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wahkotowin: Reconnecting to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin (Cree Language)

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Article abstract

The Spirit of the Language project looks to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin (Cree language), sources of disconnection between nêhiyawak (Cree people) in Treaty 6 and the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin, and the process of reconnection to the Spirit of the language as voiced by nêhiyawak. The two researchers behind this project are nêhiyaw language-learners who identify as insider-outsiders in this work. The work is founded in Indigenous Research Methodologies, with a particular respect to ceremony, community protocol, consent, and community participation, respect and reciprocity. We identified the Spirit of the language as having three distinct strands: history, harms, and healing. The Spirit of Indigenous languages is dependent on its history of land, languages, and laws. We then identified the harms or catalysts of disconnect from the Spirit of the language as colonization, capitalism, and Christianity. The results of our community work have identified the methods for healing, or reconnecting to the Spirit of language, by way of autonomy, authority, and agency.

wahkotowin: Reconnecting to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin (Cree Language)

Lana Whiskeyjack, Kyle Napier

ABSTRACT   The Spirit of the Language project looks to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin (Cree language), sources of disconnection between nêhiyawak (Cree people) in Treaty 6 and the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin, and the process of reconnection to the Spirit of the language as voiced by nêhiyawak. The two researchers behind this project are nêhiyaw language-learners who identify as insider-outsiders in this work. The work is founded in Indigenous Research Methodologies, with a particular respect to ceremony, community protocol, consent, and community participation, respect and reciprocity. We identified the Spirit of the language as having three distinct strands: history, harms, and healing. The Spirit of Indigenous languages is dependent on its history of land, languages, and laws. We then identified the harms or catalysts of disconnect from the Spirit of the language as colonization, capitalism, and Christianity. The results of our community work have identified the methods for healing, or reconnecting to the Spirit of language, by way of autonomy, authority, and agency.

KEYWORDS   nêhiyawêwin, decolonization, land-based, ceremony, kinship

Lana Whiskeyjack, the lead researcher of the Spirit of the Language project, is a treaty iskwêw (woman) who holds her doctorate degree from University nuhelot'įne thaiyots'į nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills. Kyle Napier, the co-writer and a graduate research assistant with the Spirit of the Language project, is Dene/nêhiyaw Métis and a member of Northwest Territory Métis Nation. Both of us have independently dedicated ourselves to learning the Indigenous languages of our lineage and supporting community-based Indigenous language revitalization methodologies honouring ancestral governance and kinship systems. As Indigenous academics, the goal of our Spirit of the Language project is to respond to the community-voiced needs of Indigenous language learners in reconnecting to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin. Our work seeks to braid three themes of interdependent impacts against Indigenous language vitality, which we have identified as the language's history, harms, and healing. Each of those themes are described further in this article, which also addresses our work supporting trans-systemic knowledge sharing by nêhiyawak communities in academia. The collaborative work and insight of both authors is based on the collective knowledge, teachings, reflections, and guidance from our experiences, mentors, knowledge keepers, communities, academic references, and research participants whom the authors may have viewed as extended relatives. Those who have shared

their words in this work as participants may have opted to remain anonymous, while others preferred to remain credited.

At the immediate outset of our work with the Spirit of the Language project, we realized our dual roles as researchers in the transition between nêhiyaw and non-nêhiyaw knowledge systems. We recognize this work is done through insider-outsider trans-systemic methodologies (Kovach, 2009, p. 51) in that both of the authors are nêhiyawak dedicated to supporting community-based nêhiyawêwin revitalization, while also working within the bounds of colonial institutions. In navigating the plurality of knowledge systems, we have deliberately prioritized Creator's Laws over academic convention. Prior to and throughout this project, we committed to Indigenous ceremony to ground and guide us towards maintaining good health and relationships — both in ourselves and with those we involve in this work. We then conducted a literature review, with a focus on the catalysts of disconnection from the Spirit of the language. Throughout the process of conducting the literature review, we were mindful about smudging and holding ourselves in ceremony, both for the spiritual integrity of the work as we conducted it and the healing processes required because of the retraumatizing nature of our research. Identifying those disconnects enabled us to more informatively discuss the Spirit of the language, and to support community-voiced reconnection to the Spirit of the language by the language-speaking community.

Figure 1. Matilda Lewis, Kevin Lewis' mother, holds the small birchbark canoe in the sharing circle. A larger birchbark canoe was built recently at the kâniyasîhk Culture Camp.

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Our collaboration is informed by Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) as proposed in the foundational works of nêhiyaw scholar Margaret Kovach (2009), Shawn Wilson (2008), Leona Makokis (2010), and Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), as well as by wahkotowin — or the specific nêhiyaw law that guides kinship and relationality — as reflected in our active inclusion of nêhiyaw ceremony and of the nêhiyawêwin speakers and learners in their insights. We held 12 community visits with nêhiyaw scholars and nêhiyawêwin language-learning communities. These twelve community visits were made up of nine individual interviews and two sharing circles, one with six nêhiyawak collaborators and another with 14 collaborators — all from diverse backgrounds. We began each of our community visits asking permission through protocol, giving the initial offer of tobacco to each potential speaker. Each interview began in nêhiyaw ceremony, sometimes smudging before, during, or after each interview, or holding other sacred land-based ceremonies throughout the collaborative process. We sought and maintain informed oral consent in

our obligations to community members and their words, including in an oral agreement not to publish their words without their review.

These conversations often addressed personal experiences related to community language trauma. We were in the trusted role of actively stewarding recordings and coding intimate and personal lived experiences. By reflecting on these sensitive moments, we were then able to discuss community-expressed methods for reconnection to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin. The results of this research further affirm the elements of the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin, which are that the Spirit of the language is intrinsically connected to land, language, and laws. These interviews reaffirm what we have identified as the catalysts of Indigenous language decline: colonization, capitalism, and Christianity. Those involved in this collaborative work then further provide pragmatic, Indigenous-centred epistemological solutions for greater fluency of nêhiyawêwin by nêhiyawak, which include solutions such as language agency, autonomy, and authority by Indigenous language communities. The collective knowledge of our Indigenous relation and references lead our research to providing pragmatic, Indigenous-centred epistemological solutions for greater fluency of nêhiyawêwin by nêhiyawak, which include solutions towards language agency, autonomy, and authority by Indigenous language communities.

History, or the Vitality of nêhiyawêwin: Land, Languages, and Laws
Indigenous languages have been alive on this continent for the many millennia since Creation. Indigenous communities across this continent often spoke several Indigenous languages — in trade, travel, and treaty with other groups of Indigenous Peoples. These languages, and their variances within the linguistic continuum, have each been facing a decline in fluent language speakers.

