

Material Kwe

by Celeste Pedri-Spade

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Abstract

This visual essay presents *Material Kwe*, a project of five different wearable art ensembles that premiered at Indigenous Fashion Arts 2020. As an Anishinabekwe artist-researcher, the author draws on Anishinabe ways of knowing, theories of materiality, and Indigenous futurisms to situate this collection within a context of Indigenous art that aims to press back against historical and present-day settler-Indigenous relations predicated on the exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources and the erasure of Indigenous women's lives and stories. By upholding the creative and embodied aspects of Anishinabe epistemologies, *Material Kwe* aims to re-engage the past in the present to arrive at HERstory revelations that privilege the resilience and strength of Indigenous women. Throughout the essay, the author recentres Indigenous life and the power of matriarchy, highlighting Indigenous women's roles in defending the land, their kin, and communities.

“In knowing the histories of our relations and of this land, we find the knowledge to recreate all that our worlds would’ve been, if not for the interruption of colonization.”

– Erica V. Lee, 2016

SELF-LOCATION

I am an Ojibwe (Anishinabekwe) from Nezaadiikang (Lac des Mille Lacs First Nation) located in North-western Ontario. I am most comfortable identifying as a, “maker” because this term connects me to the women in my family — present and past — committed to making a variety of meaningful visual/material items for their kin and community. The kind of items that carry spiritual, aesthetic, and functional value. My art practice is committed to honouring these women in my life, and other Indigenous women, by exploring the tactile and sensuous meanings made possible through creative entanglements with our material environments. I tend to employ different textiles and techniques in my art practice, often blending more familiar Anishinabe materials and tools like beads, cloth, hide, and ribbons with more contemporary processes like photography, digital technologies, and printmaking.

As an Anishinabekwe maker I am also a research-based artist interesting in expanding Anishinabe arts-based methodologies that privilege the felt, embodied, and tactile aspects of our knowledge production practices. At the same time, I see this “expansion” as firmly rooted in Anishinabe philosophies that inform our knowledge system. Specifically, the concept of Nebwakawin, which is the act of looking backwards, while at the same time bringing forward the knowledge and experiences that our Anishinabeg ancestors have always carried. Nebwakawin as thinking back, bringing forward, and stitching it all together, is at the heart of what I do when I design and create.

INTRODUCTION

As a maker I often find myself invested in pressing back against the urge to privilege written and spoken language in analyzing or interpreting Anishinabe visual/material culture. In other words,

I am interested in the kinds of knowledges that can't be spoken or read but must be felt. Knowledge that must be learned and carried forward through intimate, often silent, prolonged, embodied relationships with our physical and material surroundings. Knowledge in gestures and practice.

Most recently, I have explored the role and nature of these creative and embodied practices in the ways Anishinabeg think about/with/through materials, memory, time, body, and place.

I find tremendous value and meaning in my design practice because it always facilitates opportunities for Anishinabeg to come together, reconnect, and reclaim stories about our past. More often than not, the kinds of stories that are brought forward are ones that had previously been oppressed or erased for generations by settler colonial authorities.

During Indigenous Fashion Arts 2020, I premiered a project called *Material Kwe*. *Material Kwe* is comprised of five different wearable art ensembles that press back against settler-Indigenous relations within my Anishinabe homelands in and around Lac des Mille Lacs First Nation in Northwestern Ontario (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Map of the author's Anishinaabe homelands in Treaty 3 (Northwestern Ontario).

These relations are predicated on both the destruction/exploitation of Indigenous lands/waters and the erasure of women's lives and stories. *Material Kwe* is a riff off of the Madonna song, "Material Girl" as "Kwe" is slang in Anishinabemowin for "woman" or "girl." But unlike the song which emphasizes the luxuries of capitalism, *Material Kwe* is meant to speak back against settler colonial-Indigenous relations that are predicated on both the destruction of Indigenous lands and waters and the erasure of women's stories and lives.

SETTING

Today our families find themselves in direct confrontation with extractivist industries including mining and forestry, which continue to threaten our way of life as we are displaced from our lands. As Anishinabeg we continue to uphold our inherent rights to act as stewards/caretakers of the

lands and waters, which includes protecting or defending the rights of *nibi* (water) and *aki* (land) as they are our relatives. *Material Kwe* draws attention to the ways that these contemporary struggles are inextricably linked to our past.

