

Coiled and Imbricated Cedar Root, Grass and Bark Basket (.*skū* 'x) Previously Known Nlaka'pamux or Utā'mqt (Thompson River) Artist Ca. 1900 H: 5.75 in (14.6 cm) Max Dia: 8 in (20.3 cm) Base Dia: 6 in (15.2 cm) Top Dia: 5.5 in (13.9 cm) T0515a-b https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1152/basket?ctx=c5e447d6592abe5691df040beeb599ba58e27869&idx=2

By Alison Ariss Department of Art History, University of British Columbia



Otsego Alumni Review Vol. 8 (2023) - Otsego Institute for Native American Art History

This Nlaka' pamux or Utā'mqt coiled cedar root basket  $(.sk\bar{u}'x)$  in the Thaw Collection (T0515ab) intrigued me as soon as I saw it.[1] It is a tactile object that can be held in one's hands but embodies so much more—it reveals information about the knowledge, skill, and time required for its creation. The intelligence it holds became apparent during my interaction with its material being and its intersections of form, design and historical context.

Thousands of cedar root coiled baskets made by Salish women along the North Pacific Coast and interior were eagerly purchased by settler women and tourists in the late 1800s and early 1900s.[2] Re-situated into the settler economy as functional domestic objects, baskets were devalued by the heteropatriarchal structures of colonialism and its art historical canon.[3] Unattributed and treated as mere commodities rather than art forms, it is difficult to connect baskets in museum collections with their makers and their histories. Western lenses of value have focused on determining origins, describing techniques and fixing design meanings, disregarding the complex social and economic relations embodied in baskets.[4]

Described in ethnographic texts as living around the confluence of the Quoo.OOy (Fraser) and Thompson rivers, and centered where the town of Lytton, British Columbia (BC) is now situated, the Nlaka'pamux (Thompson) and especially the Utā'mqt (Lower Thompson) were well-known in the late nineteenth century for the production of coiled baskets.[5] The major monograph on Salish baskets, published under Herman Haeberlin's name in 1928, relied on fieldwork by James Teit, a Scottish man who had married into a Nlaka'pamux community. Teit consulted dozens of Nlaka'pamux and Utā'mqt women in the early 1900s about basketry on behalf of the ethnographer Franz Boas, the project's proponent.[6] Like many ethnographic texts of its time, the women's voices were mediated by Teit, Haeberlin, Helen Roberts and Franz Boas, resulting in published material (including this essay) distant from the initial conversations.[7] The monograph's text discusses the women as numbered informants, with only limited details of their identities in the appendix.[8] Their names and social standing were likely known to Teit: for example, a 2019 publication supports re-situating "No. 25, Mrs. Paul" as Kalalshe (Susan Paul), a highly respected woman, an expert basket weaver, and the wife of Xixne? (Chief James Paul) from Spuzzum, BC.[9] The monograph's emphasis on object quantification and its coding of informants separates them all from their webs of social relations. The expertise of Nlaka' pamux women becomes anonymized and amalgamated data in parallel with their baskets.

From this distance, how do I recover a sense of the knowledge and creative prowess of the Thaw basket's maker? Learning more about the knowledge these women held requires a critical review of ethnographic sources to locate moments where Indigenous women's voices are evident and may lead to what they valued most in such a basket.

A small and slightly elongated sphere, this .skū'x would be called *slkapuxê'lEmox* or "nutshaped" by Nlaka'pamux basket makers. Without the addition of what Teit and Boas considered a "modern" foot (the low, coiled pedestal at the base of the basket) the commonly made form was said to resemble a hazelnut.[10] Comfortably held with both hands below its carinated sides (shoulders), this .skū'x is typical of a woman's workbasket. Made to hold weaving tools or other belongings, the opening of such a basket was sized for a woman's hand and leather thongs were usually inserted between coils on the lid or body as handles.[11] Similar forms include a knitting basket created by Mrs. Amy Cooper of the Soowahlie Reserve in Stó:lō territory (Figure 1).[12] Cooper's ingenuity transformed the lid, allowing yarn to pass through the opening while knitting, evidence of one basket maker's integration of new fiber-working technology with existing Salish material culture. Boas' preference for older forms may have viewed such modifications as inauthentic, and he classified these as "fancy baskets"—a broad category including items made for the tourist trade.[13]

The Thaw collection's .skū'x was made through the labor-intensive and physically demanding process of coiling a core of processed, dried, and prepared split cedar roots and then sewing them into a spiral form with finely split cedar roots.[14] Simultaneously, the exterior was decorated with thin strips of dried and dyed grass and bark, folded back over each completed stitch, to create an even, decorated surface. This process of imbrication enabled endless combinations of design and colour. For this .skū'x, a natural beige grass provides the ground for alternating lines of red and dyed black bark (Figure 2). Visible use wear on the foot reveals the bundled cedar roots (Figure 3). There is less aggressive wear to the body and lid, and the interior is clean with few indications of use.