The language of us nêhiyawak is nêhiyawêwin, which is the most prominently spoken Indigenous language in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). nêhiyawêwin is a polysynthetic Indigenous language still spoken by 96,575 speakers across 11 recognized dialects in the 2016 census (Statistics Canada, 2017). nêhiyawak also represent the largest population of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and one of the largest in North America, with more than 200,000 nêhiyawak in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). Statistics Canada still incorrectly refers to nêhiyawêwin as Cree, even though the language has the strongest presence of the Indigenous languages. We have distinguished nêhiyawêwin from other Indigenous languages in three ways: land, language, and laws. nêhiyawêwin is ancestrally connected to nêhiyaw-askiy or mistik — literally, nêhiyaw lands; nêhiyawêwin is distinct in its literal language — in its pronunciation, meaning, and linguistic variances; and nêhiyawak are guided by our specific laws — which inhabit ceremony, connections, and Creation.

nêhiyawêwin does not use Standard Roman Orthographic capitalization conventions, whether through nêhiyaw Roman Orthography or spirit markers. As a result, nêhiyawêwin words, including proper nouns, are not capitalized, so as not to hold orthographic hierarchy and prioritize one word, sound, or morpheme as more important than another. We have made the stylistic decision not to italicize nêhiyawêwin or English words, so as not to establish a hierarchy of one language over another.

The root words of nêhiyawak are nêwo, meaning four, and ayisiniywak, meaning beings of this earth. In our language, we nêhiyaw(ak) are the Indigenous people of four parts of the soils of this earth. The steady decline of nêhiyawêwin vitality is not to be discussed without consideration of historical contexts and forced removal of nêhiyawak from their connection to ancestral homelands. As shared by renowned nêhiyaw educator Reuben Quinn, more than 600,000 words and concepts were awakened in nêhiyawêwin by being spoken. These days, most of the nêhiyawêwin languages and concepts are, however, known to be sleeping — with only 15,000 words and terms generally known to be awake (Leavitt, 2018). The catalysts of such Indigenous language loss will be considered more thoroughly later in this paper.

nêhiyawak are often referred to by their misnomer, Cree. In early interactions between nêhiyawak and the French on this continent, the nêhiyawak identified the land region they had lived upon to be kenisteniwuk, or kinistinôk. The French mistakenly heard, and subsequently referred to nêhiyawak as, Kristenaux, further truncating the term to the phonetic "Kris," "Cris," "Crise," or "Cree," as written in English (Lacombe, 1874, p. 7; Milloy, 1990, p. 6; Preston, 2018). Renowned Knowledge Keeper Vince Steinhauer shared his teachings that the word "Cree" arrived when nêhiyawak first came in contact with the French Canadians (personal communication, September 12, 2008). He continues describing how the nêhiyawak warriors called out to the newcomers with their sâkowê, a call to identify one's self and tribe from a distance, which the French Canadians translated as a "cri" (cry, yell, shout, shriek), and those French Canadians therefore began to call nêhiyawak "Cree" (personal communication, September 12, 2008). "This sâkowê is still done in most singing and ceremonial songs to create joy, enthusiasm and create excitement," writes Kevin Lewis, a nêhiyaw knowledge keeper and founder of the land-based kâniyâsihk Culture Camps (personal communication, July 25, 2020). Acknowledging the irony of the term "Cree" not being within the nêhiyaw lexicon, David Thompson writes, "The French Canadians... call them 'Krees', a name which none of the Indians can pronounce... " (Hopwood, 1971, p. 109). Of course, Cree is not a nêhiyawêwin word, as the letter R is not spoken in the "y" dialect of nêhiyawêwin, except with borrowed words or in the Moose (L) or Attikamek (R) nêhiyawêwin dialects, yet previous and ongoing publications on nêhiyawak still include instances in which nêhiyawak are referred to as Cree. This story reflects the distinction between the three languages, French, English, and nêhiyawêwin, and their ways of interpreting the historical and contemporary experiences and worldviews of one another.

Foundational Works around Indigenous Research Methodologies
The intention of our methodology, as with our research, is to work against the historical abuses and mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples and nêhiyawak by centering the voices of communities and their intentions when conducting the collaborative process and producing work in resulting publications. We drew from prominent Indigenous academics to set the foundation for our research practices, protocols, and processes: Margaret Kovach to provide a nêhiyaw-oriented research methodology, Leona Makokis to provide insight into co-developing community-oriented solutions, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith to provide considerations around

community and community work as insider-outsider researchers. We also draw from the works of Glen Coulthard and Neyooxet Greymorning to address the roles of capitalism, Christianity, and colonization as catalysts of disconnection to the Spirit of Indigenous Languages in our literature review.

Margaret Kovach's *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (2009) is referenced by Indigenous scholars for its role in proposing methodological frameworks grounded in Indigenous research methods. Kovach (2009) notes that

> Indigenous knowledges and the results of Indigenous research can never be standardized, for they are in relation to place and person. How they integrate into Indigenous research frameworks is largely researcher dependent. At the same time, Indigenous methodologies are founded upon Indigenous epistemology, and they will (or ought to) be evident in such frameworks, revealing shared qualities that can be identified as belonging to an Indigenous paradigm. (p. 55)

Following Kovach's lead, we work with nêhiyaw paradigms, as informed by our inward intuitions through lived experiences as nêhiyawak and nêhiyaw scholars. Kovach (2009) continues, "Because of the interconnection between all entities, seeking this information ought not to be extractive but reciprocal, to ensure an ecological and cosmological balance" (p. 57). In this way, we engage in reciprocity, giving back to communities and community members when we are able. We attain consent by community members each time we use their voices or images in publications. Further, published results of our work are shared back with community members, and all proceeds in honoraria or payments resulting from our work are given back to the land-based community camp that supported our stay as researchers.

The distinguished nêhiyaw educator Leona Makokis et al., (2010) of Saddle Lake Cree Nation provides context as to the fundamental epistemological connection between language and culture, as well as the protocols and processes guiding the relationships between people and the land underfoot. She writes,

> As we learned more about language learning methods we learned more about Indigenous culture and knowledge systems, and it became apparent that we had to find a way to relate our learning in a manner consistent with the protocols and relationships of our people. (p. 9)

Makokis et al., (2010) then addresses the contextual dangers of framing Indigenous or environmental stories through an academic or analytic lens:

> We have to tell the story, this is not an academic exercise, so to express this in academic theoretical frameworks would be to contradict what we have learned, would be a disservice to our people and our knowledge, would be a re-colonization. This learning determined my research method — a qualitative

approach which is more effective in evaluating language learning/acquisition experience, rather than seeking empirical data on how many language speakers there are or measuring how much language a learner acquires in a given period by a particular method. Our Elders have taught us that the quality of the experience, is the first measure, the results will follow. (p. 9)

With enduring respect to Makokis' words, one outcome of the Spirit of the Language project is the ongoing collaborative efforts maintained between us with, by, and for the nêhiyawak collaborators and Elders.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), the renowned Māori research theorist, posits communities as "physical, political, social, psychological, historical, linguistic, economic, cultural, and spiritual spaces" (p. 215). Where Smith makes the distinction between community-based projects and those afforded through academic spaces, the Spirit of the Language project works in both academic and Indigenous spaces. "There are also protocols of respect and practices of reciprocity," continues Smith (2012): "Consent indicates trust and the assumption is that the trust will not only be reciprocated

Figure 2. The inside of the teepee at kâniyâsihk Culture Camp, where we held the sharing circle.