Indeed, the beginning of settler-Anishinabeg contact within my family's traditional lands was based on resource extrapolation for European colonial fashion (e.g. beaver pelts for hats). We are acutely aware of how the beaver was almost brought to extinction. So while the fashion arts are often touted as an active and vibrant site of cultural exchange — a place where people with different stories, from different places, come together to explore and negotiate their position in the world, for Anishinabeg, the fashion arts is also deeply embedded in a history of destruction, appropriation, and gendered violence (Cirefice & Sullivan, 2019; Forsyth, 2005).

At the same time when we attend to the process of historical production, we know that both Indigenous and Western histories can be androcentric in nature. When we write or orate our histories as Indigenous Peoples, we often privilege our male heroes (e.g. Louis Riel or the male signatories of our treaties or our warrior Chiefs), which overlooks the lives and experiences of our women.

MATERIAL KWE PROJECT

My *Material Kwe* ensembles attempt to press back against this material history. Each design challenged me to recentre and rematerialize important aspects of our women's lives.

With *Material Kwe*, I am reengaging the past in the present to bring or move forward a different HER-story, one that speaks to the resilience and strength of women. Each ensemble embodies this spirit or intent of acknowledging and honouring their roles in defending the land, the water, their kin, and making important contributions to their community.

Figure 2 presents the ensemble titled “Anti-Pipeline Society Kwe,” taken on Atikameksheng First Nation territory in Northern Ontario. In many Indigenous Nations across Turtle Island, there are different societies of individuals that people become part of, usually through some specific act or contribution to their community that is collectively recognized. Each society has what we call regalia, which are items worn that all have their own spiritual and cultural meaning. Additionally, regalia helps identify its society members. “Anti-Pipeline Society Kwe” is the regalia that was/is/would be worn by all women who have spent time on the frontlines protecting their homelands and waters from violent extractive industrial pursuits. It is comprised of a very large ribbon skirt, which speaks to the strength and resilience of women.

While different Indigenous cultures have their own teachings about the ribbon skirt, for many community members the ribbon skirt is a powerful reminder of Indigenous women's voice, courage and the resurgence of our matriarchies (Wuttunee, Altenberg & Flicker, 2019). The top garment is a body suit that is meant to evoke the idea of wet oil and this oil theme is also in the head piece where I wove black ribbons through a constructed crown. The placement of the black ribbon in the centre of the skirt, positioned across the model's body, is intentional because it reminds us that as these oil pipelines run across/through our homelands, they run across/through our bodies as Indigenous stewards/caretakers of our homelands. I used a wired ribbon to construct a ruff worn around the neck and wove horsehair throughout it. According to Anishinabe teachings, people in my home territory had an intimate and sacred relationship with *bebezhigooganzhii* (Ojibwe pony). This animal taught/teaches us what it means to be in service to others. Ultimately, I envision Anti-Pipeline Society Kwe as embodying this teaching of unwavering service to humanity.



FIGURE 2 Anti-Pipeline Society Kwe. Photo Credit: L. Roy.

With this piece, like others in the collection, I have incorporated aspects of Anishinabe fashion (ribbon skirt, leather belt) with iconic clothing items drawn from mid-seventeenth century Europe (large skirt shape and ruff). This was deliberate because in doing the HERstory work, I aim to envision a different future, one that would hopefully be marked by more productive and meaningful relations between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples of this land.

From a design standpoint, I see this work materialized through a strategic decolonial aesthetic that provides a powerful counter-narrative, disrupting colonial histories while placing something in this world that we have yet to see/know/feel.

In this vein, I contribute to the decolonial work that Reyes Cruz (2012) articulates as being “about moving towards a different and tangible place, somewhere out there, where no one has really ever been” (p. 153).

Figure 3 depicts my ensemble called “Water Warrior,” which is comprised of red metal jingle cone lids. The cones are unrolled on the bodice and layered to give a fish scale armor effect and the skirt is full of overlapping rolled cones. The model is holding a red Ojibwe war club, standing on a shoal in the water in a bay on Fort William First Nation territory. Jingle cones are typically used on Anishinabe traditional regalia called a

jingle dress, which is a healing or medicine dress danced by women in ceremonies and at powwows. The red cones were created by an Anishinabekwe entrepreneur to honour murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. Indigenous Peoples are acutely aware of the relationship between gendered violence and environmental destruction, in how violence against the water begets violence against our women (Laboucan-Massimo, 2018). In Anishinabe culture, like in many Indigenous cultures, women are sacred caretakers of the water. With this ensemble I am honouring the women in our lives who have and continue to commit their lives to the wellbeing of water — women who embrace water as our sacred relative.