Tightly woven, the base, body, foot and lid are evenly stitched (Figure 4). The weaver's care and attention are visible in the tiny adjustments made to the thickness of her spiraling cedar coil bundle as she stitched from base to rim, to maintain a level foot, a spherical body with even coils, an even rim, and a snug-fitting lid. Otsego Institute co-participant Isabella Robbins advised that an experienced basket weaver can determine another weaver's handedness in the lean of the stitches. Likewise, Nlaka'pamux women showed Teit the visual evidence of right and lefthanded weavers in the clockwise and counterclockwise direction of their coils.[15]

Circling the foot of the .skū'x are alternating red and black right-angle triangles, divided by opposing right-angle triangles of natural beige grass to sustain the "proper" separation of colours according to Nlaka'pamux aesthetics.[16] A horizontal red bark line of imbrication visually separates the foot from the body. A truncated zig zag line in dyed black bark appears above and is topped by two separate horizontal chains of hexagons in red and black bark. Hexagonal designs were "rare" and were known as *Lukaä'ist*, or "grave box pattern."[17] A second truncated zig zag line in red circles the rim of the basket. The lid begins with a small spiral of red bark followed by three zigzag lines that alternate black, red and black, radiating around the lid in a starburst effect.[18] The alternating colours and symmetrical designs complement one another, and the individual design elements (zig zags, truncated zig zags and triangles) are the basis of many Salish geometric patterns in the region. Of the similar workbaskets I have located at the National Museum of the American Indian, the Canadian Museum of History, and the UBC Museum of Anthropology, only one other is wrapped in a hexagonal design.[19]

The fit of the design to the form indicates the maker's capacity to visualize her completed basket before she begins to weave.[20] Creating the illusion of a seamless design on a spiral and spherical form required spatial and mathematical thinking in three dimensions (Figure 5). A rectangular storage basket in the NMAI collection has been attributed to a previously known Cowlitz or Lillooet maker and displays a remarkably similar pattern.[21] How might I envision the possible relationships between these baskets and their maker(s)? How did such designs travel?

The Nlaka'pamux and Utā'mqt women who spoke with James Teit at the turn of the century described complex social decision-making regarding the sharing and use of designs and patterns that reflects their autonomy, flexibility, and creativity.[22] Salish territories are home to multiple and overlapping kinship, intermarriage, and trade networks connecting people across time and space: the designer and her baskets may have travelled for ceremonies or in marriage, and her baskets may have been gifts between individuals or commodities in the tourist trade.[23] The only documented movement of the Thaw collection .skū'x is in 1992, at the creation of its accession file. Before coming to the Morning Star Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, this .skū'x was one of 300 Native American baskets collected after 1930 by renowned American fiber artist Claire Zeisler.[24] How many exchanges has the basket experienced in its 123+ years of life?

I cannot know what the maker, Zeisler, or its other owners valued in this basket, but basket makers in past and present scholarship are shown to share a focus on foundational materials, their handling in the weaving process, and the fit of designs with a basket's surface.[25] Basket making was described to me as the control of energy in a spiral form by Sherry Farrell-Racette, and basket makers' deep understanding of their ecology has earned them respect as ethnobotanists.[26] These descriptions point to the embodiment of the comprehensive knowledge acquired by Indigenous women cultural practitioners over a lifetime of process and practice, along with the maintenance of social networks for access to basketry materials.[27] A skilled basket maker knows how and where (and from whom) to locate and gather the straightest cedar roots, how to process cherry bark and grasses for stable and even imbrications, and how to produce long-lasting colours with dyestuffs and mordants. Although baskets were made throughout the region, the Utā'mqt (Lower Thompson) were said to have the best materials in a riverine environment rich in cedar and salmon.[28] Ecological and social processes require time, care and patience, resonating with Aldona Jonaitis' assessment of weaving practices as "gestational" in their material relationships with seasonal cycles.[29] In this light, this .skū'x is visible as a source of Nlaka'pamux knowledge regarding its maker's expert integration of materials and knowledge into a form carefully wrapped in a complex design. This .skū'x remains a form and materialization of accumulated wealth and wisdom in the cultural production of Nlaka'pamux women.

