

Engraved Heritage: The Interplay Of Domestic Architecture, Wooden Carvings, And Spatial Identity In Joseph Bruchac's *Children Of The Longhouse*

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Abstract

Study of any culture is undone without an inquiry into its works of craftsmanship. Art, clothing, tools, pottery, glassware among others are archeological finds across all historical cultures. Rich in history, spirituality and meaning, the Native American culture reflects diverse traditions, customs and beliefs of hundreds of American Indigenous tribes. Fur blankets, moccasins, crafted weapons, carved utensils, engraved bowls, totem poles, turquoise jewelry, wampum, shells, beads, pottery, spirit masks along with other items provide insights into the ceremonial, utilitarian and decorative skills of Native Americans. Through detailed descriptions of the creation and use of such artifacts, Joseph Bruchac intricately ties cultural identity of early Mohawks to material objects and spatial dynamics. By analyzing these depictions, the paper demonstrates how Bruchac uses tangible elements to depict the intangible—values, relationships, and communal harmony. Drawing from Indigenous literary criticism, cultural anthropology and architectonics, the paper positions *Children of the Longhouse* as a narrative of cultural preservation and a symbol of cultural pride, resistance and the indigenous connection to spiritual world.

Keywords: place, space, native, identity, cultural preservation, anthropology

Introduction

With a career spanning fifty decades, Joseph Bruchac the renowned Native American author, poet, martial artist and storyteller, has authored numerous books for children, teenagers and adults including novels, poetry and anthologies. Born as a member of Abenaki heritage, he was brought up in a society of diverse tribal communities which has significantly contributed to his writings which are preservation and celebration of Indigenous cultures, histories, and traditions. Bruchac's novels, notably his fictions for children, are deeply rooted in oral traditions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of native people, native landscape, and cultures. Alike every other native authors, Bruchac also provides a medium for transmission of Indigenous knowledge, ensuring its relevance for contemporary and future audiences through his works. Bruchac's *Children of the Longhouse*, is a historically accurate portrayal of the Haudenosaunee (a tribe of Iroquois Confederacy) people's culture before the arrival of European settlers. As a wonderful, engaging and informative work, it connects readers to the values and traditions of the Mohawk. Set in the late fifteenth century, the story follows the lives of twin young siblings, Ohkwa'ri and Otsi:stia, as they navigate their roles within their community. Through vivid descriptions of daily life, communal rituals, and the making of artifacts, Bruchac underscores the importance of storytelling as a tool for cultural preservation and identity formation.

Bruchac provides an authentic representation of Indigenous life and language with a meticulous attention to cultural details. He, as a custodian of Indigenous knowledge systems, exemplifies his broader commitment to Indigenous storytelling and implements it as a pedagogical tool for indigenous linguistic revival along with a reawakening of its artistic traditions. By focusing on the Mohawk way of life in early-settler era, *Children of the Longhouse* highlights the dynamic connection shared by physical environments and crafted objects in perpetuating indigenous cultural values. Bruchac not only advocates to decolonize literature and promote Indigenous perspectives, but also challenges dominant narratives through his portrayal of material culture and special arrangements.

This paper aims to explore the above mentioned dimensions within *Children of the Longhouse*, analyzing how domestic architecture and wooden artifacts reflect spatial identity and cultural heritage. A multi-disciplinary methodology combining textual analysis and cultural theory investigate how domestic architecture and material culture signify identity and heritage in his work. By exploring Bruchac's literary techniques and thematic implications the textual analysis of *Children of the Longhouse*, incorporating insights from cultural anthropology and Indigenous studies, enables a comprehensive understanding of the novel's underlying themes and its portrayal of Indigenous spatial practices and artifacts. This complementary approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the text and positions it as a narrative that bridges the material and the symbolic, the individual and the communal, the past and the present.

The Longhouse as a Space of Identity

Edward Relph's concept of place emphasizes the human experience and the deep connection individuals form with specific locations, which he terms as *placeness*. In *Place and Placelessness*, Relph critiques the homogenization of spaces through globalization, arguing that authentic places foster a sense of belonging and identity, while placelessness erodes these qualities (Relph 1976). Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, explores the dynamic interplay between space and place, defining space as an abstract realm of freedom and potential, while place emerges

when space is imbued with human meaning and experience. Tuan's phenomenological approach underscores how places are shaped by emotions, memories, and cultural practices, transforming physical spaces into personalized environments (Tuan 1977). Together, Relph and Tuan illuminate the profound relationship between people and their surroundings, emphasizing the centrality of place in human identity and existence.

