

In conversation: "That's the kind of future that I create"

Afuwa and Evan Ducharme

In late 2018, TCR's Afuwa spoke with Metis artist and designer Evan Ducharme to discuss his latest collection, his commitment to community, and Metis history and futures on these lands.

Evan Ducharme: With this collection, [Hiraeth,] I started out with wanting to really sit in my joy and the joy that I feel for being a Metis person and for being a Metis person who came from a community where I was surrounded by my people, surrounded by the language and the practices and dance and music, and all of these things that my people do to survive, and created for themselves in order to make it through their hardships. But the struggle and the strife are never far away, and that's the reality of an Indigenous person in this country. Even when you're sitting in your joy, you always need to be reminded of the fact of what was lost to be in that moment.

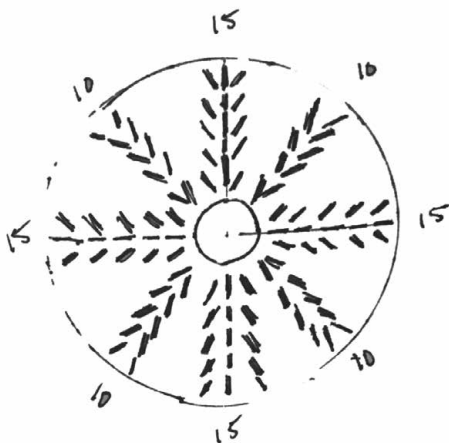
As I've become more of a public person with my work, I've been called upon to speak on issues: the settler state; colonialism; and within the fashion context, cultural appropriation, cultural theft, and also cultural revitalization through fashion—I've come to realize

that Indigenous fashion designers, Indigenous artists in general, are expected to bare our struggles and traumas for people to feel that our work is valid, that it has a space. There's this voyeurism for Indigenous struggle, and you can see it in literature, in poetry, in film, in so many artistic avenues—the general public isn't interested in seeing a happy Indian with a narrative of survival, thriving in your survival.

I knew that to be a successful designer, I would need to prove that I was good, that if I was speaking explicitly about my Indigeneity, that I would be "Indigenous designer, Evan Ducharme," not "fashion designer, Evan Ducharme; business owner, Evan Ducharme; artist, Evan Ducharme." It's that adage of needing to be twice as good to be even let in the door. Because I can move around in white spaces relatively unnoticed, unless people know me or I'm speaking explicitly about my Indigeneity, I was able to do that, and not a lot of

people can. That's a result of a lot of things—racism, colourism, sexism. I've been given this opportunity to say what I have to say, and I'm not gonna leave until I say it. [laughs]

Afuwa: But in a way, you're serving not only the community that you grew up



in, but the larger community—you're not saying, "I'm doing this thing for me." What you're saying is, "This is how high we can all go." But it also feels that some of the themes that you choose for your shows are more about yearning—it feels like there's a reaching, for something that isn't quite achieved yet.

ED: I tried really hard this season to be in that joyful, positive, happy mindset and to put that out there onto the runway, but it's very hard for me to be inspired by my ancestors and be inspired

by the places that I grew up in, and the languages and the practices, without knowing and understanding what was lost along the way and why my people needed to create their own language.

Even when I'm expressing that joy and that happiness, the longing and the nostalgia and the sorrow are not far away. They're intrinsically connected... and I'm not coming from a place of negativity; I'm coming from a place of truth. These stories are there for anyone to go and discover and educate themselves, but not a lot of people are ready to hear what I have to say, because fashion is supposed to be fun and fantasy and light and happy and sexy and dramatic, diametrically opposed to what I want to say with my work, which has more to do with who I come from, where I come from, and how I feel beholden to them, and also beholden to the people that I will never know. People who are still alive in my community went through things so that I never would. They created a place for me to grow up in.

