

Healing Through tastawayihk (2Spirit) Drumming and Songs:  
Resurgent Practices of Reclamation and Cultural Continuity

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## Abstract

### Healing Through tastawayihk (2Spirit) Drumming and Songs: Resurgent Practices of Reclamation + Cultural Continuity

Moe Clark

This research creation project, grounded in Michif and nêhiyaw worldviews, centres the resurgent practices of tastawayihk-iyiniwak (2Spirit) drum carriers across Turtle Island, highlighting their roles, relationships, and lived experiences of cultural continuity, language reclamation, and healing. Settler colonialism's gendered process forced patriarchal social systems on Indigenous communities (Arvin, M., Tuck, E., & Morrill, A., 2013; University of Alberta, 2021), imposing a gender binary and suppressing leadership roles 2Spirit (Two-Spirit) people held in many Indigenous communities (Labelle, 2018). In response to this cultural erasure, this project serves to reanimate 2Spirit sacred relationships to the drum. This research creation is grounded in a decolonial framework, upholding four-body being teachings, through participatory methodologies of kiyokêwin (visiting) (Campbell, 2015, Naytowhow, 2015, Flaminio et al., 2020; Gaudet, 2019), and wâhkôhtowin (extended kinship) (Naytowhow, 2013, Thunder, 2025).

The research explores têtewêhikan (the drum) as both central methodology and method, acting as teacher, guide, and helper, working to assist 2Spirit healing and resurgence. The process involves extensive kiyokêwin (visiting) with six 2Spirit drum carriers to gather embodied knowledge and personal stories. This research actively cultivates spaces for Indigiqueer joy and miskâsowin (belonging) in 2Spirit community.

Culminating the research creation, a new bundle of 2Spirit songs (nikamowina) is created, ensuring the transmission of vital 2Spirit knowledge for future generations. These songs, which are an expression of a 2Spirit future imaginary, are integrated into a collaborative performance, serving as a vital resource to uplift 2Spirit roles, sovereignty, language reclamation, and self-determination for present and emerging generations.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to mosôm Bob Smoker, who taught me the sacred lesson of unconditional love, and his always affirming reminder: "I'm gonna need you as much as you're gonna need me." Bob gifted me the most beautiful elk skin drum and a ribbon wrapped pow wow mallet, not even a week after we first met. We were kindred spirits. Who knew, that pow wow drum mallet you gave me Bob, would be the first mallet used to awaken our 2Spirit buffalo skin big drum in this work. And for that, I am beyond grateful ~ kinanâskomitin notakiwêkisik.

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## Definitions

The following are definitions for various terms and modes of contextualizing decisions taken in the written research:

**Capitalization of nêhiyawêwin:** Special note about leaving out capitalization of nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree language) words throughout this paper. I do so as a way to reinforce and give particular emphasis to non-hierarchy within the language. No one person, place, thing, concept, is above or below another. There is an interconnected energy and inherent value to all beings, animate and inanimate, as they all exist within the circle of life. This concept was first introduced to me by Cheryl L'Hirondelle while collaborating on a song creation project in 2013 (L'Hirondelle, personal communication, 2013).

**Heteropatriarchy:** Heteropatriarchy constitutes social systems that enshrine heterosexuality and patriarchy as the default, perceiving any deviation from these configurations as abnormal and unacceptable (Arvin et al., 2013).

**Indigenous:** The First Peoples of a territory. This term is used broadly when a general context is necessary, but the specific Nation or Tribe is identified whenever the source allows for precision.

**kiyokêwin:** kiyokêwin is spelled in different ways, depending on the dialect of the speaker or writer. I chose to standardize 'kiyokêwin' as the main spelling, which was how I originally learned to spell it from Joseph Naytowow. However, quoting other authors, it also appears as keeoukaywin and kiyekewin, both Michif spellings.

**Métis:** In this text, the term Métis refers to the Red River Métis Nation.

**Michif:** I will often replace Métis with Michif, as a term used by Red River Métis people to self-identify (Campbell, 2022). The term Michif directly reflects both our language and connection to ancestral territories, particularly the historic Red River Settlement in the west. I identify as Michif, as it speaks to who I am and where my ancestors are from.

**nêhiyaw vs. Cree vs. Plains Cree:** The term nêhiyaw is utilized as the preferred form of identification for specific Elders and collaborators within this work. References throughout the text switch between nêhiyaw, Cree, and Plains Cree depending on the context and terminology used by cited sources. Authors are consistently recognized using the terms they select for their respective Nations, clans, and territories.

**Settler colonialism:** "Settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there" (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 12).

**tastawayihk-iyiniwak:** A nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree language) term that translates to mean "in-between person." It is another term for 2Spirit person, specific to Plains Cree ways of knowing, and expresses notions of gender and/or sexual fluidity. Originally taught to me by nêhiyaw knowledge keepers Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Joseph Naytowow.