Cite as: Ariss, Alison. "Coiled and Imbricated Cedar Root, Grass and Bark Basket (T0515a-b)." *Otsego Institute Alumni Review* Vol 8. (2023) [https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/ariss.pdf].

## **Endnotes:**

[1] Herman K. Haeberlin, James A. Teit, Helen H. Roberts, under the direction of Franz Boas, "Coiled Basketry in British Columbia and Surrounding Region," *US Bureau of American Ethnology, Forty-First Annual Report* Vol. 1919/24;1919/24 (Washington: Govt. Print. Off, 1928), 390.

[2] Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 136. See also Sharon Fortney, "Symbols of Identity, Containers for Knowledge and Memories," in *S'abadeb: the Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and*  *Artists*, edited by Barbara Brotherton (Seattle/Vancouver: Seattle Art Museum, Douglas & McIntyre, 2008), 186-87; Ira Jacknis, "The Artist Himself: The Salish Basketry Monograph and the Beginnings of a Boasian Paradigm," in *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, edited by Janet C. Berlo (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 142.

[3] Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, "Encircles Everything': A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts," in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Terri Greeves (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Art Institute, University of Washington Press, 2019), 44-45; Jacilee Wray, "Marketing Olympic Peninsula Basketry and the Indian Arts and Crafts Act," in *From the Hands of a Weaver: Olympic Peninsula Basketry Through Time* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 21-42.

[4] Jacknis, "The Artist Himself," 136-38. See also Livingston Farrand, "Basketry Designs of the Salish Indians." *Memoirs of the AMNH* 2, Part 5, Publications of the Jessup North Pacific Expedition 1, Part 5. 391-399. New York: AMNH. 1900.

[5] Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 133, 143-44; Charles Hill-Tout, *The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout: Volume 1: The Thompson and the Okanagan*, edited by Ralph Maud (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1978 (1899)), 41, 56; Fortney, "Symbols of Identity," 178. See also Jennifer Iredale, "Mali Quelqueltalko: The Writings of a Nineteenth-Century Nlaka'pamux Woman," *BC Studies* no. 203 (2019), 83-84, n.4. Iredale provides <u>Quoo.OOy</u> as the Fraser River's Nlaka'pamux name. See also James A. Teit and Franz Boas, *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia*, 16242 (New York: American Museum of Natural History and Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1900), 167. Beyond Teit's reference to the Lillooet calling the Nlaka'pamux "Cê'qtamux, which name is derived from that of Thompson River," I have not located an Indigenous name for the Thompson River in Nlaka'pamux language resources online.

[6] Haeberlin et al., 131. Franz Boas' Preface outlines the monograph's production after Haeberlin's death: Helen Roberts prepared the text and Boas provided supervision, editorial guidance and concluding remarks. Wendy C. Wickwire "To See Ourselves as the Other's Other: Nlaka'pamux Contact Narratives," *The Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 1 (March 1994), 5; Wickwire addresses Teit's life and context. See also Leslie H. Tepper, *Earth Line and Morning Star: Nlaka'pamux Clothing Traditions*, (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994), xvii; Jacknis, "The Artist Himself," 136.

[7] Margaret Bruchac, "My Sisters Will Not Speak: Boas, Hunt, and the Ethnographic Silencing of First Nations Women," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57, no. 2 (April 2014), 153-71; Iredale, "Mali Quelqueltalko," 87.

[8] Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 162, 431-62. Appendix, notes regarding informants.

[9] Haeberlin et al., 446. Appendix notes regarding "No. 25" Mrs. Paul, who was mentioned frequently in the monograph's text. Iredale, "Mali Quelqueltalko," 87; Iredale's paper studies the published writings of Mali, the daughter of Kalalshe (Susan Paul) and Xixne? (Chief James Paul.

[10] Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 197, and 203 (fig. 28 e).

[11] Haeberlin et al., 159, 194; Hilary Stewart, *Cedar: Tree of Life to the Northwest Coast Indians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), Fig. 1, 176. Sketch of cedar root basket, showing use of leather thong handles.

[12] Amy Cooper (nee Lorenzetto) was a knowledgeable Stó:lō woman involved in the resurgence of Salish wool weaving in the 1960s. See Oliver Wells, "Dedication," *Salish Weaving: Primitive and Modern*, Second Edition (Sardis, BC: Oliver N. Wells, 1969), 2. See also Fortney, "Symbols of Identity," 185, figure 8.5.

[13] Haeberlin et al., 159; Jacknis, "The Artist Himself," 137, 139; Wickwire, "Nlaka'pamux Contact Narratives," 3. Although Wickwire addresses oral traditions, Boas' focus on locating and publishing the most ancient forms is evident.