Mohawks, the tribe illustrated in the novel is one of the six tribal nations of the *Haudenosaunee* (People of the Longhouse) Confederacy. Hence, the longhouse, a defining architectural structure of the Iroquois people, is central to their cultural and social fabric. As its name suggests, a longhouse is an elongated but narrow communal dwelling made of wooden poles, covered by bark or mats. Being a matrilineal clan, mothers and children of the same clan with their family live at designated sections in these longhouses which typically measures up to 200 feet in length. Built without a window and doors only at the two ends, these structures had hearths at the centre for cooking or as fire pits for warmth. The central corridor served as a shared space, fostering community interaction and cooperation, whereas the sides of the house as living areas for families. The longhouse was more than a shelter; it was a microcosm of Iroquois society, encapsulating their values, traditions, and worldview. Culturally, the longhouse or 'Great Longhouse' reinforces the societal norms and cultural identity of the Iroquois people and reflects the political and social unity of the Confederacy. Principles of cooperation, shared responsibility, and communal living serve as untaught lessons of the longhouse. Being matrilineal, the children of these longhouses engage extensively with their nurturing maternal family while father and his relations stand as a backing relationship of encouragement.

In *Children of the Longhouse*, Joseph Bruchac vividly portrays the longhouse of "fifty families" (21), as a space of identity, intertwining physical structure with cultural significance. The longhouse "is the longhouse of the Bear Clan... although most of the two hundred people who live in the great longhouse are of the bear clan. There are people living in the longhouse who belong to the clans of Turtle and the Wolf," serves as a setting symbolizing the interconnected lives of its inhabitants. For the protagonist siblings, Ohkwa'ri and Otsi:stia, the longhouse represents a secure space where values like respect, cooperation, and responsibility are instilled. Bruchac's detailed descriptions of the longhouse's layout—the individual family sections, the shared hearths, and the central corridor—underscore its role as a site of collective identity. Beds lined the two sides of the longhouse. They were used as benches for people to sit on during the day. All the people could partition off their own sleeping places and use the area under each bench bed for storing their most private possessions (20)

The archeological findings from Mohawk sites show longhouses adorned with carvings and objects of significance. These longhouses and its artifacts, functions as a repository of cultural memory and tradition providing a window into the material culture, technical prowess and social organization of Mohawk people in sixteenth century. Bruchac subtly highlights this when describing the elders' role within the longhouse, as they pass down oral traditions and counsel the younger generation. The physical space of the longhouse, therefore, mirrors the intangible bonds of heritage and identity that tie the community together.

The Iroquois values of unity and collective well-being is exemplified by the author in detailing shared activities within the longhouse, such as meal preparation, crafting, and decision-making. These shared experiences shape young characters and their identities, as they learn to explore and handle their roles within the community. Archeological finding validate the setting of the novel, as longhouses of varying width and length were excavated with numerous nuclear family compartments depicting different clans of Mohawks. The anthropomorphic figures and carved symbols in pottery and other artifacts found from these sites reinforce a cultural identity tied to longhouse space. Hence, the longhouse in the novel goes beyond being a dwelling space to a place of self-exploration, developing identity, respect and harmony with one's culture and heritage.

is not merely a dwelling but a dynamic space that encapsulates Iroquois cultural identity. Through its physical structure and the activities it houses, the longhouse represents the values of unity, respect, and continuity. Bruchac's portrayal in *Children of the Longhouse* serves as a reminder of how architecture and space can be imbued with profound cultural and symbolic meanings, making the longhouse a living testament to Iroquois heritage.

Wooden Artifacts and Carvings

The renowned American anthropologist and one of the fathers of historical archeology, James Deetz has advocated that historical archeology can be interpreted as "the science of material culture" Emphasizing on the physical and cultural significance of material objects, Beaudry and others put forth the pan-cultural role of object-symbol correlation to cultures. Thus objects such as wampum and other cultural artifacts serve as repositories of collective memory and identity. Physically, wampum beads, often crafted from shell materials, and game sticks or water cups, delicately carved from wood, reflect the craftsmanship and environmental resources of their creators. Functionally, wampum served as a medium for communication, treaty-making, and storytelling, while game sticks played roles in recreational and ceremonial contexts, water cups for everyday use Culturally, these objects transcend their materiality, manifesting the values, histories, spiritual beliefs and artistic milestones of the communities that created and used them. They act as tangible links to the past, preserving narratives of identity, tradition, and intergenerational continuity.

