

NEEDLE, BEAD AND VOICE

Learning about Yukon First
Nations Traditional Sewing from Mrs.
Annie Smith and Ms. Dianne Smith

Nicole Bauberger and Amanda Graham



“Traditional Doll – Girl” by Annie Smith, 2004, photo Government of Yukon, from Yukon Permanent Art Collections

Needle, Bead and Voice was a research project that took place between 2014 and 2015 in Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon Territory in Canada. It was undertaken by Nicole Bauberger, with Amanda Graham from Yukon College, in collaboration with Mrs. Annie Smith and her daughter Ms. Dianne Smith, both elders of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation, a self-governing First Nation with a contemporary treaty. Both Annie and Dianne are well known as artists and teachers in the traditional sewing art world (Keevil 2008; Becker 1982).

Nicole and Amanda here offer an account of the steps they took and the methods they developed to undertake this research. They hope their approach might be useful to others considering similar research.

Whose Voices?

When Indigenous artworks are exhibited, whose voices are celebrated in the exhibition design? Nicole had noticed that the voices and stories of Indigenous artists working in traditional sewing were not given the same respect as those of artists working in the mainstream European-derived art world, whether contemporary or historical. Bydler (2017) noted this discrepancy in reference to Sami duodji practitioners. Book titles often refer to traditional sewing as art (Duncan 1989; Oakes & Riewe 1995; Thompson 2013); however, curatorial practice seldom pays attention to the thoughts and voices of the women creating this work. See Yukon Arts Centre (2010) for a counterexample, and Bauberger (2012) for a review of a show that completely omitted such women's voices.

Nicole wanted to use her research project to set Annie and Dianne in their rightful roles as experts on several of their family's artworks in the Yukon Permanent Art Collection. To that end she collaborated on a video interview of Annie and Dianne talking about these works, with the works in their hands. Dianne also felt that traditional sewing was not well enough understood as an art form. This research project gave them a chance to address that. Here we describe some of the methods we used to work together.



Figure 1. Ms. Dianne Smith and Mrs. Annie Smith discussing Annie's dolls from the Yukon Permanent Art Collection, January 2015.

Methods of Preparation

LOG OF TEN ADVISORS

A “log of ten advisors” helped to connect Nicole to some of her community’s existing knowledge. She discussed the potential project with ten individuals experienced with this kind of research and “logged” their advice. Their responses improved the project design. Knowledge flowed both ways. Asking those people spread the word about the project and helped locate resources to support it, both in terms of protocols and in providing room space and refreshments for a concluding public presentation. In addition, the advisors’ support and critique were important because Nicole and Amanda were working without a conventional university community to normalize their behaviour. Indeed, the advisors acted as a kind of ethics review board, with local understanding supporting their ethical choices.

Amanda and Nicole also followed more formal ethical review procedures. They completed an online ethics tutorial created by the Canadian granting councils (Canadian Institutes 2014). The tutorial coaches researchers to apply widely generalized science-based principles to all research projects involving humans. We would propose that for projects like *Needle, Bead and Voice*, a local guide like “Protocols and Principles for Conducting Research with Yukon First Nations” (Yukon Research Centre 2013) offers a more suitable ethical framework. Coming from an Indigenous source, it complemented the more holistic, human ethical review achieved by the advice of the ten advisors.

SEWING MITTENS

Shelby Blackjack, one of the ten advisors, is a member of the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation. At the time of the research project she was a PhD student in Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Shelby was interested in investigating traditional sewing and traditional law. Nicole sewed a pair of gauntlet mitts with Shelby’s guidance, to gain experience to bring to the process of listening to and learning from Annie and Dianne. The separation of intellectual knowledge from practical knowledge, often privileges the former as a sign of a superior culture, empowering colonialism (Machlup 1982; Smith 2012). In contradistinction to this, in what Nicole heard from Dianne, knowledge about traditional sewing is not separate from being able to sew.