**Turtle Island:** I use this term in lieu of Canada, as a decolonial way to invoke an Indigenous

paradigm, and return to pre-contact understandings of the lands and waters upon which we live and create life.

2Spirit/ Two-Spirit: “A translation of the Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language) term *niizh manidoowag*, refers to a person who embodies both a masculine and feminine spirit” (Filice, 2025, online). Coined by Cree Elder and educator Myra Laramée in 1990, this term expresses gender and sexuality specific to Indigenous contexts. It is utilized throughout this work to designate individuals whose identity, sexual orientation, or gender expression does not conform to heteronormative conventions.

nêhiyawêwin words/ a glossary:

âpihtawikosisâniskwêw: Métis person, or half breed  
apitawikisikanohk: the mid-day sun place or Southern direction

cistêmaw: tobacco

iskonikan askiy: fake land, or leftover strips of land  
iskwêw: woman (singular)

kakisimowin: prayer  
Kanien'kehá:ka: Mohawk person  
kêtehyahyak: Elders (plural)  
kohkomwak: grandmothers  
kinêhiyawêwininaw: the gift of language  
kitimâkêyihtowin: empathy, taking care of one another  
kiya: you (singular)  
kiyokêwin: visiting  
matotisânihk: inside the sweatlodge  
Michif: Métis  
miskâsowin: belonging  
mistik: tree  
moniyaw: settler  
Mooniyang: Anishinaabemowin term for Montréal

nêhiyaw: Plains Cree person  
nêhiyawêwin:  
nikamowina: songs  
ninanâskomowin: thankfulness, gratitude  
nisitohtamowin: understanding  
nitohtâmowin: listening  
niya: 'I' or 'me' (singular)  
nosisim: my grandchild

okiskinwahamakêw: educator  
onikamow: song-carrier, vocalist  
oskâpêwis: ceremonial Elder's helper  
oskpwâkan awa: a sacred pipe  
otipimêsiw: one of the people who own themselves, another term for Métis person

otipimêsiwak: a title given to Métis people by Plains Cree relatives, which translates to 'the people (plural) who own themselves, they are their own bosses'  
otôskwanihk: Calgary, AB (Treaty 7)

paskwâwi-mostoswak: our bison relatives  
pawâtamowin: to dream; the act of dreaming  
pimâtisiwin: life  
sâkihta/ sâkihiwêw: love it (the language)

sônîyâw: money, or monetary gift  
tapwêwin: truth, or truth-speaking  
tastawayihk-iyiniw: in-between person, or 2Spirit person  
tawow: welcome  
têwêhikan: drum  
Tiohtià:ke: Mohawk term for Montréal

wâhkomisowin: being related to self  
wâhkomitowin: being related to others  
wâhkôhtamowin: being related to all of creation  
wâhkôhtowin: kinship beyond immediate family, being related to all that sustains life  
wêpinâsowina: cotton broadcloth  
wiya: they/he/she (singular)  
wîyatikwêwin: joy

## Chapter 1 Introduction

*When a ceremonial song calls out the spirit keepers of nêhiyaw laws, the vibrations are felt through the generations: a connection binding all Creator's children and creations"*

(Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum, 2015, p. 21-22).

### 1.1. Positionality

#### 1.1.1. Song as first language

Song is my first language. Before I learned to speak, I could sing. I first felt my truth in song around a fire with family, camping under Milky Way skies in the Cypress Hills of Southern Alberta. These early memories grounded me in a place of trusting song as a generative means for loving, connecting, and building reciprocity with human, earth and beyond-human kinship relations. We weren't singing traditional songs from an Indigenous context, but we were singing songs that connected us in body, mind and soul, and through this gift of sharing our voices I built myself up and learned the power of voice as a tool for transformation.

Later on in my life, through ceremonial connections to sweatlodge, vision fasting, sundance and other nêhiyaw and Michif ceremonies, I found têtewêhikan (drum). It is with the têtewêhikan that I found another aspect of my voice, both creatively and spiritually. Even though têtewêhikan isn't often considered a Michif instrument, I hold reverence for têtewêhikan and the many ways têtewêhikan has been an accompaniment, teacher, and guide along my journey, and ultimately how my relationship to the drum has kept me alive.

Before I go further into song, let me introduce myself. Guided by the work of Sylvia McAdam and the advice of nêhiyaw uncle and Elder, Joseph Naytowhow, I invite readers who have a relationship to smudging, to do so. As McAdam shares, "The smoke clears the mind and prayers are carried to the spirit keepers or to the Creator." (p11) In this space of seeking and sharing knowledge in a sacred way, Allan Joe Felix highlights, "When a person seeks knowledge, the knowledge moves, shapes, and changes their thoughts and their spirit." (p17) If you don't already work with plant medicines and smudging, perhaps light a candle or place a glass of water close, and carry what follows in your heart, body, and mind, acknowledging there is spirit alive in all I am about to share (McAdam, 2015).