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but constantly negotiated — a dynamic relationship rather than a static decision" (p. 229). Our research process recognizes the sovereignty and authority of participants over their words, and uses of their words, in that we continually ask for consent prior to publishing — consent that can be withdrawn at any moment. The Spirit of the Language project is also conducted as a form of what Smith (2012) and Kovach (2009) refer to as insider-outsider dynamics. As nêhiyawak on our own learning journeys, our dual role in this dynamic encourages us to think critically within this collaborative work.

The contributions of these Indigenous scholars to the global field of Indigenous scholarship supported our collaborative work, work that prioritized community-led processes and protocols informed by relational kinship through the law of wahkotowin. wahkotowin is embodied by — but not limited to — relationality, reciprocity, humility, humour, sensitivity, ceremony, honesty, and kinship. As nêhiyawak, wahkotowin guides our lives and our Indigenous Research Methodology, within which we situate our academic community-based participatory research methodology. Upholding wahkotowin further necessitates ongoing consent from those whose words or visual representations are included in this work, and conducting our work according to the terms voiced by the communities and individuals involved.

Harms, or the Catalysts of Language Disconnect: Colonization, Capitalism, and Christianity

Our literature review sought to include anything that affected the relationships between nêhiyawak and the histories embodied in the Spirit of our languages, specifically in our lands, languages, and laws. Each colonial policy created and enforced by various governments reflected a deliberate intention to forcefully remove Indigenous Peoples from their land, starve Indigenous Peoples of their languages, and illegalize the ceremonies inherently bound within our nêhiyaw laws. Our literature review is introduced by the theoretical frameworks presented by Dr. Glen Coulthard (2014) and Dr. Neyooxet Greymorning (2018). Coulthard's (2014) conceptualization of grounded normativity addresses the simultaneous impacts of colonization and capitalism on the land, while Greymorning (2018) identifies Christianity and government policy as ensuring forced disconnect between Indigenous Peoples and their lands and languages. This research process required many moments to pause for reflection, prayer, and ceremony.

Glen Coulthard (2014), a Dene theorist of Denendeh, introduces the term *grounded normativity* as a theoretical framework for understanding land- and place-based experiential knowledges flowing through Indigenous Peoples in their ancestral homelands. Coulthard (2014) says, "place-based practices and associated ways of knowing" fit contextually within the land (p. 60). He furthers this point by addressing the connection between Indigenous languages and cultures, within both human and nonhuman relations, related to areas of specific place and land (p. 61). Coulthard is explicit in his words, which connect place-based learning with Indigenous land-based practices involved in Indigenous ceremony, dancing, regalia, culture, language, and nearly every aspect of Indigenous ways of being. Coulthard (2014) elaborates that the primary motive of settler-colonialism was claims to territory and land, subsequently leading to "structured dispossession" through ideological and literal displacement and diaspora (p. 7). Coulthard (2014) identifies Indigenous anticolonialism and anticapitalism as

> a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around the question of land —
> a struggle not only for land in the material sense, but also deeply informed
> by what the land as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach
> us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in
> nondominating and nonexploitative terms… I call this place-based foundation
> of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice grounded normativity, by
> which I mean the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and
> longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical
> engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman
> others over time. (p. 13)

Coulthard's introduction of the term grounded normativity into academia allows for further emphasis on the ancestral depth of the roots that support place-based learning in Indigenous languages.

Neyooxet Greymorning is an Arapaho scholar and language activist who is currently a professor in Anthropology and Native American Studies. Greymorning (2018) observes governmental policies and control as deeply impacting Indigenous identity, particularly governmental abetting and support of residential schools. Greymorning (2018) states, "It should also be realized that governments, like those found in the United States and Canada, have crafted policies regarding Indigenous people in such a manner as to give those countries an ability to manipulate, and to a large degree define, who is and who is not Indigenous" (p. 2). Greymorning (2018) looks to the Doctrine of Discovery (19), published by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, as a pinnacle document for the religious imperialistic influence of colonizers onto Indigenous Peoples. The Doctrine of Discovery followed Columbus' return to Spain, and specifically denied Indigenous Peoples' right and title to their own lands, as they were not viewed as people because they were non-Christian. This paved a path for Spain's assumed jurisdiction over Indigenous lands, as colonizing nations competed for the lands now colonially referred to as North and South America. Greymorning (2018) continues,

> In Canada, the definition of who is Indian is prescribed by the Indian Act (1876), which historically not only could change a female Indian's identity to white, but could also change a white female's identity to Indian. Another example is provided by the Canadian government's policy to change the tribal identity of First Nations women who marry men from other tribal bands. (p. 3)

That is, Canada maintained the use of policy to assert its heteronormative, patriarchal views on identity, which included enfranchising Indigenous Peoples, and particularly women, into status Canadians, as opposed to recognized Indigenous persons, also known then as official Section 35 Indians under the Indian Act. In addition, this policy-making automatically negates non-heteronormative relationships held between Indigenous Peoples. Greymorning (2018) further identifies that the colonially-administered religious imperialism continually diffracts precolonial Indigenous connections to land.

In our literature review, we identify capitalism, colonization, and Christianity as the main catalysts of disconnect from the Spirit of Indigenous languages within North America. The literature review we conducted illustrates a chronological history and thematic pattern of colonial, capitalist, and Christian impacts on Indigenous connections to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin since 1492. We recognize each catalyst as an inter-related cause of the disconnection between Indigenous Peoples and their lands, languages, and laws. Through our content analysis, we determine these catalysts to be three separate but inherently interwoven imperialist ideologies affecting Indigenous language vitality: colonization, disconnecting Indigenous people from their languages and culture through forced removal, assimilation, enfranchisement, slaughter, and slavery; capitalism, enforcing diaspora of Indigenous Peoples for the exploitation of their lived-upon lands, while continentally damaging ecologies and species for profit; and Christianity, which dominated through religious doctrine and denounced the existence of Indigenous Peoples as peoples because they were not Christian, while simultaneously delivering state-

funded residential schooling. Together, these led to a diffraction in the connection between Indigenous Peoples, the living creation inherently connected to the lands, and the languages of those lands.