RESEARCH JOURNAL

Nicole kept a record of this mitten making, which became a research journal. In it, Nicole constructed meanings from her experiences, and, later, realize the flaws in those ideas. The writing exposed the process of constructing meaning. A longer discussion of the value of journaling for this kind of research can be found in Richardson and St. Pierre (2008).



Figure 2. Nicole sewed these mitts for her partner with Shelby Blackjack's guidance, using his old motorcycle jacket and mended beadwork from a worn-out pair of his moccasins.

GIFT GIVING

It felt right and respectful to also bring something to each meeting that was from Nicole, personally. She brought biscuits she baked, or just blueberries. If research is ceremony (Wilson 2008), it is important to give it something from yourself. Despite being non-Indigenous, Nicole did her best to apply Indigenous research values to her project.

Approaches to Research Design

PRELIMINARY SESSION

At their first meeting, Nicole described the project and its intentions, making sure Annie and Dianne knew she would welcome their input and requests for changes at any time. They all agreed on terms and signed consent forms. Nicole left Annie and Dianne photographs of some Permanent Collection works, so they could think about what they might want to say.

ONE: LOOKING AT PICTURES, TIME TO THINK

At their next meeting, Nicole, Annie and Dianne discussed the images while Nicole took notes as preparation for the video interview. Annie and Dianne generously allowed Nicole to scan pictures from Annie's photo album to include in the resource files on Annie's work in the Permanent Collection.



Figure 3. Photo of Johnny Smith, Annie Smith's late husband, wearing a jacket created by Dianne and Annie, with beadwork by Dianne. Image from Annie's photo album.

TWO: VIDEO INTERVIEW

The video interview was recorded with Annie and Dianne handling the actual pieces from the collection. Collection Curator Garnet Meuthing unpacked the chosen works, and an Indigenous Yukon College student filmed the proceedings. Nicole had a list of questions based on earlier meetings, but as much as possible followed Dianne and Annie's leads. Dianne actually cut up the sheet of questions to demonstrate how to make beading patterns. Together the Smiths examined Annie's two dolls in the collection, as well as works by members of their family. Dianne is a gifted storyteller, and the resulting video weaves laughter with family stories, reflections on traditional sewing, and practical techniques.



Figure 4. Dianne explaining how much time it takes to bead a slipper top, January 2015.

THREE: VETTING

Nicole showed Annie and Dianne the draft edited video, and, over two meetings, the artists reviewed all the research material, including Annie's photos, to catch mistakes and remove anything they felt uncomfortable sharing. Nicole shared what she felt she was learning in order to check her understandings.

FOUR: PUBLIC PRESENTATION

A public presentation at the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre completed the research project's official phases. Garnet brought out pieces from the Permanent Collection. Dianne brought bannock. Annie sewed. We screened a ten-minute excerpt from the ninety-minute video, Dianne talked about the art pieces, and Nicole talked about what she had learned. This

was not only dissemination; this kind of presentation continues the dialogue – more information emerges in the process. One member of the audience suggested another person who could tell stories about other works in the collection. Nicole later screened the ninety-minute video for the Permanent Art Collection board and presented reports to the Kwanlin Dün Elders' Council and the Yukon College Board of Governors.



Figure 5. The Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre, where Dianne, Annie and Nicole shared the research in the Elders' Lounge.

FIVE: A NEW WAY OF EDITING

An academic paper can alienate the research knowledge from the Indigenous people who provided it, especially if the field of knowledge in which they are expert is not an academic one. Nicole read her draft paper to Dianne for her corrections. Reading it out loud added a different dimension to editing, making the paper a shared text. This collaborative editing process led to a published paper (Bauberger 2016). For this current article, circumstances prevented Nicole from reading the final version to Dianne, although she tried. However, Dianne and Annie gave consent for its writing, and Dianne told Nicole to go ahead and sending it, saying she likes the way Nicole writes.

ADDING TO THE ARCHIVES

Nicole gave packages of the research materials to Kwanlin Dün First Nation, the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre, and to the Yukon Permanent Art Collection. An innovative document, co-created with Dianne, outlined protocols for the use of the materials. Nicole will be accountable for managing this in the future.