#### 1.1.2. niya ôma: self-location

moe clark d'ishinihkaashon. My name is Moe Clark. nikamow piyêsiw êkwa osawi kinosêw nitisihkâson kihtwam. I also carry two spirit names. nitohtsin otôskwanihk / treaty 7/ Calgary, maka Tio'tia:ke / Mooniyang / Montréal niwikin anohc. I am originally from Treaty 7, otherwise known as Calgary or 'At the Elbow', and I currently reside in Tiohtià:ke/ Mooniyang/ Montréal, in the unceded territories of the Kanien'kehá:ka and Anishinaabe peoples.

niya ôma âpihtawikosisâniskwêw, otipimêsiw, êkwa moniyaw. I am michif, one of the 'people who own themselves', and mixed-settler. niya ôma tastawayihk-iyiniw êkwa onikamow, okiskinwahamakêw êkwa oskapêwis. I am an in-between person, or 2Spirit person, and I am a song-carrier (vocalist), educator, and a ceremonial Elder's helper.

With roots from the Métis homelands in the Red River Settlement in Treaty 1 on my paternal side, I am a proud member of the Otipimêsiwak Métis Government (Métis Nation of Alberta). My Michif family names are Cardinal, Villebrune, Lalonde, Ducharme, Labreque, and Gariepy. As a means of identifying kinship relations, I share my Michif family names so that other Michif and Indigenous community members can identify who I am, through the community and lands I belong to. I also carry Norwegian and French ties on my paternal side, and French, Belarusian, and English family lineages on my maternal side. We are hunters, trappers, tricksters, farmers, crocheters, storytellers, postal workers, war veterans, nurses, cacklers... the list goes on. I come from a diverse bunch of prairie people, who all found their own way of relating to the world. Unfortunately, most of them did not live or learn how to make space or exist safely outside of patriarchal, capitalist, and heteronormative societal constructs.

In my creative and community life, I identify as a multidisciplinary 2Spirit singing thunderbird. My creative practices run deep from lineages of vocal improvisation, land-based practices and drum song creation. I'm also inspired by experimental, collaborative, and experiential creative practices. Adding to what I named earlier, my origins in song come from extensive experience singing in choirs growing up, from singing in old folks homes to an outdoor auditorium in front of thousands. This has given me a capacity to hone my voice as a creative tool for self-expression, personal liberation, and community and collective co-creation. I am grateful for the artists and collaborators I have had the privilege to learn, create, and grow with over the years.

Ceremony found me at a time in my life when I was really struggling to stay alive. Since my early twenties, I've participated in ceremonies far and wide, all with the intention of transformational growth, and to better understand who I truly am at the source of my being. Through these ceremonial practices and my work as an oskapêwis (ceremonial Elder's helper) I have been gifted with many opportunities to learn sacred songs, receive ceremonial teachings and to carry têtewhikan (drum) in these spaces. I've been blessed to support nêhiyaw, Michif, kanien'kehá:ka, and Oji-Cree Elders in ceremonies locally and across Turtle Island. As a ceremonial person, my creative work and process are intimately tied to medicine wheel teachings, which centre four-bodied ways of knowing, relating, and being through spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical healing. I am a dedicated sundancer, sweatlodge facilitator, and pipe carrier.

Near the beginning of my master's research, I was gifted oskpwâkan awa, a sacred pipe, when I 'returned home,' so to speak, for a 2Spirit fasting camp at a site called Wolf Medicine Healing Place in the Métis homelands just outside Winnipeg. Two 2Spirit Métis kohkomwak (grandmothers), Charlotte Nolin and Barbara Bruce, saw something in me and wanted to acknowledge my good work with an invite to continue coming back and supporting our community. With this sacred gift bestowed upon me also came new responsibilities. I've continued to journey 'home' every summer, assisting in the ceremonial duties and running of our 2Spirit Sundance, recently completing our third year. These relationships have carried on throughout my master's, and through them, new kinships have brought deep reciprocity, love, and transformational learning, all nourished through and bound by sacred law.

Part of this process of reclaiming my place within the circle, has been about honouring my roles within the circle, as they are ever-transforming and evolving. Within the understanding of my roles, it has also been important to uphold the names I have been given in language, and how names affirm cultural inclusivity and relationship. Throughout this research and creation, my own role began as an oskapêwis. This title was introduced to me years ago, as an Elder's helper. In conversation with nêhiyaw Elder Senapan Thunder she shares, "oski is the root of fresh or new, and apiw relates to he/she/they sit" so oskapêwis is someone who is younger and

often more able-bodied (fresh), who sits close to, or even at the feet of the elder to support them in their roles during ceremony, and learn through doing. Thunder further shares that as one grows, learns, and develops certain skills and receives gifts through ceremonial and intergenerational teachings, they become oskâpôh, one who sits at the front and supports the pipes. I acknowledge that these roles are relational, emphasizing how I uphold myself in space and time.