FIGURE 3 Water Warrior. Photo Credit: W. Fiddler.

“Water warrior” is perhaps the ensemble most visually aligned with wearable artworks that engage in Indigenous futurism. Indigenous futurism offers a vehicle for artists to address a range of issues and activities that are related to settler colonialism including ecological violence, institutional racism, and genocide (Dooley, 2018). Scholar Susan Fricke (2019) illustrates that in materializing what futures could be possible and what pasts could have been, Indigenous artists engaged in Indigenous futurism often explore new mediums. Thus, not only is their art about putting a new idea or narrative into the world, it is also about exploring new creative avenues for cultural expression. It often pushes artists out of the spaces that they are familiar with into new creative territories that they have never ventured before. At the same time, this experimentation is still rooted in the same concerns, teachings, values, and histories that situate the artist as a member of their Indigenous community and Nation. Thus, Indigenous futurism provides artists a way to as Fricke states, “weave together the historical and the fictional, allowing the past, present, and future to co-exist” (p.108).

Figure 4 depicts my wearable art ensemble titled “Biboon na Kwe”, which translates to “Winter Woman.” The model is standing in the snow in front of several birch trees. Her billowy skirt is made of aqua-dyed rooster feathers and she is wearing a top corset made entirely by piecing together birch bark with sinew. “Biboon na Kwe” is about acknowledging the labour and ingenuity of Anishinabe women as evidenced through their ongoing relationship with the birch tree. Anishinabeg have been living in relation to the birch tree since time immemorial and have a specific connection with both its winter bark and its summer bark. It continues to be used to construct a variety of tools that have both functional and aesthetic value. I did not go into the creation of this piece with any preconceived meaning or intention. Rather, I had a stock of harvested bark and started to experiment with how it could be used in a garment. As it evolved, the legacy of the relationships our women have with “wiigwas” (birch bark) somewhat unfolded or presented itself to me.



FIGURE 4 Biboon na kwe (Winter woman).
Photo Credit: L. Roy.

This particular ensemble, perhaps, helped reaffirm some of my earlier work that addresses the role of making, clothing, and material practices in better understanding questions related to the nature of time, place, land, and history within Anishinabe worldview. I have written previously about the importance of locating Anishinabe history as more than simply a process of talking or writing about past people, places, or events. Rather, history is a creative force that can propel us forward if we take the time to experience and work with it in different ways (Pedri-Spade, 2017; 2019). As I worked with the wiigwas, I began to reflect upon how wiigwas is centred in the lifeways of many respected well-known Anishinabekwewag. How their relationship with wiigwas, through making everything from baskets to earrings, has led to this intense appreciation for and understanding of wiigwas as home.

In a recent interview, Anishinabekwe master wiigwas maker, Helen Pelletier, stated that for Anishinabeg, wiigwas is the tree of life and will always teach Ojibwe how to live sustainably within their homelands (CBC News, 2020). Thus, *Material Kwe* is about transcending linear concepts of time and the Eurocentric tendency to place our peoples, their stories, and knowledges in the past. It privileges Anishinabeg materials and practices that remind us that as Anishinabeg, we make and share our material culture through/for/with each other and all parts of creation, living/feeling/breathing our history as part of who we are (Pedri-Spade, 2019). In *Material Kwe* I am honouring Anishinabekwewag like Helen who, through their relationship with material relatives like wiigwas, our history is lived for the generations ahead of us. In placing Biboon na Kwe back into the world in this corset, reminiscent of early settler colonial fashion, I am also asking what kinds of relations could have been and/or may continue to evolve between people and land if we privilege this concept of material relatives.

When we talk about envisioning a different kind of future that moves away from a settler colonial reality, this kind of creative work brings us in close relations with other Anishinabeg within our homelands. It is a collective effort.

In order to actualize the *Material Kwe* project, I relied on the support and assistance of many Anishinabekwewag. Once complete, I documented each ensemble through photographic portraits on the land. This would not have been possible without the assistance of several women who came together and took on different roles as models, stylists, photographers, etc. Cree scholar Lindsay Nixon (2016) reminds us that artworks engaging in Indigenous futurisms must be centred in an ethics of love and kinship if they are to help transform colonial realities for Indigenous communities.