Pointing out the cultural significance of various wooden artifacts, Bruhac, intricately describes the manufacturing and utilization of items such as the wooden cup, fighting club, and blowpipe, to emphasize their cultural significance within the Iroquois community. These objects are not merely utilitarian; they embody the traditions, values, and heritage of the

people who create and use them. Bruchac represents the tribal tradition, history, investments, knowledge and respect for natural assets of Iroquois community when he describes the time and care invested in crafting these items. Committed in preserving the cultural practices of Iroquois people, Bruchac captures the ethos in his narrative, highlighting the cultural identity and values intertwined with the practical and aesthetic aspects of artifacts.

The wooden cup, for instance, represents both sustenance and craftsmanship. Cups carved from wood are practical items used daily, "Every man owned a cup...with some design on it which indicated his clan...used for dipping up drinking water...in forest" (31). Yet their creation requires skill and attention to detail, reflecting the artisan's understanding of natural materials. The process of carving a cup is more than an act of creation—it is a form of honoring the resources provided by the land. Ohkwa'ri's uncle Big Tree "had been working on that cup for two moons" and Ohkwa'ri describes hollowing the hard maple piece with glowing coal placed into the cup;

Ohkwa'ri blew and the coal burned with a sound like that of a tiny storm wind, reddening the blackened wood, burning the hollow deeper...making sure that the coal moved around the bowl evenly to make the inner shape of the cup just right...Big Tree took his sharp-edged scraping stone and used it to clean out the bowl. (30)

Bruchac's depiction of this seemingly simple object serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness between the Mohawk and their environment, where even the smallest artifact holds a spiritual dimension. Big Tree had also carved "two man-high poles set up outside the east and west approaches to their village along the river, the *Te-uge-ga Ga-hun-da*, The River at the Forks" (35). The poles establish a clear demarcation of the village's boundaries, signaling entry points to the community. Their placement along the river, at a significant geographic feature underscores the importance of natural landmarks in Mohawk spatial organization. These poles likely serve as a warning to outsiders or a greeting to allies, communicating the village's presence and its control over the surrounding territory. This use of carved poles to delineate space highlights the Iroquois understanding of geography and their ability to integrate natural and cultural elements into their spatial identity.

Similarly, the fighting club is an artifact steeped in cultural and historical importance. Carved from hardwood, the club is both a weapon and a symbol of strength and protection. Bruchac describes it "a terrible weapon" with a handle in length of a man's forearm "was carved into a ball the size of a fist...was perfectly round except for one sharp point, carved like a tooth, on the striking face of the club (16). Beyond its functional use, the fighting club often features intricate carvings or designs that signify its owner's identity, clan, or achievements. Two Ideas, the War Captain, named it "*Onawi'ra*, The Tooth" (16). These carvings transform the club into a personal and communal artifact, connecting the individual to their lineage and the broader community.

Each of these artifacts are cultural markers that embodies sustainability and the ancestral wisdom of Mohawk people passed down through intergenerational teachings. In describing these objects, a tangible link to the past, Bruchac's highlights the duality of these objects, which are designed not only to meet practical needs but also to reflect the cultural and spiritual values of the community. These objects are not merely ornamental; they serve both utility and visual appeal. Form and function coexist harmoniously in these artifacts which are shaped by the needs and customs of the people who created them. By weaving these artifacts into the fabric of his storytelling, Bruchac not only preserves the cultural practices of the Iroquois but also invites readers to recognize the value of material culture in shaping and sustaining Indigenous identities.

Craftsmanship and Community

Crafting artifacts, weaving and constructing homes, are collaborative processes that emphasize the communal nature of craftsmanship among Iroquois people. These processes not only fulfill practical needs but also strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of unity within the community. By weaving this theme into his narrative, Bruchac underscores the interconnectedness of individual contributions and collective well-being in Iroquois society.

Building a longhouse is a significant undertaking that involves the participation of multiple members of the community, each contributing their labor and expertise. Men are typically responsible for harvesting and preparing the materials, such as cutting saplings and gathering bark for the framework and walls. Women contribute by preparing mats and assisting in the assembly of the structure. This division of labor highlights the collaborative spirit and mutual respect that characterize Iroquois society. The shared labor fosters a sense of ownership and pride, as the completed longhouse becomes not just a shelter but a symbol of collective identity and cooperation.