[14] Haeberlin et al., 159-166, 202-203. According to the Nlaka' pamux women the nut shape is a customary form (203), and the foot was introduced circa 1800 (191).

[15] Isabella Robbins, conversation at the Otsego Institute, Oct 20-23, 2022; Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 160, 168.

[16] Haeberlin et al., 304.

[17] Haeberlin et al., 327. See also Farrand, "Basketry Designs," 392-393. Farrand explains how the suffix "äist" stands for "pattern" in Nlaka'pamux and allows for the formation of compound words to describe patterns.

[18] Although the "Scholar Attributions" in the accession file indicates there is a hole in the lid "for yarn to pass through," hands-on inspection showed that lid is solid. This basket was not designed for knitting. See Thaw Collection Accession File, T0515a-b (PDF).

[19] UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. A2299 a-b,

http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=salish+basket&row=505 My search was not exhaustive, and I imagine there are similar baskets in collections in Canada, the US and internationally. I located comparative lidded women's workbaskets at: National Museum of the American Indian, Catalogue No. 10/992, https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI\_109181?destination=edan\_ searchtab%3Fpage%3D2%26edan\_q%3Dcoast%2520salish%2520basket National Museum of the American Indian, Catalogue No. 23/1046, https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI\_245289?destination=edan\_ searchtab%3Fpage%3D8%26edan\_q%3Dthompson%2520river%2520basket UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. 2928/3, http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=salish+basket&row=15 UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. 3116/5 a-c, http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=salish+basket&row=39 UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. A2433 a-b, http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=salish+basket&row=245 UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. Nd564 a-b, http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=salish+basket&row=325 UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. D1.372, http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=salish+basket&row=594 Canadian Museum of History, Catalogue No. 1989-025-035a-b, https://www.historymuseum.ca/collections/artifact/210147

[20] Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 216, 259. See 302-03 for dreams as a source of designs.

[21] Haeberlin, et al., "Coiled Basketry," 327, 354. See illustration labeled "Figure 100" page 337; Link to image of basket with hexagonal design, labelled as "Cowlitz" by NMAI, Cat No. 20/8284. <u>https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI\_222583</u>

[22] Haeberlin et al., 228, 300-303.

[23] Iredale, "Mali Quelqueltalko," 86-88. See also Keith Carlson and Sonny McHalsie, *You Are Asked to Witness: The Stó:lō in Canada's Pacific Coast History* (Chilliwack, BC: Stó:lō Heritage Trust, 1997), 88-94.

[24] Thaw Collection Accession File, Collection No. T0515a-b, PDF. Art Institute of Chicago, "Claire Zeisler," web, <u>https://www.artic.edu/artists/37413/claire-zeisler</u>. Smithsonian Institute, "Claire Zeisler fonds," web, <u>https://www.artic.edu/artists/37413/claire-zeisler</u>.

[25] Sharon Fortney, "Identifying Stó:lō Basketry: Exploring Different Ways of Knowing Material Culture," MA Thesis, Anthropology and Sociology, UBC, March 2001.

[26] Sherry Farrell-Racette, conversation at the Otsego Institute, Oct. 21, 2022. And Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips, "'Encircles Everything'," 65. See also Fortney, "Symbols of Identity."

[27] Nadia Jackinsky-Sethi, "Art as a Container for Culture," in Ahlberg Yohe and Greeves (eds), *Hearts of Our People*, 157; Aldona Jonaitis, "The Scientists and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal," in Ahlberg Yohe and Greeves (eds), *Hearts of Our People*, 119-121.

[28] Rena Point Bolton and Richard Daly, *Xweliqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch* (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2013), 8; Haeberlin et al., "Coiled Basketry," 144.

[29] Aldona Jonaitis, conversation at the Otsego Institute, October 21, 2022.

## **Figures:**



Figure 1. Photograph of knitting basket created by Mrs. Amy Cooper before 1935. Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology, Catalogue No. A1889a-b, <u>http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/search/item?keywords=A1889+a-b&row=0</u>



Figure 2. Exterior view of body of T0515a, showing imbrication. Photo by author Oct. 2022.



Figure 3. View of foot of T0515a, showing use wear and coil foundation of split cedar roots. Photo by author Oct. 2022.



Figure 4. Interior of T0515a, showing even stitches and their lean to the left. Photo by author Oct. 2022.