I've always been an artist, and throughout much of my work, I've been called to facilitate and share my process in a myriad of contexts, for youth, family, and 2Spirit community in lockdown facilities, addictions and recovery programs, medicine gatherings, land-based and healing gatherings, as well as creative settings the world over. Adjacent to spaces I hold for others, I have been on my own healing journey; blending western and traditional healing as a way of continuing to better express myself, move through emotional stress, reduce my biases, and practice harm reduction.

Integral to my path as an artist and oskapêwis, I am also a dedicated nêhiyawêwin learner (Plains Cree language) and more recently, a Michif learner (Métis language), working intimately with Elders and language keepers to advance Indigenous language resurgence through cultural knowledge and song-based practices. What began in 2013 as a week-long summer song creation and language learning residency with two revered Cree knowledge keepers, Joseph Naytowhow and Cheryl L'Hirondelle, has grown into an ongoing practice of learning, creating, and singing in nêhiyawêwin.

Before I continue, it's important to name, I don't identify as an academic. I began this master's journey during the pandemic when all my creative work got cancelled and I sort of lost sight of who I was in the world as a performing artist and facilitator. Who I was when I began this master's journey is a completely different person than I am today. What I hope comes through in the following writing is a narrative journey that highlights some of the intersecting currents or 2Spirit traplines (Fiola, 2020) I have tracked and set in this research and creation. In multiple sections I include personal stories (Story 1, 2, etc.) read as short anecdotal stories or cautionary tales, to embed relational and intimate encounters that have shaped my path. It is my hope that those who read along can pick up the pieces that resonate, and place them in their own bundles of knowledge, in an effort to continue to uplift our 2Spirit kin in a good way.

tawow ~ welcome

## **1.2. Research Questions**

For this research creation project my central focus explores two primary questions to explore 2Spirit drumming:

1.2.1. How does drumming assist 2Spirit kin in their healing journeys and nurture pathways of self-determination, cultural resurgence and language learning?

1.2.2. How does 2Spirit song creation assist 2Spirit kin in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and nurture pathways for healing, self-determination, cultural resurgence and language reclamation?

### 1.2.1. How does drumming assist 2Spirit kin in their healing journey and nurture pathways of self-determination, cultural resurgence and language learning?

The objective of this research creation is to engage in a series of visits, or 'kiyokêwin' (Campbell, 2015; Gaudet, 2019; Naytowhow, 2025) with 2S drum carriers from across the Métis homelands and Turtle Island. From these visits, knowledge will be gathered and integrated into a series of new drum songs in order to fill a gap in the Indigenous knowledge base and to give voice to 2Spirit kin. These songs will serve as tools for transmitting knowledge, language, and ensure 2Spirit teachings carry on into future generations.

The central methodology within my work is têtewêhikan, honouring drum as my primary teacher, collaborator, and song generator. Drum is the central point around which the rest of the methodologies circle. I further draw from principles of 4-bodied knowing, being, and relating through medicine wheel teachings, working with tapwêwin (truth speaking) and nitohtâmowin (active listening) from a place of embodied kitimâkêyihtowin (empathy) and kiskisiwin (remembering). These kiyokêwina aim to reinforce wâhkôhtowin (kinship beyond immediate family) and animate space for pawâtamowin (dreaming), miskâsowin (belonging), and wîyatikwêwin (joy) for 2Spirit kin to name and reclaim their roles and relationships to drum practices and to healing, and the reclamation of cultural identity that has come as a result of connection with drum (Naytowhow, 2021; Cardinal and Hildebrand, 2000).

### 1.2.2. How does 2Spirit song creation assist 2Spirit kin in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and nurture pathways for healing, self-determination, cultural resurgence and language reclamation?

Teachings and concepts shared through the 2Spirit kiyokêwin (visiting) are woven into a series of nikamowina (songs). wâhkôhtowin (kinship relations) carries into the song creation component of this research creation, uplifting ongoing intergenerational relationships made over two decades of ceremonial and land-based knowledge transmission with kêtêhyahyak (Elders). Conversations with Elders around interconnecting themes creates an additional context for language learning, knowledge transmission and oskapêwis engagement. Co-written with support from valued nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree) language teachers, Senapan Thunder, Joseph Naytowhow, and Charlotte Ross, as well as the guidance of 2Spirit Michif Elders, Charlotte Nolin and Barbara Bruce, these songs represent overlapping layers of kinship relationship and kiyokêwin as a process. Throughout the song creation, protocols are upheld to offer Elders and knowledge keepers ceremonial cistêmaw (tobacco) and wêpinâsowina (cotton broadcloth, when required), and sônîyâw (monetary gift). This practice of gift giving acknowledges the sacredness of the exchange, the relationship within which these songs were created, and ensures right-relation is upheld throughout; from gathering knowledge and first intentions for the songs, to finding and affirming the language and melody of the songs, in order to carry the teachings forward.