Bruchac illustrates how artifacts like wampum serve as memory keepers, encapsulating the cultural and spiritual narratives of the Iroquois people. He incorporates the story of first wampum, crafted by *Aionwahta*, one of the founders of League of Peace. Wampum, typically made from polished purple and white clam or snail shells native to Eastern coastline and crafted into belts or strings, holds profound symbolic and practical significance. These served as mnemonic devices, each bead or pattern representing a specific element of a story, an agreement or a relationship between different nations. Bruchac hints at this dual role of wampum as both a physical artifact and a repository of intangible cultural memory. Reflecting the reverence with which wampum is treated Bruchac narrates "wampum would only be brought out during the day when a council was taking place. It would be put carefully away before the sun had set..." (87) highlighting its role as a sacred object that bridges the past and present.

Bruchac's descriptions of crafting smaller artifacts, such as game sticks or baskets, further illustrate this communal aspect. Archeologists have excavated 'juvenile' artifacts (Funk, 53) which were poorly made and undecorated items by young

women or men as training. These activities hence often take place in shared spaces, such as the central area of the longhouse, where multiple generations work together. The act of crafting is not isolated but part of a larger social experience, where individuals exchange stories, jokes, and teachings while working. The communal nature of crafting also occurs in gathering of materials, such as wood for poles or reeds for baskets. Such group activities involving both elders and younger generations emphasize sustainable practices and collective responsibility for the environment and ensure that the resources are used wisely and replenished for future generations.

As a reflection, both Ohkwa'ri and Otsi:stia, though just eleven winters old are good artifacts. Ohkwa'ri appreciates Otsi:stia as a great weaver of elm bark baskets, which she makes use of to gather strawberries. Ohkwa'ri's description of the process of crafting a game-stick of *Tekwaarathon* is an evidence for him be a quick learner and a great artisan. He ruminates,

First a hickory log would have to be cut, and that was always done in fall. Then it would be split into four pieces or more, using stone wedges and a heavy wooden club to drive them. That splitting would be done in the cold of winter, when the tough hickory would be easier to split.

Next the stick would be roughly shaped and bent in two places...It would not be until late summer that the final work of shaping and smoothing the stick down would be done. The holes to string the lacing of the net would be made with a bow drill, and the stick would be oiled with bear grease. It took a full year to make a ball stick. (106-107)

Additionally, the process of crafting reinforces the Iroquois's respect for the environment. The younger generation learns to harvest materials such as wood, reeds, or bark in a way that ensures the resources remain abundant for future use. This practice instills a sense of responsibility and gratitude towards nature, reflecting the Iroquois belief in living in harmony with the land. Through hands-on learning, storytelling, and mentorship, younger members of the community acquire both technical skills and learn the cultural ethics of sustaining resources for every person in the community and for future generations. Bruchac's depiction of craftsmanship highlights the fostering of intergenerational continuity, ensuring that the wisdom and heritage of the community endure for future generations.

Comparison with Broader Indigenous Contexts

Spatial identity is a universal concept in Indigenous cultures, deeply embedded in their architecture and carving traditions. It can be observed in Indigenous traditions worldwide, from the Maori meeting houses of New Zealand to the totem poles of the Pacific Northwest. Joseph Bruchac's novel is a rich portrayal of Iroquois life, with detailed descriptions of domestic architecture, material culture, and spatial identity. These themes resonate with depictions of Indigenous practices in other works, such as Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* series, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*. By comparing these works, it becomes evident how Indigenous literature often uses architecture and material culture as tools for cultural preservation and storytelling. These comparisons highlight how Indigenous literature, regardless of regional or cultural differences, uses space and materiality as powerful tools for preserving heritage and fostering resilience.

Conclusion

Joseph Bruchac's *Children of the Longhouse* masterfully intertwines architecture and artifacts to narrate a story of cultural resilience and identity. Through detailed depictions of the longhouse and wampum, the production of fighting clubs, game-stick and water cups, Bruchac demonstrates how physical spaces and material culture serve as repositories of cultural memory and expressions of communal values. His portrayal of communal living, sustainable practices, and intergenerational knowledge transfer resonates with Indigenous traditions worldwide. By highlighting the connections between individuals, places, and things, Bruchac advances our knowledge of how Indigenous communities create and maintain their identities in the face of past and present difficulties. He argues for a nuanced understanding of the complexity and relevance of Indigenous spatial activities, challenging prevailing paradigms that frequently minimize or oversimplify them.

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