Our research resulted in a thorough, albeit truncated, post-contact chronology observing the effects of catalysts against the vitality of nêhiyawêwin through colonially administered policy-making, the compounding diaspora begetted by capitalism, and the horrors of religious imperialism executed against Indigenous languages. We look to how colonization, capitalism, and Christianity have categorically compounded against Indigenous Peoples, while we situate nêhiyawêwin as one of many Indigenous languages affected by those catalysts. We also recognize the irony of writing Indigenous Peoples into European chronologies presented in a format based on the Gregorian calendar, and in an academic context that contributes to the Anglophonic and European biases towards conventions around time, accountability, worldview, and typography.

Terra nullius is a primary example illustrating the interconnectedness between all three catalysts. Terra nullius is a pre-colonial papal doctrine, with terms unavailable in nêhiyawêwin. In its intent, terra nullius denies humanity to those who do not believe in Christ. According to terra nullius, land lived on by non-believers is considered unoccupied — or, rather, nobody's land. This precedent for sources of Indigenous language disconnect through colonization, capitalism, and Christianity would start on this continent in 1492. Upon Christopher Columbus' first arrival to Taíno-occupied Guanahani — colonially referred to as San Salvador in the Bahamas — he and several of his ships would almost immediately begin the enslavement and slaughter of the Taíno. Over time, European demands for lands to colonize would justify the wholesale cull of millions of bison and the slaughter of other species who have lived on this continent in abundance and reciprocity with Indigenous Peoples since Creation. European demand for pelts and bones would create a market in the fur trade, interrupting the many millennia of subsistence living for various Indigenous Peoples and causing the extinction and near-extinction of many animals that were relied on for subsistence. These actions would be justified through nefariously-worded religious doctrine denying identity, and therefore land attachment, to those who were not believers in Christ. The governmental sway of resource extraction industries, such as gold, uranium, and diamond mining, and energy sectors such as the development of dams for hydro and oil and gas extraction for power, would cause sincere harms to environments and the Indigenous Peoples. The effects of mining and environmental degradation have only compounded as they directly imbalance climates and ecologies, transforming the land and altering the populations and behaviours of many species' relationships to the land. The institution of reserves for Indigenous containment and national parks under the guise of conservation mandated the forced removal and relocation of Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral homelands, while colonial jurisdictions assumed authority over the care and protection of now federally-protected animal populations.

The Indian Act in Canada, and Title 25 under the United States Code, would enable the continental illegalization of Indigenous ceremonies, such as the potlatch, Sun Dance, and other ceremonial dances, along with banning and confiscation of ancestral and cultural regalia.

The Indian Act would further determine itself as holding jurisdiction over the pluralities of Indigenous genders and sexual identities, limiting two-spiritedness and broad spectrums of Indigenous genders into a reductionist binary of male or female (Lee and King, 2020). In its many evolutions, the Indian Act would continually gate-keep Indigenous access to land, inherently held by Indigenous people, by instituting a pass-system (Legacy of Hope, 2015). This pass-system required Indigenous people living on reserve to request permission from an Indian Agent before leaving the reserve (Legacy of Hope, 2015). Indigenous women were constantly disenfranchised through assimilationist and patriarchal policies maintained by Canada's Indian Act, and Title 25 in the United States, while Indigenous women simultaneously faced ongoing forced sterilization (Greymorning, 2018) and risk-by-existence through ongoing systemic issues related to Missing, Murdered, and Exploited Indigenous Peoples (MMEIP).

Worst of these catalysts of diffraction were the residential schools. At their beginnings, churches and their missionaries would appropriate Indigenous languages to produce Catholic and other Christian texts in native languages for the purposes of conversion, beginning with catechisms in 1610 (Curtis, 1915, p. 272). Residential schools on the continent were trialed and failed in the early 1600s, but re-emerged in the 1800s. Canada's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, would make attendance to residential schools and Indian Day Schools mandatory for all Indigenous children. This began one of the most atrocious institutional systems of abuse against Indigenous Peoples in recorded Canadian history, as only exacerbated with the legalized forced removal of Indigenous children from their families to impose their attendance at these schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). This legacy of removing Indigenous children from their families continues today through the foster care and child welfare systems. There are now three times more Indigenous children in foster care today than were in residential schools at the height of the residential school system in 1931 (Blackstock et al., 2004).

These catalysts and their impacts are ongoing. The policies, abuses, and displacements against Indigenous Peoples by Canada are considered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) as constituting cultural genocide. Canada and international organizations have responded to these legal claims with apologies and minor, but still colonially-entrenched, policy revisions. As a whole, these attempts at reconciliation have not thoroughly addressed the half-millennia of maintained abuses. This lack of resulting change in oppressive policies and ongoing policymaking, and the absence of genuine consultation with Indigenous Peoples toward tangible results, has continually enabled further disparity between Indigenous Peoples and the Spirit of their ancestral language.

Foundational Theory: Indigenous Research Methodology and Institutional Affiliation

Further to colonization, capitalism, and Christianity, there exists historical and ongoing oppression, abuse, and racism against ayisiniywak within academia and institutionalized education, as historically maintained from outsider academics and researchers. These centuries of estranged documentation and extraction have resulted in a justifiable distrust between some

Indigenous Peoples and university institutions. As nêhiyaw academics working within the University of Alberta, we have an opportunity to address those challenges while ensuring that voices from the community remain supported and upheld, such that we steward the words shared with us as opposed to convolute them.

Our work actively seeks to maintain Indigenous spaces for Indigenous language speakers, knowledge keepers, language learners, and academics to voice their insights and recommendations for reconnecting to the Spirit of the language for their language community. Our methodology prioritizes nêhiyawak epistemologies to ensure this work is supported by communities, and we provide the results of our research as a vehicle to further empower and embolden the voices of those who have dedicated themselves as speakers or learners of nêhiyawêwin and its teachings. We draw from Indigenous scholars to identify the processes related to our own Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2001). In positioning our methodology, we look first to Makokis' acknowledgement of the protocols of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the land to further inform the reciprocal-relational methods that guide our work. We also draw upon her work when we revisit communities to invite community members to share their own preferred means to learn the language. We then incorporate the work of Smith (2012), who asserts the importance of recognizing variations of community self-identification, and who reinforces that Indigenous Research Methods are themselves community-defined, as well as contingent and established on the basis of mutual respect and reciprocity. In this way, we only worked with nêhiyawêwin learners and speakers in spaces occupied mostly by nêhiyawak and those with a self-identified connection to nêhiyawêwin to better honour the sensitivity of nêhiyaw spaces.