These 2S songs are integrated into a collaborative short performance with local interdisciplinary artists, and the outcome is shared with the Concordia and Tio'tia:ke/ Mooniyang/ Montréal communities. The stories woven throughout these songs provide educational, creative, ceremonial, and archival resources for Indigenous communities, and serve to uplift 2S roles, sovereignty, ongoing miskâsowin (belonging), and practices of self-determination. The recordings of the songs and performance are to be submitted to the 2Spirit Archives at the University of Winnipeg (originally created by Dr. Alberta McLeod), and they will also be archived

at the Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS, Concordia University) as well as Indigenous Futures Research Centre (IFRS, Concordia University).

Since the performance and creation component of the thesis was completed, I have had the honour of returning to the 2Spirit Sundance site (Medicine Wolf Healing Place), where many of the kin who took part in the kiyokêwin (visits) come to participate in ceremony, and to share the songs with them inside and outside the matotisân (sweatlodge). I also taught one of the songs at the first ever National 2Spirit Michif Gathering, also hosted at Medicine Wolf Healing Place. Locally, in collaboration with other community organizers, we've hosted six big drum circles with 2Spirit and Indigiqueer kin. In these circles, we're learning these 2S songs to sing ourselves home as well.

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

#### **1.3.1. Objective 1: Exploring têtêhikan (drum) as Teacher**

The first objective of this research-creation is to engage têtêhikan (the drum) as a primary teacher, guide, and relational methodology for exploring the healing journeys of 2Spirit kin. Drawing from my own path where têtêhikan became my spiritual anchor, I aim to further understand how têtêhikan can support spiritual interconnectedness with kîkâwinaw askiy (Mother Earth), through ceremonial, creative, and cultural transmissions. Engaging in embodied practices and research methodologies, I examine how drum can assist 2Spirit kin in self-determination, cultural resurgence, and language reclamation. The methodology of this project is centered around têtêhikan, and draws from principles of 4-bodied being and deep listening (nitohtâmowin) to explore drum making practices, feasting, creation stories, and then conduct kiyokêwin (visits) with 2S drum carriers. These visits will gather essential, embodied knowledge, reinforcing the concept that the drum is a powerful, living technology that not only keeps 2Spirit kin alive, but is central to reclaiming our sovereignty.

#### **1.3.2. Cultivating Healing, Belonging (miskâsowin), and Joy (wîyatikwêwin) in 2Spirit Community**

The second objective of this research creation is to cultivate spaces for healing, belonging (miskâsowin), and joy (wîyatikwêwin) among 2Spirit kin by centering Indigenous ways of knowing and relating. Through the practice of kiyokêwin—the Michif Visiting Way—this research will honour oral storytelling and shared experience as the essential medium for knowledge exchange. This involves gathering with six 2S drum carriers in one-on-one visits to discuss how their relationship to the drum has facilitated their healing journey and their sense of place within the circle. By upholding wâhkôhtowin (kinship and relational ethics) and principles of tâpwêwin (truth-telling) and kitimâkêyihowin (empathy), I intend to collectively document and celebrate the cultural protective factors that enable 2Spirit kin to resist fragmentation and trauma, ensuring the research process itself is a decolonial act that affirms our inherent dignity and sacred roles.

#### **1.3.3. Generating a 2Spirit Song Bundle (nikamowina) to Transmit Knowledge for Future Generations**

The final objective is to generate a new bundle of 2Spirit songs (nikamowina) that serves as a vital tool for the intergenerational transmission and acquisition of 2Spirit knowledge, language, and teachings. Teachings and concepts shared during the kiyokêwin will be woven into new drum songs, co-written with the guidance of nêhiyaw and 2Spirit Michif Elders and language keepers. These songs are intended to fill a critical gap in the Indigenous knowledge base, embodying principles of cultural resurgence and self-determination in a format that is accessible, archival, and living. This song bundle will further be shared with the community—in ceremony, drum circles, on the land, and through archives—to ensure that 2Spirit knowledge and language contained within the songs uplift future generations of 2Spirit kin.

## **1.4. Preview of Contents**

This research creation master's thesis is organized into the following chapters:

### **1.4.1. Chapter 1 Introduction**

Presented in this chapter is my positionality (where I grew up, my community and cultural connections, family history, my role as an artist and ceremonial helper), as well as my relationship to this research, research questions, research objectives, preview of the contents, and a personal story.

