

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Bead Talk: Indigenous Knowledge and Aesthetics from the Flatlands*

**Carmen Robertson, Judy Anderson, and Katherine Boyer (eds.).** University of Manitoba Press. 2024. 240 pp. 62 figs. \$22.50 Canadian (ePub or PDF) \$27.96 Canadian (paper)

For many Indigenous peoples, beads are capable of communication, of telling stories, of carrying cosmologies, and of signifying networks of human and more-than-human relationships. Editors Carmen Robertson (Scots Lakota), Judy Anderson (Gordon First Nation), and Katherine Boyer (Métis and settler) use their positionalities to convene Flatland-born or -based Indigenous scholars, bead workers, artists, and curators for the creation of an edited book. Their contribution centers the power of beading traditions, relations, and visual aesthetics in storying a multiplicity of Indigenous worlds and temporalities. To take the bait of the title's idiom, that which must also be read beyond the figurative, *Bead Talk* lets beads and their readers talk. So, what are they saying?

The introduction reminds us of the history of certain subfields that continue to fetishize beads or suck their souls by framing them as sterile, antiquated, and artifactual. Rather than dwell on that particular theme, this book intervenes by focusing on the contemporary Indigenous art/media of beading praxis and the specific colonial and decolonial histories — past, present, and future — that they respond to. Careful attention is given to introduce all contributors and to detail how their kinship networks formed through in-person, Zoom, and other virtual beading circles, particularly in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Bead Talk* is organized in two parts, the first containing conversations and the second, essays. Part I is valuable in providing behind-the-scenes looks at beading processes, underscoring themes such as the value of mentorship, queer visual cultures, mental health, and institutional (museum, gallery, university) politics that impact Indigenous expression. Two standout chapters in this section are dialogues with Ruth Cuthand (Plains Cree and Scottish), a paradigm shifting beader. Cuthand details her work in *Trading Series* (2009), which represents viruses such as Smallpox through teeny tiny glass beads. By rendering the

microbial through colorful beads, she interprets the realities of colonialism, particularly biological warfare enacted by European settler-invaders, but also those of survivance and resistant creativity.

While I appreciate the transcribed conversations and attention to Indigenous methodologies of talking circles and beading circles, Part II feels more polished and is where the magic happens. Theoretical dives into the agency and animation of beads, along with felt stories of place, ceremony, and the more-than-human world find a home in this second part of the book. Sherry Ferrel Racette's (Métis) essay interprets work from Indigenous artists and theorists of many backgrounds such as Cree, Anishinaabe, and Métis to demonstrate how beadwork is "language, speech, and coded knowledge" (p. 158). Particularly powerful is her storying of Rosalie LaPlante Laroque's (Métis) wallpocket (c. 1870), which features a whooping crane, fish, and river. It invites viewers to feel the ecology of the Qu'Appelle River in Saskatchewan and decode the beaded imagery thereof, based on their degrees of connection to the place.

Readers will also appreciate the book's visual delights: plentiful full-color images of prismatic beads strung together in patterns, textures, and shapes that show just how beads are an Indigenous worldmaking technology. Beading is affective and multisensory, but it is strikingly visual; thus, the book would not have the same impact if the images were in black and white. A respirator mask, tea bag, moccasins, toilet paper, regalia, and a goalie helmet are among the objects, belongings, and ideas adorned by beads and depicted in the images throughout the book. Somewhat comparable to atoms, Legos, and binary digits, beads allure us in their singular form, but transform into limitless mediations, be they mundane, playful, political, horrific, or joyful pieces. While beading has been a part of Indigenous cultures and technologies since time immemorial, many beads were brought through globalized trading networks and Indigenous Peoples have adapted and used what they see fit in the ways they see fit. Anderson offers a reminder that Indigenous beading is expansive and need not always reflect an assertive aesthetic of decolonization, particularly one that is comprehensible by non-Indigenous eyes. Anderson states, "While my work is about decolonizing, I don't centre

decolonization. I believe that decolonizing is at the core of all of our work” (p. 58).

The strength of the edited collection lies in its meticulous curation of voices and beadwork that present Flatland beadworking on its own terms, framing it rightfully as leading-edge. Though I appreciated the authors’ honesty and intentionality in the scope and locality of the work, the Flatlands, the book left me wanting for a more comprehensive collection that engages with beadworking across diverse Indigenous communities. However, this limitation in scope creates space for other Indigenous editors and authors to take up similar methods in future research. Readers looking to supplement this book with others on Native beading could consider *Painful Beauty: Tlingit Women, Beadwork, and the Art of Resistance* by Megan A. Smetzer. While those gripped by the brilliance of contemporary Indigenous art could also pair it with Jeffrey Gibson’s *An Indigenous Present*.

*Bead Talk* ultimately affords beads and Indigenous Peoples the agency to transport us into textured relations with Land (prairie, plains, and flatlands), Indigenous knowledge systems, and community. This book is an essential read and citation for scholars interested in the intersections of current beadwork, Indigenous Studies, and Art or Visual Studies. Moreover, the book is certain to gain an audience via word of mouth in Indigenous culture and education committees, beading circles, and intergenerational art collectives that exist within and across Tribal and First Nations communities.

[Editor’s Note: A version of this review also appeared in the *K’wen ‘Inish-Ha* tribal newspaper for the Coquille Indian Tribe on the Oregon Coast.]

## REFERENCES CITED

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## *Glass Trade Beads in California*

**Clement W. Meighan and Elliot H. Blair (ed.)**. BAR Publishing, Oxford. 2024. 107 pp. Black & white and color illustrations. £38.00 (paper)

Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the archaeology of colonial California has undoubtedly seen reference to Clement Meighan’s glass bead type collection. Meighan began his work on the project some 75 years ago, drawing on the extensive archaeological and ethnographic collections at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology (what was then known as the Robert H. Lowie Museum) at the University of California, Berkeley. With periodic updates and expansions, Meighan eventually included beads from nearly all corners of the state, identifying some 440 different bead types. These included beads of essentially all known manufacturing techniques—drawn, wound, blown, mold-pressed, and Prosser-molded—not to mention a wide range of colors and finishes. Yet, Meighan passed away in 1997 without ever publishing his typology. And for most archaeologists and bead researchers—especially those who came of age in the new millennium—his bead project has existed primarily in the realm of shadow and rumor, taking on an almost mythical status. Many knew of it, but few had seen the actual manuscript. That is, until now.

With the blessing of Joan Meighan (Clement’s widow, herself now deceased), Elliot Blair has put in countless hours of work to bring this important manuscript to press. Indeed, there will be great satisfaction among archaeologists and scholars of a certain age in simply—finally—having a physical copy to reference. This is especially important for the ability to decode early publications that relied on Meighan’s typology to present bead findings. That said, the world of bead research has in many ways passed Meighan by. Meighan was a self-professed “splitter” and organized the beads in his type collection primarily by color, shape, and size. Today, however, most bead researchers use the typology developed by Kenneth Kidd and Martha Ann Kidd, and refined by Karlis Karklins (2012), that instead relies on manufacturing technique for the first order classification (hereafter Kidd/Karklins). While Blair identifies some areas where Meighan’s system does capture potentially meaningful variation missed by the Kidd/Karklins system, few if any archaeologists are likely to adopt Meighan’s typology wholesale. Similarly, significant time has elapsed since Meighan wrote the explanatory text that accompanies his typology. While it is interesting as a window into the history of California bead research, more recent studies have