IRM deviates from Community-Based Participatory Research, or CBPR, in that it centers Indigenous hope, healing, and resistance. Shawn Wilson is an Opaskwayak nêhiyaw who works with international communities. He acknowledges that Indigenous paradigms are outside the scope of conventional academic framing, noting the differences in academic work as Indigenous researchers working within Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and productive methodologies. "From an epistemology and ontology based upon relationships, an Indigenous methodology and axiology emerge," writes Wilson (2001, p. 77). To elaborate, Wilson (2001) describes Indigenous axiologies as being "built upon the concept of relational accountability" (p. 77). That said, the collaborative research conducted through the Spirit of the Language project focuses on and prioritizes nêhiyaw worldview and relationality. This inherently means steering the process away from traditional institutional academic research methodologies, to favour nêhiyaw ways of being and to collaboratively support nêhiyaw ways of learning.

Working within Indigenous Research Methodologies includes being deliberate about how we engage with and prepare non-Indigenous people who have held active leadership positions within academic institutions, which have historically situated themselves on Indigenous lands and in contrast to Indigenous languages and laws. Dr. Martin Cannon, of Oneida Nation of the Six Nations at Grand River Territory, is a professor of Sociology and Gender Studies. He asks, "How do we engage privileged learners to take responsibility for histories and legacies of settler colonialism and make change?" (2013, p. 54). Our work responds to his question in how we

collaborate and research in ways that honour and retain the integrity of Indigenous knowledge. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2008) argue that the key to overcoming the mistrust between community members and university institutions will be through collaborative research that focuses on Indigenous knowledge systems in which the process has "primary direction coming from indigenous people so they are able to move from passive role subject to someone else's agenda to an active leadership position with explicit authority in the construction and implementation of the research initiatives" (p. 239). By ensuring that work is Indigenous-led with the ongoing consent

Figure 3. Lana Whiskeyjack, left, listening to Kevin Lewis share his words during the sharing circle. He started kâniyâsihk Culture Camps, an accredited land-based nêhiyawêwin-immersion program.
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of communities, while also outwardly acknowledging the histories and legacies of infractions against the language, we encourage nêhiyawêwin learners to share solutions to language learning that counter historic legacies of disconnect.

Dwayne Donald (2013) suggests that the Spirit, intent, and integrity of Indigenous philosophies and teachings can be meaningfully maintained, even in formal institutional settings, with students who typically have very little prior experience with such philosophies and teachings (p. 14). Reflecting on this, we continually reach out for ongoing and full participation of those who collaborated with us, the Elders who kept us in ceremony, and those who guided us in Indigenous epistemologies beyond the formal setting of our associated university. Our community-based research contributes to the discussion of the challenges of integrating Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies into research, teaching, and publication associated with the University of Alberta. These discussions were led by learners and instructors who were in accredited post-secondary nêhiyawêwin programs and classes and who were present in the sharing circles. This research fosters a model of community-engaged transformative learning between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems of knowledge, the benefits of which model support Indigenous-based ownership of education. The research approach, methods, analysis, and knowledge mobilization activities are designed with the words of Shuswap leader George Manuel (Secwepemculecw) in mind. Corntassel (2013) says, "We will steer our own canoe, but we will invite others to help with the paddling" (p. 50). The Indigenous community members we met with are steering their own canoe, while we nêhiyaw researchers assist with the paddling.

Honour, or Respecting nêhiyaw wahkotowin within Academic Knowledge Systems: Principles, Process, and Praxis

Through the process of working with and coming from these communities, we are familiar with — and intrinsically bound to uphold — nêhiyawêwin protocols that honour nêhiyaw ceremony and epistemologies in relational wahkotowin. To honour these nêhiyaw epistemologies, we have committed to ceremony in our own personal processes in this work, as well as in the collaborations with Indigenous community members and nêhiyawêwin learners. We developed research principles, processes, and practices congruent with nêhiyaw ceremony and protocol, and that reflect Indigenous research methodologies proposed by nêhiyawak and Indigenous theorists. The community-based research we conducted centers on nêhiyaw-voiced methods of reconnection to the Spirit of language, as well as the processes to provide community-voiced tangibilities of the Indigenous abstract to the academic concrete. The recommendations, and work that results out of these collaborations, constitute the embodied praxis of our work.

We chose the communities to work with based on previous established relationships, environments, and people actively supporting nêhiyawêwin revitalization and acquisition, and we invited those who joined the sharing circle to contribute to discussions around the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin, disconnects to the Spirit of the language, and methods of reconnecting to the Spirit of the language. We drew largely on the knowledges and lived experiences of nêhiyawak and nêhiyawêwin learners, and we invited 31 total nêhiyawak, including nêhiyaw-speaking Elders, educators, and learners, into interviews and sharing circles. Our community work needed to be conducted through principles that actively privilege Indigenous voices and perspectives in accordance with the participation of nêhiyaw Elders and Indigenous language speakers and learners, and not prescriptivist processes brought into their lives through our involvement as researchers. This meant fostering and maintaining a space for openness, trust, and informed consent in shared discussions. We also followed tapwêwin, or honesty, with everyone and ourselves, even so far as being honest in our humour and laughing during interviews and sharing circles. We further ensured participants in sharing circles could speak in both English and nêhiyawêwin. Most of the interviews were conducted in English as a dominant language, but several participants chose to answer in nêhiyawêwin. We were mindful to work with a transcriber fluent in both nêhiyawêwin and English. The transcriber, in dealing with some personal, private, and contentious information, also had to maintain ethics associated with the research by committing to a Transcriber Confidentiality Form. It was also integral to work with an Indigenous transcriber sensitive to knowledge systems and privacy who could transcribe in both nêhiyawêwin and English, with an understanding of both worldviews. We also made room in our work — independently and with community — for ceremony. In the instance of our research, ceremony included smudging, but also included making room for breaks, healing, and food, and ensuring we began only when participants felt comfortable.

The participants in our collaborative research identified problems with previous research and the way it had been conducted around Indigenous communities and languages. For some, this included sharing their own hesitations about institutional involvement and the

potential mismanagement of their ancestral Indigenous intellectual properties. As helpers in this Indigenous research, Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers with institutional involvement have a responsibility to make research and work directly relevant to, and centered on, the priorities of the Indigenous communities they are working with and for. We must learn how to justly and collaboratively honour and uphold Indigenous Peoples' knowledges and values in their own pedagogies and language support systems, as opposed to imposing colonially institutionalizing knowledge systems. We recognize there were some processes in our research that remained institutional, and this paper therefore acknowledges its facilitative role in trans-systemic knowledge systems. In tandem with these systems, we have learned to prioritize Indigenous knowledge and languages as led by Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders within the university and communities, and to ensure the publishing processes are guided by community members.

