have fostered laws that curtail Indigenous use of animals vital to survival and sovereignty, said Arnaquq-Baril, whose 2016 film *Angry Inuk* highlights the importance of the Inuit seal hunt. “It’s an issue across the Native fashion industry,” she said. “As usual, we’re a footnote in the conversation.” Just as Indigenous Fashion Arts consistently emphasizes its support of fur, advocates must continue to amplify Indigenous voices and help amend or prevent legislation that does not adequately support subsistence-focused communities.

These trends have brought a concomitant loss of commercial tanneries and disruptions in the intergenerational knowledge of home tanning. Bobby Itta, for example, has had to send harvested seal hides to San Francisco for processing. In response, Larsson and Sandy discussed strategies that organizations and municipalities can implement to educate about hide tanning techniques. “Urban hide camps” have been effective in places like the quad at Toronto Metropolitan University and a city park in Yellowknife. When based in Indigenous cultural and scientific knowledge and shared through social media, these events reclaim urban landscapes as Indigenous and create access points for city dwellers who can’t easily travel to their home communities to learn these techniques. “From the first year to the third or fourth year, we would have repeat students come by,” said Larsson of the Yellowknife event organized by Dene Nahjo, the Indigenous innovation collective she co-founded.

The panelists emphasized that deep community benefits are at the heart of land-based fashion. “You’re not just buying a pair of earrings or boots,” said Arnaquq-Baril. “You are supporting a whole chain of people... A whole world of culture.” Hunting skills are sustained and meat is shared. Language skills and place names are maintained as younger generations join in and learn on the land. What’s more, said Larsson, the community offers a natural “production line” in the variety of skill sets in a given place, from hunting to patternmaking, cutting, sewing, beading, and more.

A key issue is how to grow those entrepreneurial opportunities in a way that economically and culturally supports the community. The panelists noted that capacity-building organizations that provide practical business training and mentoring (such as EntrepreNorth) are critical. Itta remarked that social media is, too, as it facilitates community sharing of materials and techniques and also creates new points of sale for local businesses in a global market. “Those kinds of opportunities... are what are really going to change the game here,” said Sandy. Actions to help build capacity can be as simple as offering to build a website or facilitating relationships — especially when the help is rooted in Indigenous values and perpetuates culture.

What about the risks of so much sharing — say, of patterns, techniques, and especially of specific cultural knowledge that could be exploited? The panelists highlighted the need for respect and reciprocity, approaches that are bedrocks of Native cultural practice. For example, Itta spoke of the joy of mentoring trusted friends and peers to professionalize their sewing work. Sandy commented that beneficial exchanges in this industry don’t start with ‘Can you teach me how to do this? And can I take this?’ but rather “Can I come help you with your work and spend this time?” The reciprocal relationships that are embedded in the land-based framework thus offer a model for all producers and consumers to attend to mutual benefits — a model that anyone in the greater fashion industry can learn from.

“None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable,” wrote Kiowa poet and author N. Scott Momaday. The ethics and the practice of land-based Indigenous fashion are a means to maintain connection. This framework imagines, and enacts, an alternative to fast fashion that is rooted in relations and reciprocity. The Indigenous Fashion Arts panel of leaders are advancing this work, offering key ideas and actions to help sustain these practices, sustain Native cultures, and sustain land itself.



**Laura J. Allen is an interdisciplinary scholar and the Curator of Native American Art at the Montclair Art Museum.**

As an M.A. graduate of Bard Graduate Center in New York City, Allen focused on Northwest Coast Native dress and fashion, centering Indigenous perspectives and aesthetics. As a scholar and curator with a design, science, and anthropology background, her work addresses themes such as the cultural use of animal materials in dress and textiles; intercultural exchange and colonialism; the collection, circulation, and display of cultural objects and designs; and animal conservation biology and policy. She has worked for the University of Alaska Museum of the North, the American Museum of Natural History, and several New York City-based fashion designers, among other organizations.

**DISCUSSANT CITATION**

Laura, Allen J. "Discussant: Land Based Fashion: A Leading Fashion Framework." *Fashioning Resurgence*, special issue of *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1-5, <https://www.fashionstudies.ca/discussant-land-based-fashion>, <https://doi.org/10.38055/FR010110>.

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ISSN 2371-3453

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