### **1.4.2. Chapter 2 kakêskomowina (knowledge keepers guidance) & Literature Review**

This chapter includes review and discussion of drumming, cultural and creative knowledge as they have been received through embodied and experiential learning environments (ceremony, Elder's visits, creative community), as well as highlighting literary sources. Highlighted sections include 2Spirit song practices, 2Spirit sovereignty and Indigenous futurism, têtêhikan okiskinwahamakêw (drum as teacher), and ê-môsâhkinamahk nêhiyawêwin (picking up the language).

### **1.4.3. Chapter 3 Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical frameworks used in this research are decolonization, medicine wheel (w)holism, and deep listening. In addition, I propose seven guiding principles from Michif and Nehiyaw lifeways, as a framework to support the integration of knowledge and relationality: kiskisiwin, miskâsowin, nitohtamowin, tâpwêwin, kitimâkêyihtowin, pawâtamowin, wiyatikwêwin. These are all highlighted in more depth throughout this chapter, and again in the Research-Creation Field Work Chapter.

### **1.4.4. Chapter 4 Methodologies**

The research is grounded in and guided by relational methodologies, that all circle and centre on têtêhikan, drum as primary collaborator, guide, teacher. The relational methodologies are kiyokêwin, and wâhkôhtowin.

#### 1.4.5. Chapter 5 Research-Creation Field Work

This chapter highlights the process for the kiyokêwina, visits with drum carriers and the primary guiding questions that led those conversations. The song creation process is also described in this chapter.

#### 1.4.6. Chapter 6 Findings: kiyokêwina 2Spirit Knowledge Synthesis

This chapter presents the process and findings of the kiyokêwina, visits (or interviews) carried out with six 2Spirit drum carriers across Turtle Island, and highlights their stories and teachings around drum and 2Spirit ways of knowing, being, and relating. Framed around the seven guiding principles of Michif and Nehiyaw lifeways, this chapter emphasizes interwoven relationships of each drum carrier and their roles in ceremony and community.

#### 1.4.7. Chapter 7 Outcomes / nikamowina: Generating a Song Bundle

Thirteen songs created during this research creation project are presented in this chapter along with journal entries highlighting the process, intentions, and dreams that support the songs in their creation, embodiment, and presentation.

#### 1.4.8. Conclusion

A summary of the research and future research plans and possibilities are presented in this chapter.

### **1.5. Personal Story #1: matotisânihk (Inside the Sweatlodge): Holding My Drum to My Heart (a cautionary tale)**

Sometimes they say, the closer you get to the source, the more intense the challenges become. One of my aunties, nêhiyaw/half-breed artist and scholar, Cheryl L'Hirondelle once shared the teaching that only when we are ready to receive a particular lesson, does that teaching place itself on our path. (L'Hirondelle, personal communication, 2015). With her wisdom in mind, I share a cautionary tale of readiness, a situation that challenged my perseverance and put my learning to the task:

*I had just finished the second to last kiyokêwin (interview) in my research process, and was hoping to attend a matotisân (sweatlodge) in Winnipeg before flying back to Montreal. After spending almost a month on the road, I had received an invite to a matotisân, down the river from where I was staying. I showed up at the Elder's house, only to find out the lodge was water-logged with spring melt. No worries, she said, and shared an invite to another matotisân the following day. I didn't personally receive an invite from the lodge keeper, so I went on a whim, barely knowing one other person. Even though this is not the best means of approaching a ceremony, I was trusting in the invitation and hoped for the best. The next day I showed up in my sweat scrubs and rubber boots, with cloth, tobacco, berries, and drum in hand. I introduced myself to the lodge keeper and his wife, naming who I am, my people, and how my master's research centering 2Spirit drumming had brought me there. I gave white cloth, the Creator's colour, and tobacco to the lodge Elder, and voiced my prayers for our 2Spirit relatives' before entering.*

*Not even five minutes into the sweat did the lodge keeper start sharing what he called “old stories” that had been passed down to him, about where the drum comes from and how he learned it to be “pâstâhowin,” a violation of sacred law, for women to carry or play the drum. I was shocked. Upon hearing his words, and sitting with the shaming that accompanied, I held my drum close to my chest, whispering quiet prayers to têtewêhikan and myself, and prayed that his words wouldn’t prevent other 2Spirit kin and women from ever picking up one of these sacred beings in their life. I used the drum as a protection, to help me stay in my heart and know my value and truth.*

*At that moment, I was reaffirmed in my commitment for doing this work. Looking around the circle in between rounds, I noticed the rainbow edging on two young ones’ ribbon skirts, both with brightly dyed fluorescent hair, and thought to myself, perhaps they’re 2Spirit. I didn’t let the shaming stop me from staying in the lodge and keeping my drum with me. I prayed so hard, to stay protected and safe, and to be wrapped up in the good love of the Creator and all my spirit guides. I felt strong, even if a bit shaken, holding true to more inclusive and generative drum teachings as I had come to learn and know them. I knew I’d never go back, but also felt that if I didn’t stay inside the lodge, I wasn’t honouring myself. The lodge keeper didn’t make it to the final round. His adult child took over, and continued to reiterate his teachings, which felt additionally shaming and painful.*