Our institutional involvement in the Spirit of the Language project required us to either gather signatures on the Research Information and Consent Form, or decolonize the process through oral promise and exchange of tobacco, with a mutual understanding of the significance of the research and of ethical conduct in our role as institutionally-supported researchers. We then wrote an an oral consent agreement on behalf of those involved. However, if participants were not comfortable with sharing their words and knowledges with us, or had not yet given consent to share their direct quotes as words, we respected their wishes and did not publish their direct quotes or sensitive knowledges. These same ethical procedures were applied to the photo consent form. If desired, participants could withdraw their words from interviews within two weeks of viewing their transcription, or the papers in which their words are used, and they can also choose to withdraw participation, and therefore further publication of their words, at any moment. It is necessary that research lifts the knowledges of and benefits the community and its members.

The Research Information and Consent Form indicated whether or not a participant was able to offer informed consent in their participation with the research, and participants could choose to include their name and nation/affiliation or indicate they would prefer to have their shared words anonymized in future publishings. The information and consent documents outlined our processes in maintaining the integrity of our work and the words of the participants. In lieu of participants signing this document on location, we encouraged some participants to take their time to read the agreement first. Participants were welcome to withdraw consent any time after the interview, or to participate later if they felt more comfortable. We noted to participants that it is easier for us to physically remove participant contributions from the recordings and transcriptions sooner, and prior to publishing. At the outset of the interviews, we also outlined the timeline for us returning the transcripts and detailed draft works back to community members. That is, we indicated that it would take about a year for us to organize the sharing circle and hold one-on-one interviews, review the information shared, and work with community members in publishing material using the words of or information about participants. We also indicated that participation is completely voluntary, that participants can choose not to answer any or all of the questions — for example, they can choose to pass if they

do not wish to share their words — and that they are invited to leave the conversation at any time. However, we also realized and indicated that we might not be able to completely remove participants' recorded contributions to the sharing circles, as some notes they bring to the discussion might be touched upon by other participants. We also indicated to participants that the raw recording of the interviews would be held in encrypted digital storage for a minimum of five years. The participants continually have chances to review their words and contributions, and may withdraw their words prior to us publishing

Figure 5. A copy of the research consent forms and media release forms, along with tobacco to be shared, all rest on the ground. The sharing circle at kâniyâsihk Culture Camp continues past sunset. We could hear the five-dozen sled dogs howling into the night.

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content from their interviews. This ethics approval process is maintained by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, which is independent from us as researchers but does grant institutional approval of our research. The nature and intent of our research further ensured our due diligence in offering fair compensation for participants sharing their voices. We documented this compensation using the Honoraria Form, indicating receipt of honoraria. More importantly, we offered tobacco to those participants willing to share their words. We provided equal honoraria of $100 in gift cards to each of the participants, regardless of the duration of their participation or their Indigenous language fluency. While the Honoraria Form required a signature, we were able to sign on behalf of the participant with their expressed permission, particularly if they chose not to write their own signature or to exchange trust through tobacco. Ultimately, this process was used to ensure our accountability, as researchers, in the use of provided funds.

Although our work was funded by Alberta Health Services through the Métis Life Skills Program and delivered by the University of Alberta, we were deliberate in honouring nêhiyaw methods over institutional biases or funding sources. This allowed us, as Indigenous researchers, to place ourselves as relatives and partners in the learning and community-building towards a collaborative solutions-based approach. In principle, this process required reciprocity with community members, as researcher-relatives in nêhiyaw language learning. In practice, this might look like avoiding referring to and treating the recorded interviews as data because the knowledges shared with us are sacred and beyond conventional quantitative interpretations of data. Instead, we honour the Spirit of the words with ceremonial integrity, by offering tobacco, gifts, and involvement in the knowledge-sharing processes. We also avoided the academic bias of focusing on one aspect of language acquisition, such as with prescriptivist approaches in

formal linguistics, to instead illuminate the interdisciplinary and holistic nature of Indigenous language revitalization work with communities.

Inevitably, elements of ancestral knowledge were shared in these sharing circles and interviews while we were recording. As Indigenous researchers and collaborative community partners, we have a responsibility to steward digitized Indigenous knowledges with the utmost respect, integrity, and cautions, particularly in documentation and publishing. This praxis is guided by the individuals sharing their knowledge to ensure they are comfortable sharing that particular knowledge in the contexts we intend to communicate them, including in our publication of their voices across platforms (platforms that are addressed later in this paper). When we share the results of this collaborative work back with communities, we will invite community members to provide their own considerations about how this work should be published, and for which audiences. The publishing process necessitates ongoing collaborative idea-making around the publishing and circulation of knowledge and words shared in this research, ensuring that we continue visiting with community members and confirming their ongoing consent prior to publishing work that includes their words.

History, the Spirit of the Language: Land, Language, and Laws
In addition to the elements of nêhiyaw historical connection that have been written about, we also asked nêhiyawak about the Spirit of the language and the history of the ancestral language. Through our lived experiences as nêhiyaw academics, and throughout the learnings accompanying our community work, we have heard overwhelmingly that land is sacred, and that land is the Spirit of the language. Critically, those who offered their words in interviews and sharing circles reaffirmed the historical and ongoing consequences of colonization, capitalism, and Christianity, noting how each significantly impacts relationships with the ancestral language, land, and laws. Those who shared their words identified as a catalyst of disconnect the forced removal of Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral homelands onto reserves and into residential schools, for purposes of religious conversion, resource extraction, and territorial colonization. The nêhiyaw speakers and learners suggested that every impact resulting from colonization, capitalism, and religious imperialism would need to be undone to allow for a reconnection between nêhiyawak and nêhiyawêwin. In essence, language learning and teaching practices must counteract the policies and laws that systematically disconnect ayisiniywak from their lands, languages, and laws.

Those who shared their knowledge in interviews and sharing circles have said that the Spirit of the language is drawn not only from the language itself as it is spoken and understood, but also from the Creator. Each Indigenous language is interrelated with the land of its origin, and those languages are best understood when spoken about lands underfoot through ancestral lineage and connectedness. Because nêhiyawak are ancestrally connected to specific lands, nêhiyawêwin understandings of the world are best understood on those ancestral lands. The connectedness between all of Creation and the language speaking specifically to those lands is guided through nêhiyaw law. wahkotowin, which guides the relationality behind our project, is just one of many nêhiyaw laws.