FURTHER PUBLIC PRESENTATION

Although the research was officially over, it has an ongoing life. Dianne encouraged Nicole to sew with Annie in the evenings, which has resulted in their strong continuing friendship. In that context, and within the social matrix that each of these three artists inhabit, other presentations of this research became possible, valued enough by the community to be worth paying for. The Yukon Arts Centre hosted a public presentation by Annie, Dianne and Nicole as part of a series of public art-talks. A neighbouring First Nation invited a presentation at their cultural centre.



Figure 6. Sewing at Annie's place. Clockwise from left: Annie Smith, Marjorie Blake and Nicole Bauberger. Photo credit Rose Smith, Annie's youngest daughter.

The collaborations continue. Dianne joined Nicole as an elder at painting workshops for new Canadians at the Yukon Transportation Museum, adding an important Indigenous cultural dimension to the events. Dianne and Annie included Nicole in a Yukon Government commission of slippers for presentation to Canada's provincial and territorial premiers. Nicole beaded and sewed the slippers for the Northwest Territories premier, and, with Dianne, drew many of the other designs. Nicole feels blessed to have Annie and Dianne as part of her life, an ongoing learning relationship where they can visit, encourage and learn from each other.

Conclusion

Amongst Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's "94 Calls to Action," Number 83 calls for the Canada Council of the Arts to fund collaborative art projects between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. This idea would offer the possibility of a cultural commons, a cultural space arising from respectful contact between two cultures that exhibits features of both. This shared space must be initiated by Indigenous voices (Bydler 2017), which is (arguably) the case in this Recommendation, coming from the Commission. In the same volume, Aamold (2017) joins his voice to that of his colleague Ruth B. Phillips in insisting that "the idea of common ground must ... be countered by a recognition of the art and aesthetics of indigenous people on their own terms" (p. 25). *Needle, Bead and Voice* sought to elicit an aesthetic of traditional sewing in the terms of its practitioners, and to bring their voices forward. In many ways, Nicole approached the research as an artistic collaboration. Imagining research in this way can help avoid historically problematic researcher/subject power imbalances and can lead to co-production of knowledge and insight.

Meaningful opportunities can arise when northerners are empowered to do research. By undertaking this research project as a non-Indigenous Yukoner committed to living here, Nicole is and was working in a different ethical landscape than someone based in a southern city. The project drew from her personal cultural capital and connections in the Yukon, on which she depends to make her living, which holds her to a practical responsibility for her actions. Living here, she can take part in spontaneous opportunities to present and extend this research. Indigenous culture lives and grows in the Yukon, as it does in many northern places. Curators of traditional sewing artworks have an opportunity to redress the disempowering habits of colonialism manifested in the way we listen to artists within the art world of traditional sewing, instead supporting dialogues to help foster a cultural commons. Nicole and Amanda hope that the methods developed to undertake *Needle, Bead and Voice* can be used to continue this negotiation and begin new conversations elsewhere.

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BIO

Nicole Bauberger is a visual artist based in Whitehorse, Yukon. Her work observes the land around her and the ways human beings interact with their environments and each other. She completed a Diploma of Northern Studies from Yukon College in 2016, receiving a Governor General's medal. The research project that this article comes from was part of that diploma, which she pursued to understand more deeply the cultural context in which she was making art.

Amanda Graham is the Chair of the School of Liberal Arts at Yukon College (Yukon University after 2020), an instructor of Northern Studies and History, and a senior editor of *The Northern Review*. She is her institution's University of the Arctic's site coordinator and a long-time instructor of the UArctic's international online introductory core course, Introduction to the Circumpolar World. Her scholarly interests have mainly centred on the history and development of research and university "projects" in the Yukon, in the Canadian North, and in the Circumpolar World. She is enthusiastic in and about the promotion of research and research capacity and delights in working with students on their own research projects.