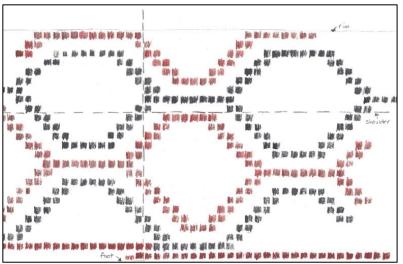


Figure 5. Sketch of design at its point of shift over the coil spiral, designated with vertical hashed line. Sketch by author.

## **Bibliography:**

- Berlo, Janice C. and Ruth B. Phillips. "Encircles Everything': A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts." In *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*. Edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Terri Greeves. 43-73. Minneapolis: Minneapolis Art Institute, University of Washington Press. 2019. Print.
- Bruchac, Margaret M. "My Sisters Will Not Speak: Boas, Hunt, and the Ethnographic Silencing of First Nations Women." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57, No. 2 (April 2014): 153-71. DOI: <u>https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12058</u>
- Carlson, Keith Thor and Albert (Sonny) McHalsie, You Are Asked to Witness: The Stó:lō in Canada's Pacific Coast History. Chilliwack, BC: Stó:lō Heritage Trust. 1997. Print.
- Farrand, Livingston. "Basketry Designs of the Salish Indians." *Memoirs of the AMNH* 2, Part 5, Publications of the Jessup North Pacific Expedition 1, Part 5. 391-399. New York: AMNH. 1900. URL: <u>http://hdl.handle.net/2246/35</u>.
- Fortney, Sharon. "Symbols of Identity, Containers for Knowledge and Memories." In *S'abadeb: the Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists*. Edited by Barbara Brotherton. 178-97. Seattle/Vancouver: Seattle Art Museum, Douglas & McIntyre. 2008. Print.
- Fortney, Sharon. "Identifying Stó:lō Basketry: Exploring Different Ways of Knowing Material Culture," MA Thesis, Anthropology and Sociology, UBC, March 2001. URL: <u>https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0090038</u>.
- Haeberlin, Herman K., James A. Teit, Helen H. Roberts, under the direction of Franz Boas. *Coiled Basketry in British Columbia and Surrounding Region*. Vol. 1919/24.
  Washington: Govt. Print. Off. 1928. URL: <u>https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.c006932931</u>.

- Hill-Tout, Charles. The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout: Volume 1: The Thompson and the Okanagan. Edited by Ralph Maud. Vancouver: Talon Books. 1978 (1899). Print.
- Iredale, Jennifer. "MALI QUELQUELTALKO: The Writings of a Nineteenth-Century Nlaka'pamux Woman." *BC Studies* No. 203 (Autumn 2019): 83-174. <u>https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/mali-quelqueltalko-writings-nineteenth-century/docview/2313707401/se-2</u>.
- Jacknis, Ira. "The Artist Himself: The Salish Basketry Monograph and the Beginnings of a Boasian Paradigm." In *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*. Edited by Janet C. Berlo. E-book. 134-161. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1992. <u>https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb03801.0001.001</u>
- Jackinsky-Sethi, Nadia. "Art as a Container for Culture." In Ahlberg Yohe and Greeves (eds). *Hearts of Our People*. 157-61.
- Jonaitis, Aldona. "The Scientists and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal." In Ahlberg Yohe and Greeves (eds). *Hearts of Our People*. 116-25. Print.
- Point Bolton, Rena and Richard Daly. *Xwelíqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch*. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press. 2013. Print.
- Stewart, Hilary. *Cedar: Tree of Life to the Northwest Coast Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1985. <u>https://canadacommons-</u>ca.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/artifacts/1873817/cedar/2622884/
- Tepper, Leslie H. *Earth Line and Morning Star: Nlaka' pamux Clothing Traditions*. Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization. 1994. Print.
- Teit, James Alexander, Franz Boas. The Thompson Indians of British Columbia. Vol. no. 16242. New York: American Museum of Natural History and Jesup North Pacific Expedition. 1900. URL: <u>https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.16242</u>
- Wells, Oliver N. Salish Weaving: Primitive and Modern. Second Edition. Sardis, BC: Oliver N. Wells, 1969. Print.
- Wickwire, Wendy C. "To See Ourselves as the Other's Other: Nlaka'pamux Contact Narratives," *The Canadian Historical Review* 75, No. 1 (March 1994): 1-20. <u>https://muse.jhu.edu/article/574510/summary</u>
- Wray, Jacilee. "Marketing Olympic Peninsula Basketry and the Indian Arts and Crafts Act." In *From the Hands of a Weaver: Olympic Peninsula Basketry Through Time*. 21-42. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. 2012. Print.