As our work realized the importance of place-based immersion for learning, the research expands deeper into land-based pedagogies. This can also be contentious in that, owing to diaspora, colonization, and migration, some Indigenous languages have had varying presences in different regions, but have since been locked into reserves, municipalities, and other colonially-enforced boundaries, grossly limiting access to ancestral lands. That is, some Indigenous languages have been spoken in newer regions as of the last few hundred years, and are less linguistically representative of the regions in which they are situated now. In this way, English and French are not regionally-specific to the areas inhabited by English speakers on this continent. The rematriative effort against colonial naming of locations is seen in the current and ongoing recognition of place names. Where communities, as municipalities, have recently designated names of places in the last few hundred years, Indigenous place names with deeper spiritual or cultural significance are often overlooked or erased in those discussions and localities.

Through our independent teachings as nêhiyaw language learners, we have learned the nêhiyaw words for woman and fire illustrate this worldview reconceptualization — the word for woman, iskwew, contains the root morpheme for fire, which is iskotew. Together, these words remind us, in nêhiyaw worldview, of the importance of women being the home fires of family, community, and Nations. Further, effective land-based immersion courses are dependent on the seasonal changes within local ecologies and recognized in our language. Where English sees four seasons, nêhiyawêwin sees six. These seasons are miyoskamin, or ice break-up; sikwan, or spring; nîpin, or summer; takwâkin, or fall; mikiskon, or ice freeze-up; and pipon, or winter. The addition of the two seasons to the English context, both miyoskamin, or ice break-up, and mikiskon, or ice freeze-up, reveals nêhiyaw worldview, which is interdependent with the land and important for harvesting, hunting, trapping, fishing, and dog-sledding on the ice in-between the fall, winter, and spring.

nêhiyawêwin speakers and learners, from their words spoken in interviews and sharing circles, favour transgenerational aspects of language learning, in which multiple generations of learners are able to draw from each other's nêhiyawêwin learnings and teachings. Regardless of age, we encouraged nêhiyawêwin speakers and learners to speak candidly about their own learnings and teachings during interviews and sharing circles, instead of responding to the possible biases we brought as researchers. Knowledge sharers identified youth as the ones to revitalize Indigenous languages within their families. At this critical moment, young Indigenous language speakers are countering a generational gap of learners and are learning from their Indigenous relatives whose first language is nêhiyawêwin.

Several nêhiyawêwin knowledge holders have independently proposed nitisiy, or the belly button, as a morphological metaphor that embodies the Spirit of the language. This phrase rings true in the nêhiyawak adage of ê-nitonahk otisiy, "s/he is looking for their belly button," which can be used to say someone who is on their path to find their roots (Personal communication, Makokis, July 15, 2020). When someone introduces themself, they say their name, then nitisiyihkâson, which translates to the person behaving like the Spirit of their name. In this way, nêhiyawak are introducing their Spirit (Personal communication, Makokis,

July 15, 2020). nêhiyawak Elders have also shared with us that when we introduce ourselves, we are introducing ourselves as our Spirit through the connection to our mother, the umbilical cord connected first through our belly button, and that that spiritual connection is passed from our mother and our matrilineal ancestors, such as our grandmother, our grandmother's grandmother, and all the way back to Spirit and Creation.

Figure 6. Participants in the kâniyâsihk Sharing Circle, sharing their words.

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Participants shared examples of the ways in which morphological concepts come alive to represent the Spirit of the language. This can be found in the word e-pîsâkik-sakikihk or e-sâkipakâcik. Both are different ways of saying that the plants are showing themselves, and it is that first part of a plant blooming to show love. Participants have suggested that Love, from the Creator and for Creation, is within the Spirit of the language. In this same way, plants are raised to show us love each spring. They bloom and they grow, reflecting love's own growing and blossoming. Where the morpheme sâki- is drawn from sâkihitowin, which is love as a concept, sâkihitok, or to love, is also imperative. Love, for us, is "with the six nations, the winged people, the four-legged people, plant people, insect people, water people, and us two-legged people, we have to be in relationship, and to communicate with those ones as well" (Personal communication, Makokis, July 15, 2020).

As nêhiyaw learners, nêhiyaw law, and concepts of wahkotowin, guided our work with communities. Within the concept of wahkotowin, nêhiyaw speakers and learners also discussed healing and other options for Indigenous language acquisition. In this way, our collaborative research offers reciprocity in order to counter retraumatization. However, healing should be available to those invited to share their experiences and to revisit traumatic experiences for institutional research — healing through, for example, anonymous opportunities for post-interview therapy and involvement in the process based on one's own emotional availability. Ceremony, as guided by the community, led the healing in this process. Each of these ways of collaborating are guided through nêhiyaw law of wahkotowin.

Community conversations identified the holistic worldview of the language, in which view the language is both from and of the land, and each sound is alive with its own Spirit. In these ways, nêhiyawêwin is embedded with ancestral spiritual connection to land and as reinforced through nêhiyaw law. Elders and community members shared the importance of honouring the living language through land-based Indigenous learning pedagogies, which center reciprocal-relational methods like ceremony and mentorship. Because Indigenous languages are intrinsically tied to the land, land-based language immersion pedagogies have been found to be the most effective for nêhiyawêwin acquisition.

Healing, or Reconnecting to the Spirit of the Language: Agency, Autonomy, and Authority

Three themes emerged as solutions from nêhiyawak when addressing reconnection to the Spirit of nêhiyawêwin. The themes were agency, or those involved in language work taking personal accountability to their language work, and reducing the influence of their biases in the collaborative work; autonomy, or self-determination and sovereignty by the Indigenous language community over their own language programming; and authority, in which Indigenous nations and their communities of language speakers and learners are designated as holding the principal rights and responsibilities to Indigenous language policies, programming, and funding.

Our work realizes the expressed call to provide equitable Indigenous language programming through decolonial approaches based on community needs. In this same way, we recommend that research communities working with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous knowledge systems ensure reciprocity, respect, and reflexivity, and that they conduct the work under terms set by the community. Decolonizing our academic approach means being transparent in recognizing our roles as academics with institutional affiliations, challenging the tethered historical exclusivity and dominance of post-secondary institutions, and removing our biases while retaining relational wahkotowin. In particular, we must challenge the hierarchical influence maintained by knowledge- and gate-keeping institutions by ensuring that Indigenous communities have sovereignty

Figure 7. Stan Lee (left), a nêhiyawêwin educator; Matilda Lewis (middle), a fluent nêhiyawêwin speaker; Michelle Whitstone (right), Diné Asdząą, who is also researching effective Indigenous language revitalization efforts.

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over the work being done with them, as well as access to the research done on, with, by, and for them. We particularly support, and maintain, community-initiated, consent-driven, multi-step collaborative processes. For linguists and researchers working with Indigenous language learning communities, this call supports the undoing of infractions against Indigenous language vitality maintained by colonization, capitalism, and Christianity through institutional and ideological imperialism.

