



Joshua Schwab Cartas*

Living our Languages¹

Pijla'si, Padiuxi, Wachiya, Pee-pihtikweek, Shé:kon,
Tansi, Siingaay'laa, Ba'ax ka wa'alik, Komo mai,
Welcome, Bienvenido, Bienvenue

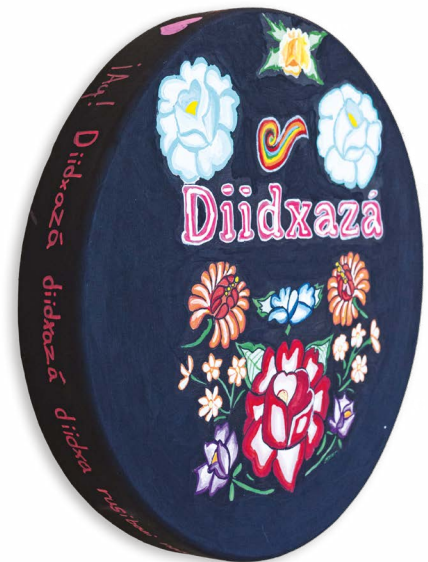
Living our Languages exhibit celebrates resilience, resurgence and diversity of Indigenous nations, languages, and cultural lifeways across Turtle Island. This project had four specific objectives, first to bring together Indigenous students, staff and faculty at NSCAD University. The second was to create an exhibition that would bring visibility of Indigenous students, staff and the Treaty Space, which is one of the few spaces for Indigenous folks at NSCAD. Third, to establish a working relationship between Indigenous folks here in Kijipuktuk and Binnizá from Ranchu Gubiña in the state of Oaxaca. The last objective was to collectively explore how art in its various forms, such as painting a drum, can be a medium to support both language and cultural reclamation, while honoring the distinctiveness of each nation language and traditions.

* Joshua is an Art Education Assistant Professor in the Division of Art History & Contemporary Culture at NSCAD University. He is an emerging Zapotec scholar whose ongoing research projects focus on language revitalization and community-led capacity building in collaboration with Indigenous communities (bio taken from the exhibition catalog); you can contact him at jschwab-cartas@nscad.ca.

Living our languages is a project that seeks to explore how to establish inter-Indigenous relationships,² not rooted in homogenizing Pan-Indigenous theories, but rather rooted in honoring each nation's distinct locally grounded histories, languages and cultural lifeways. In addition, it contributes to bring youth together from different locations on Turtle Island (North America) to create an Indigenous youth network where experiences of language reclamation and cultural resurgence can be shared in order to promote transborder solidarity amongst nations.

Each drum, like each participant who painted one, represents a unique and personal history of a language, cultural lifeways that is rooted in a specific place or territory on Turtle Island. So instead of starting with the fact that many of our Indigenous languages are endangered due to colonialism and ongoing educational and national policies established to silence our languages, this exhibit pays tribute to our ancestors, elders, aunties, youth, and anyone in or outside their communities fighting to keep the embers of their languages burning. So by bringing multiple Indigenous voices, languages and people together, I am reminded of the words of "Kanakan Maoli philosopher Manulani Aluli Meyer, who asserts "specificity leads to universality." Understanding distinctiveness leads us to appreciate how "we are all the same, differently."³ This exhibit taught me that our strength is not only in our similarities, but also in our differences.

Lastly, I want to underscore that the exhibit and its success were directly, due to the fact that this was a collaborative effort between participants, students, faculty, and staff at NSCAD.⁴



Joshua Schwab Cartas, *Guie' saa* (flower celebration - as named by Najeli Schwab Nicolantonakis).

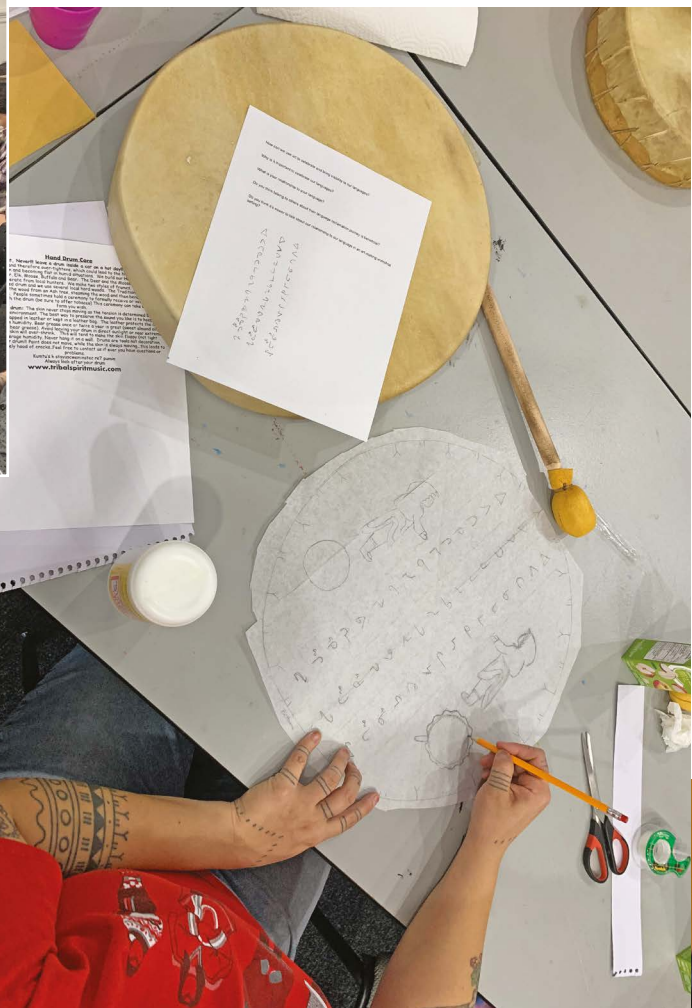
The drum was a collaboration between my daughter and myself. The drum celebrates our language by using designs that part of our women's regalia amongst Isthmus Binniza's (Zapotec). Language: Diidxazá, Binnizá.