Long Live the Matriarch pictured in Figure 5 reveals how this notion of re-envisioning a past in order to envision a decolonial future must involve addressing the kinds of harms that our women endured then and now. It must address how extractivist pursuits are deeply connected to gendered violence against Indigenous women and girls. These are very personal, intimate, emotional, and spiritually challenging stories to work through and with, in ways that restore and contribute to our own wellbeing as Indigenous women. The model in the picture is wearing a very regal skirt in shades of red and gold. There is applique work on the front that says “Material Kwe” in a style that pays homage to what Anishinabeg know as “woodland style women’s traditional.” As I was planning the design of this ensemble, I kept thinking of stories about past fierce matriarchs in our community. People often talk about a woman

named Menigotchigan and when they speak of her, she is always framed as this strong, tenacious, brave, and extremely independent woman. People talk about how she wore large skirts no matter what kind of bush or cabin work she was doing. There is one story that is well known about Menigotchigan, which took place during the fall. Upon the community learning of an act of violence committed against a young Anishinabe woman, Menigotchigan was seen departing the community, heading towards a bush path. People talk about how she returned days later carrying her skirt in one hand while smoking a man’s pipe in the other and wearing a baggy pair of man’s pants. I chose a voluminous pannier silhouette for the skirt to honour the stories of women like Menigotchigan and other Anishinabe women who have articulated the connection between wearing skirts and their sense of strength, power, and cultural continuity (Laramee, 2017). I also constructed a thick necklace of horn pipe beads and meegus shells to show all the wealth of our women and to convey the heaviness or weight of the many kinds of responsibilities they carry. Additionally, the model is wearing a beaded top hat and is holding an eagle claw stick as a monarch would hold a scepter. Again, as I was creating this piece I was trying to embody the spirit of our fearless matriarchs who protected women and children in their communities — women who fight for justice when the rule of law only upholds settler colonial supremacy.



FIGURE 5 Long Live the Matriarch. Photo credit: L. Roy.

Figure 6 presents the last wearable art ensemble in *Material Kwe* titled “For Gladys.” This work materializes my personal relationship with a very special ogimaakwe (leader woman) in my community who passed away a few years ago. The model is wearing a magenta short coat that has a military cut with a bustled short skirt over beaver fur chaps. Before Gladys passed on to the spirit world she gifted me with a large beaver pelt that she had trapped and tanned herself. Gladys spent many hours teaching younger trappers on how to harvest small animals like beavers, otters, and martens according to Anishinabe protocols that stress the importance of living in a careful and considerate way with the land and all living things. I used the gifted pelt for the front of the chaps, and I deconstructed an old leather coat that had been gifted to me to complete the back. I used an otter pelt that had been gifted to my partner for the turban. This illustrates how Anishinabe design and aesthetic has and continues to be grounded in reciprocal and respectful relations with both our other-than-human relatives and one another. Gladys fully embodied my idea of Anishinabe sovereignty because she could go out into our homelands with nothing and not simply survive, she would thrive. She was the epitome of bougie bush lady because she also had a flare for fashion. I never saw her without her signature black eyeliner applied perfectly and her hair styled in her signature bun.



FIGURE 6 For Gladys. Photo Credit: W. Fiddler.

I have come to think of each ensemble in my *Material Kwe* collection as a type of material architecture (Pedri-Spade, 2017; Schneider, 2012) that embodies complex sets of relationships involving myself as a maker (my own intuition and creativity), the tools and materials that I use, and the various social and cultural relationships that go into the realization of my vision. Friedman (2002) reminds us that visual artists often work in expressive forms that resist language. Indeed, the artworks that are part of *Material Kwe* do more than symbolize or represent words or concepts because they exist as something tangible and wearable — as sensuous objects. *Material Kwe* draws from and contributes to the technological traditions that Indigenous peoples are using in order to restore their lives from colonial histories and institutions and envision better futures for their families and communities (Nixon, 2016). I am reminded of how Anishinabe Elders talk about the importance of “wearing our teachings” and how my mother has taught me how important *process* is in making garments (e.g. regalia, beadwork) that visualize who we are as Anishinabe people.

The work of makers is important because makers carry the responsibility of putting something into the world that other Anishinabeg people will connect to in a way that supports both the creativity of the maker and a collective vision for our past, present, and future.

Scholars from the Transnational Decolonial Institute (Mignolo et al., 2011) remind us that a decolonial aesthetic is a re-valuation and re-presencing of what has been made invisible or devalued by the modern-colonial order and with *Material Kwe*, I aim to contribute an intimate Anishinabe understanding of the role of wearable art to decolonization, particularly in work related to reclaiming women’s stories, honouring their lives, and strengthening relationships among land, body, art, and HERstory making.

Meeya. Miigwetch.

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