There is a further distinction between nêhiyawêwin and English language pedagogies. For nêhiyawêwin, verbs and nouns are often joined together with prefixes and suffixes to create whole expressions of thought within just a single word. Though the expressed thought may be a longer term or concept, the expression may be viewed linguistically as one word. This may be unfamiliar to English or European language speakers who are used to longer sentences to form expressions or thought, and not used to how the morphological conjugation of verbs and nouns together within a word can be used to form an expression. Through language, nêhiyawêwin

also distinguishes between conceptions of animacy or inanimacy in ways unrealized in English. Where European languages, such as Spanish or French, differentiate between nouns through gender and their corresponding pronouns, nêhiyawêwin refers to a noun as either animate or inanimate based on the corresponding verbs and pronouns. It should be noted, there are no uniform rules on what constitutes nouns with animate or inanimate characteristics in nêhiyawêwin. For instance, while liquids, recognized with the -apoy suffix, are viewed as inanimate, even though they have motion, asiniy, or stones and rocks, are viewed as animate because they carry with them the Spirit of the grandfather. Some berries are animate, while others are inanimate. As voiced by community members and our experiences with successful nêhiyawêwin programs, these difference in language are best learned through nêhiyawêwin immersion and ceremony. Fluent Indigenous language speakers also told us that there are several sounds from English that are not in nêhiyawêwin, such as B-D-F-G-J-K-P-Q-T-V-X-Z (personal communication, anonymous, 2019). It had been further noted by participants that Spirit markers — known in nêhiyawêwin as nehiyaw atahkipehikana or by English linguists as syllabics — are the preferred typographic forms for learning nêhiyawêwin morphologies.

Indigenous communities need to have ownership their own communities language learning. This which include speakers and learners of language communities having priority access to supports for Indigenous language immersion programming, their inclusion when discussing ceremony and Spirit in language teachings, and when teaching through connection to the land. Those in the sharing circles also noted that expressions favouring land-based pedagogies have inspired non-Indigenous academics to change their practices, and that those non-Indigenous academics now have the responsibility to incorporate the land when conducting research with, by, and for Indigenous Peoples. Those speakers and learners also expressed caution when teaching or incorporating Indigenous knowledges in various academic or published works, particularly when that work is guided by non-Indigenous academics. To elaborate, some participants remain hesitant to share Indigenous knowledges with non-Indigenous Peoples, for reasons related to the ongoing legacies of colonization, capitalism, and Christianity, as well as institutionalized oppression. Non-Indigenous academics have more recently valued Indigenous knowledges as having merit within academic frames of thinking, though these efforts attempt to force-fit these Indigenous knowledges within academic and European epistemologies. The worldview presented in English, or inherent in Anglophonic biases, often privileges a scientific approach, which has not historically validated Indigenous Peoples' modes of knowledge or ways of thinking, unless there is a perceived or added benefit to non-Indigenous societies.

Indigenous sovereignty over language programming incorporates the need for care, stewardship, rehabilitation, and return of the land and regionally-specific, Indigenous-led houses for learning that are guided by Indigenous Peoples. The methodologies conducted to arrive at these conclusions deliberately amplify the considerations of Indigenous language learners, and ensure the right to sovereignty by the Indigenous communities sharing their knowledges and knowledge systems.

By highlighting the process undertaken to conduct research for this project, we hope to provide ceremony- and community-based academic resources for Indigenous language speakers,

leaders, and learners to reclaim sovereignty over their own language education, community-building in ceremony, and connections to the land through language. As a response, the results of our research will offer platforms for publication that centre the Indigenous voices speaking towards meaningful holistic learning of Indigenous languages in spaces not usually available and accessible to nêhiyawak for language learning. Our publication processes are done through methodologies that are collaborative, that respect sacred words and knowledges, and that involve knowledge sharers in the process of overseeing the finished works that use their words. Platforms that have emerged from the project so far include this paper, our website, the founding of the Spirit of the Language conference, and presentations at local and international linguistics conferences. Any research awards for publications or speaking fees have been donated back to kâniyâsihk Culture Camps. This article itself is one of the resources we have created based on community-voiced protocol, and it describes processes for engagement when working with outside groups and institutional organizations. Other publications or presentations have involved collaborations and emerging opportunities for co-involvement in mutally-realized Indigenous language learning opportunities.

The nêhiyawêwin speakers and learners we talked to favoured reconnecting to the Spirit of language through experiential land-based immersion programming. As Indigenous languages allow for the most linguistically detailed accounts about the land within land stewardship, compounding damage to ecologies further acts as a catalyst of disconnection from the Spirit of the language. Ancestral Indigenous ways of being are directly dependent on the land and its vitality, and on immersion in the ways of being that directly relate to the land. The Indigenous children who spend time within mandated education systems are further removed from the Indigenous lands, languages, and laws of their ancestry. However, this can be counteracted with opportunities for Indigenous language immersion programming that are connected to the literal place to which the language is connected, through footsteps walked by our ancestors, and led by Indigenous language speakers and communities. nêhiyawak community members voiced the land-based learning as achieving a significantly higher chance of fluency than an institutionalized single-course program in classrooms.

Other options voiced by community members for language acquisition include Master-Apprentice / Speaker-Learner programs for more intimate learning environments, learning independently through digital media like apps and social media, creating content to foster one's own learning processes, and ensuring that Elders and knowledge keepers are included in those language learning environments. Those who shared their words with us stressed the importance that the nêhiyawêwin instruction include the Creator's Laws of love and kindness, as reiterated in several nêhiyawêwin concepts. Other comments suggested by community members included reminding educators to always speak as though we were speaking to our own children or in the ways our childhood self would have yearned for. For any of these language learning methodologies, the collaborative community partners elaborated on connecting ceremony, culture, Spirit, intergenerational responsibilities, and Creation, which includes the land, the cosmos, and all animate and inanimate beings with which they are connected.

Our transparent identification as insider-outsider nêhiyawak academics relates to our own lived experiences as Indigenous researchers now and in the future, and opens the space more to talk about the issues and solutions raised most pertinently by nêhiyawak. Our kinship systems come from nêhiyaw identities, we share ancestral connection with the communities we are working with, and we have been raised, mentored, and trained to be of service to nêhiyawak in our communities. Since utero, throughout our growth and learning in education, to the daily duties of our work, we acknowledge we are stewarding ancestral knowledges through our work as engaged scholars. This community engagement is intrinsic to wahkotowin, nêhiyaw kinship systems, and the health of communities as reflected in the Spirit of Indigenous languages. Most importantly, the agency, autonomy, and authority for language learning programming needs to be held by the same communities and people who are ancestrally connected to the language.

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