Painting a drum, can be a medium to support both language and cultural reclamation, while honoring the distinctiveness of each nation language and traditions.



Jude Gerrard, *Star Dancers*. Part of drum series entitled Universal Knowledge. Based off Mi'kmaq petroglyphs located in Kejimikujik and Bedford. Language: Mi'kmaq.





Trina Annand, *Kiweki*.

Kiweki means returning home; it's connected to the land and community. As someone not living on their traditional land it is a word that resonates with me. I decided to fill my drum with images from the land that make me feel at home and at peace.
Language: Algonquin.



Misiwegiizhig (Gabriel Maclean), *Pulse-Perpetual Understanding, Language, Soul, Expression*.
Language: Oji Cree.

In their own words

"Living our Languages supported community building and visibility, by activating space within the institution for us to gather, share and continue to engage with some of the ways we as Indigenous peoples connect to our languages. Painting on Drums as a medium to express visual languages, tied to our individual cultures and many times the land in which we come from, and the sounds from drumming, that compliments language revitalization through music. Additionally, being able to share those experiences with others through a group exhibition, creates further opportunities for language sharing. This experience is just a small representation for how many Indigenous languages and cultures there are across Turtle Island. This is just one of many ways Art happens to create common connections."

Sydney Wreaks

"As a person with mixed ancestry growing up in the city, my relationship with language has always been complicated. But through this project as well as some recent conversations with Indigenous artists from across Turtle Island, I have come to realize that I actually know and recognize more than I think I do.

I based the design of my drum on another type of living language: tattoo. The patterns are all inspired by imagery that is on my own skin, including the Mi'kmaw double curve which features heavily on the edge of the drum. The other imagery speaks to two-spirit identity as well as plant life from Mi'kma'ki."

P. Doak



P. Doak, *I Will Do My Best / Pjilasi*.
Language: Mi'kma'ki, Wasoqopa'q.



Aly Conrad, *Ka'qawej with Buttercups*.
Ka'qawej (crow) and gold iridescent buttercups - Childhood nostalgia
Language: Mi'kma'q, Wasoqopa'q.



Each drum, like each participant who painted one, represents a unique and personal history of a language, cultural lifeways that is rooted in a specific place or territory on Turtle Island.



"For me, learning our languages is more like building a relationship, than it is memorizing sounds, words, and their definitions. With each word, we learn more about ourselves, our history, and the ways our cultures perceive the world and our interconnectedness with it.

When I think about my relationship to my language, I think about how illuminating it feels to learn a new word, how much warmth I feel when furthering my understanding of our etymology, or otherwise described as the root origins of where any word comes from. Although I have a long way to go, I really feel I do, I'm grateful for every speaker in my life, those who encourage me to continue, and I am optimistic really about my language journey."

Aiden Gillis



Aiden Gillis, *Wliwa'so'qa'tuin*
[To Give You Good Light].



Delaine Aakumalik Fredlund, *Skidoonguaq*
Delaine Akumalik is a young Inuk artist from Nunavut. Skidoonguaq is a slang term, friends might ask each other "wanna go skidoonguaq?" when they'd like to go drive around on snowmobiles. Inuktitut is the language of Inuit.

Notes

1 This exhibit was organized by Dr. Joshua Schwab Cartas an emerging mixed race Zapotec scholar in collaboration with Métis illustrator, interdisciplinary artist and Exhibitions Coordinator of the Treaty Space Gallery, Natalie Laurin at NSCAD University NSCAD and the Treaty Space gallery are both in Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia) the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq of Mi'kma'ki. This exhibit was part of Schwab-Carta's larger sshrc funded project: *Planting the Seeds of Cultural Continuity: Using cellphlms, food and storytelling to form an international Mikmaq and Zapotec Indigenous youth-2-youth language and cultural reclamation network*. Laruin alongside Sydney Wreaks, Masters of Education student and interdisciplinary visual artist of Kanien'keháka and of euro-settler descent, both facilitated the drum painting workshop. However, it was Laurin that suggested painting hand drums as a way to honor each participant's own Indigenous language and reclamation journey.

2 Wildcat, M., & Voth, D., "Indigenous relationality: definitions and methods," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, no. 19(2), 2023, pp.475-483.

3 Duarte, M. E., & Belarde-Lewis, M., "Imagining: Creating spaces for indigenous ontologies," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, no. 53(5-6), 2015, pp. 677-702.

4 A special thanks to Aiden Gills, Aly Conrad, Cameron Walker, Delaine Akumalik Fredlund, Inuujaq Leslie Fredlund, Jude Gerrard, Jordan Bennett, P.Doak, Misiwegiizhig Gabriel McLearn, Najeli Schwab Nicolantonakis, Natalie Laurin, Syndey Wreaks, Trina Annand, Emily Gillies, Morgan Phillips, Emma Bug, Meghan MacDonald, Mads Randall, Anita Barak and Keely Hopkins. This project was made possible with the generous support of the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