The first time I learnt the term “pâstâhowin” was in the front seat of nêhiyaw Elder Joseph Naytowhow’s rez wagon. We were driving through Southern Saskatchewan, talking about storms, floods, and intense weather patterns, read: climate crisis. He suggested these storms were a response from kikâwînow askiy, Mother Earth, to the ongoing human violations of lands, waters, forests, and natural law. Joseph shared *pâstâhowin* as a very severe term that referred to the violation of natural law, and the resulting “sacred whipping into order” that transgressing such laws entails. nêhiyaw scholar Sylvia McAdam writes, “pâstâhowin has also been described as going against natural law: you will suffer retribution for an action against creation” (McAdam, p43). She specifies that *pâstâhowin* usually denotes transgressing against another human being, but is sometimes applied to Creation in a more general sense. McAdam further shares: “breaking these laws can bring about divine retribution with grave consequences” (McAdam, p43).

It is severe, then, for an Elder to use the term *pâstâhowin* inside a mâtotisân to denote who should and shouldn’t be carrying and playing a drum. Had this Elder given his teaching about drums before I entered the lodge, I could have made my own choice to leave before entering into a sacred relationship with him. The fact that I was welcomed inside led me to believe that the teachings within that space would include me and be in service to all peoples’ healing and wellness. So many of our sacred ceremonies have been overtaken by heteropatriarchal practices that seek to forcibly exclude 2Spirit relatives and Indigenous women from holding our rightful and dignified places in these cultural contexts. Furthermore, the use of sacred language to frame these harmful teachings as “traditional ways” increases the violence and policing of our sovereignty, roles, bodies, and relationships as 2Spirit people.

A previous version of myself would have absorbed the violence and attack on my spirit as a 2Spirit femme presenting person. I likely would have slunked away feeling upset and ashamed, and perhaps remained silent. But this time, almost as soon as I could, I shared my experience and the resulting impacts, with trusted Elders and 2Spirit kin. This act of resisting the harms directed at me represents a crucial turning point in my healing journey. I begin with this story as a way of affirming the approach and reasoning behind the research and creation I share here. In naming the pain of this experience, I am reinforcing the teachings I have received throughout

my ceremonial and master's work, and the various ways this work emphasizes embodied resurgence and affirms miskâsowin, belonging, and celebrates our vital roles as 2Spirit people in ceremonial contexts.

## Chapter 2 Theoretical Frameworks

### 2.1. Decolonization Framework

The continuation of our drum practices as 2Spirit people reclaims our place as active contributors in the practice of decolonization, within urban, ceremonial, and institutional settings, and sets a precedent for future generations of Indigenous creatives, cultural workers, and scholars. Following Linda Tuhiwai Smith's imperative that research must be about us and for us, not situating us as subjects to be studied, assimilated or worse, my master's work centers 2Spirit voices as knowledge holders (Smith, 2002). In her work, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2002) Smith states that decolonization is necessary as a continual resistance to colonial power and assertion of Indigenous sovereignty. As 2Spirit people, decolonization can further be affirmed by being embodied, and identifying and asserting "control over our resistances" (Smith, 2002, p.38). As a 2Spirit Michif person, who often identifies as iskwêw (woman), my body is the site which both contains and declares my sovereign position and opposition to colonial powers. When I further this declaration through creative and ceremonial practices of singing and drumming, I move from mere opposition into a sovereign position of reclamation through decolonial action. As stated in her essay, Reclaiming the first person voice, *traw/wulwuy* scholar Emma Lee affirms that decolonization must be grounded in truth-telling, tâpwêwin (Cardinal & Hildrebrand, 2000) and in the real and lived experiences of Indigenous people. Recentring Indigenous first-person narratives and collective resistance movements, Lee (2022) shares:

"To delve here into these critical, social justice and reparative territories to support decolonizing aims is to attack the very heart of colonial control through reclaiming the things that matter – land and power. Decolonization is a tangible movement to destabilize and unsettle dominant social structures in favor of Indigenous rights that the academy should look to uphold" (p.143).

This return to land and power by practicing ancestral and contemporary ways of being is foundational to ensuring inclusive and vibrant futures for future 2Spirit kin. There is no quick path forward, but there is continued urgency in the present moment to take the steps required for systemic and long-term changes to happen. Asserting what Lee (2022) so powerfully voiced, being a drum carrier today means "reclaiming the things that matter" (p.143). We are still healing from the Pot Latch Law of the Indian Act, which was enforced between 1884 and 1951 across so-called Canada (University of British Columbia, 2021). Under the Ban, it was made punishable by law for Indigenous people to gather in ceremony, thus prohibiting the use of all drums and drum songs. At the *Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience* exhibit at the McCord Museum (2021-2026), I saw a hand drum on display, confiscated before the 67 year Pot Latch Ban in 1868, and on the back of it, a note was inscribed by nêhiyaw chief William Badger (date unknown), stating:

"We the Indians of Mistawasis Indian Reserve send this drum to the Indian Commissioners. It has been used for heathen rites and dances and is the last relic of heathen observances possessed by any of our band."