A: It gives your work a complexity because even as you're striving for that joy, you're also holding the present and the past with you, and the future that—

ED: —That I hope—even though I'm always in reverence of the struggle that my people have gone through, I always have the hope that me, and my community, and the people that I

know who are creating work and doing work in many different spaces—that everyone is working together to create a future for people who haven't been born yet, for Indigenous people who haven't been born yet, for children who are going to be born to people who came to our lands to seek refuge from their own lands, for people who were brought here unwillingly. That's the kind of future that I create. I have no time for Indigenous people who think that refugees and the descendants of people who were brought here to these lands forcefully have no place. They consider them settlers, and that's not something that I agree with, and you can put me on the record. [laughs]

A: Okay. [laughs]

ED: You know? Stolen bodies on stolen lands cannot be held to the same standard as people who profit directly or indirectly from the systems that were created by the people who created them, for them to be able to succeed over somebody else.

A: And realizing how oppressions are linked across continents and across borders, the only way for us to deal with this is to use our own interconnectedness. In terms of your practice, because you're also a dancer, how does having those multiple expressions affect how you are in the world, and how you make your art?

ED: With my clothing, movement and the way it feels on the body has

always been paramount. People need to live their lives in these clothes. These aren't clothes for you to sit on a settee all day and be spoon-fed. These are for people who live and work and love and eat, breathe, and die. I want these clothes to go out and have a life. I don't want them to be sitting in a closet and just worn every now and then.

A: In terms of beauty, you're not just an artist, an artisan, a businessperson—it feels like there's soft edges around the things that you do. I took videos at the show, and the way the fabrics moved, they were really loving on the body, or they were accentuating movement, soft. Also, the way that you use gender in the show, and you were the only person in the [Water Me] show that had that variety in their models. I thought, "Oh, all of these clothes are beautiful, and they all fit. They all cherish who is wearing them."

ED: The garment dictates very little; it has a lot to do with the wearer. This idea that a person needs to look a certain way or have a certain body... apart from being ethically and morally corrupt—it's just not a good business model [laughs]. For clothing, something that's so personal and oftentimes brings about a myriad of emotions within a person when they're going to shop or they're going to get ready for a certain event, why would you not want to make that as joyful and as affirming of an experience as possible? Working with clients has

informed what I do. The work doesn't exist in a vacuum. I've always created clothes for every different shape and size of person, but I was educated in the western fashion academy where thin bodies were prioritized and expected.

It's always a journey to being as authentically myself as possible, and I asked myself, "Why do I not have people who look like my clients on my runway? I don't have a good reason why, when I know all of these amazing people who would be more than happy to live out that fantasy on the runway and do it very well. Why not?" I would challenge my contemporaries to ask themselves that same question.

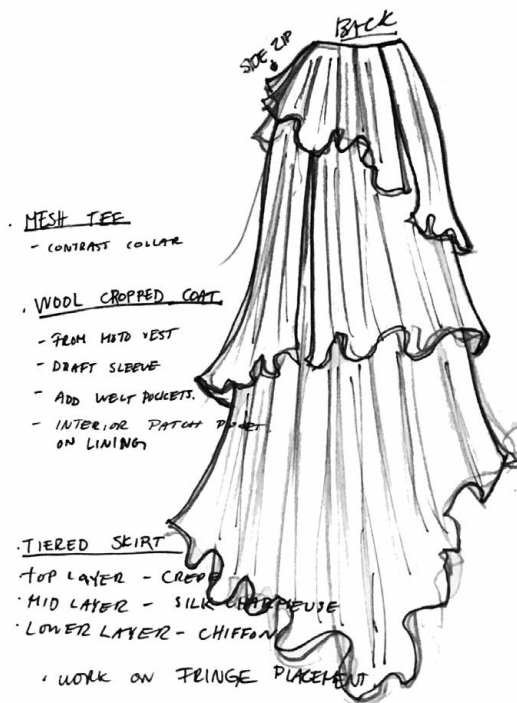
A: Do you see it as a way of having more integrity in your work?

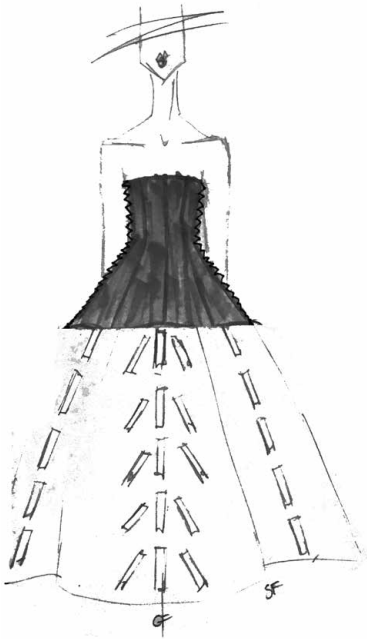
ED: I wouldn't say that I'm the end-all and be-all of bringing intersectionality into the fashion world because everyone always has a lot of work to be doing; there's no one who has it all. I'm en route. I'm en route to living up to the expectations I have of myself, and the expectations that I have of my industry and my contemporaries... And that comes back to the desire to leave something behind of worth that people can see themselves in because, myself, as a queer Metis person, I have few queer Metis ancestors. There's Gregory Scofield, who's an amazing queer Metis poet. Aside from that I'm a huge fan of Dr. Angelou, who's given me so many lessons on how necessary it is to revere the people who came before

you, and to pay homage to them and to never forget them in everything you do. When I read Gregory Scofield's work, that was the first time that it was in the languages and the places and the people that I know. I've read almost all of Dr. Angelou's books, and I speak specifically to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but that story wasn't written for me. But the lesson, and what I like about her so much, is her message that we're more alike than we're un-alike.

A: I think she would've been happy to know that her work influenced you. I think she was very kind, from the struggles and hardships she faced in her own life.

ED: And in that same breath, she's really educated me on giving people a little bit of grace and that lesson that everyone has their own histories and their own





baggage and their own traumas. I'm in a place right now in my career that my parents never thought I would be, that my ancestors never thought I would be. So, I have a responsibility to the people who came before me to create. The place where I grew up instilled me with the strength and the voice and the knowledge and the pride that carries me through my work, and especially carries me through the fashion industry as an Indigenous person.

A: And from that position, what are you going to say? The truth.

ED: My ancestors had to take up arms against what is now the Canadian state to save their people and to save their homelands. They did that so I would never have to. I might not be picking up a musket and hopping on a horse, but bit by bit, piece by piece, story by story,

I hope that I'm getting the reality out there and getting the truth out there because Metis identity and Metis history has been so morphed and mutated and perverted by the Canadian education system. The realities have been silenced. They've been virtually erased from history, but we speak of these things. We remember. This isn't something that happened in the distant past.

A: And it's also in your body. These are your ancestors.

ED: Blood memory.

A: Right?

ED: Mmhm. For this collection and the collection coming up, I did some research in Quebec, in Montreal, in the National Archives of Quebec. So, I was reading through all of these scrip documents from Manitoba, documents the Canadian government issued to Metis families that gave them a plot of land. But they purposefully gave Metis people plots of land that were virtually unfarmable, rocky land, filled with boulders. So, a lot of Metis families were forced into poverty, starvation, and were forced to sell their scrip back to the Canadian government so that the Canadian government would own that land. A lot of the Crown land in Manitoba is scrip.

A: Is that where you found the documents for your Census Print Bomber Jacket?

ED: I found those previously, when I was doing genealogy because me and my brother were in the process of becoming members of the Metis Nation of BC, but for reasons that were never made clear to us, we were denied, even though our first cousin is on their board. We've both come to the conclusion that we don't need to be registered somewhere to validate our Indigeneity, but that's a whole other conversation. So, the census documents were a revelation to me, especially the one with "French" scratched out all the way down and then "Indian" put on top. I really tried to put myself in the space of being the census taker going into what our community was like before the provincial park and the highway. What was it like for a stranger to look upon my ancestors speaking Cree, Ojibwe, French, English? They had no idea who they were. Who are these people? What are you?

A: And where do you put that multiplicity, because on the census form, there isn't enough space in the box.

ED: And the term "Metis," it's a modern term. It's a term that the Metis people came to a consensus on, because people use "Michif," which is how we refer to ourselves in our language, as a "Michif person." The language and the people are the same. But the Metis felt it was in their best interest to use a word that was more palatable to the

people that they were working with to ensure a future for the communities. I give reverence to that word, because that's how I've identified my whole life. That's how everybody in my community identifies. You could get into the etymology of the word and the ethics behind it, but it's really simple. They did what they had to do to get to where we are now.