It is almost unfathomable how painful this note must have been for Chief Badger to write, given the sacredness and significance of drums and the ceremonies they're tied to. The systemic coercion, patronization, and intimidation that forced the hand who wrote this note must be stopped. Within these colonial systems, there is all the more reason to pick up the drum, as a decolonial mechanism of reinstating power back into the actual hands of our relatives, and more

specifically, resisting heteropatriarchal oppression by uplifting 2Spirit drumming practices (Simpson, 2018). As stated by Smith (2002),

“Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” (p.101).

Song creation in nêhiyawêwin is a refusal of dominant linguistic systems, a divestment from colonial power, and turning away heteropatriarchal violence (Ahmed, 2006; Simpson, 2018). 2Spirit people drum song creation, is a re-assertion of power, enacted through the reclamation of voice and language, which further nurtures pathways for collective care, deep listening and a relational accountability. Being a 2Spirit drum carrier is an act of refusal, resistance, recognition and liberation (Simpson, 2018). Through drumming, we awaken portals for vital memories, creative intuition, and cultural transmissions to move through our bodies with each song and drum beat. By re-establishing connection to the drum beat, we re-connect with our own heartbeats, and in turn, the heartbeat of okâwâmâw askiy, Mother Earth (Walker, 2021). This connection grows with each song and each time we sing, all of creation that is part of this system of land-based relations, is re-membered. Decolonization as a framework asks that we embody a set of relationships and re-position ourselves back into the centre of our wâhkôhtowin (kinship relations) circle, just as our ancestors envisioned (Thunder, personal communication, 2025).

## 2.2. Medicine Wheel (w)holism Framework



Figure 2.0: Siksikaitsitapi Medicine Wheel in Treaty 7, Moe Clark, 2025.

Much of my work is grounded in principles of the medicine wheel, which engages a wholism centred on four-bodied ways of being, knowing and relating. Four-bodied being draws from the understanding that we have been gifted mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical bodies with which to perceive and engage in the world (Absolon, 2010; Archibald, 2008; Ermine, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Lee, 2006; Naytowhow, 2013-2025, McAdam, 2015). Knowledge is generated through experience, and more specifically, when we are in active and right relationship with the land, ceremonies, cultural practices, with all our kinship relations, and the sacred gifts as provided by Creator. For me, this means integrating creative practices, ceremony, intergenerational transmission and community into my process, ensuring the practices are embodied and relational.

Anishinaabe kwe, social worker, and educator Kathy Absolon underscores *minobimaadsiwin* (a good life) and values of 'wholism' utilizing medicine wheel/ four-directions frameworks to develop healing strategies. In her words, "My use of the spelling wholism indicates 'whole' as in wholistic, complete, balanced and circular" (Absolon, 2010, p. 75). Finding balance between Anishinaabe and Western knowledges, Absolon shares her medicine wheel methodology, beginning from the centre *iskotêw* (fire), which also represents self. Moving 'sun-wise' through four stages of healing, Absolon (2010) outlines the four directions as:

1. East: spiritual/historical, highlighting the process for visioning & beginning of the work;
2. South: emotional/relational which supports community collaboration and affirming protocols;
3. West: mental/political, asserting Indigenous knowledges + Elders teachings;
4. North: physical/healing which supports methods and action (p. 77).

There are concentric rings in Absolon's medicine wheel, conveying "reciprocal interconnections of self, individual, family, community, nation, society and creation. At the centre is a tiny circle representing the Self" (Absolon, 2021, p. 76). I draw inspiration from these multiple layers of relation as I anchor the research-creation work ahead, while continuing to uphold teachings I've learned through my own experiences with *nêhiyaw tâpisiinowin* (Cree worldview) and Michif worldview.

*nêhiyaw* Elder and knowledge keeper Willie Ermine shares about the earliest medicine wheels as land-based and alive, stating that they are stone markers which "gave insight into our common humanity and connectedness" (Ermine, 1995, p. 106). He further shares how medicine wheels act as mirrors of sacred and spiritual knowledge connecting humans to deeper inner and outer cosmological knowing and relating. In Ermine's (1995) words:

"These wheels convey concepts derived from introspection and illustrate the pathways to self-discovery, the first door to mystery. They speak, in the silence of the unknown, about the progressive growth of self through a cyclical journey of repetition, experience, and construction of meaning. The wheels mirror the cosmology of the inner space" (p. 106).

These practices are re-iterated by *nêhiyaw* writer and one of the founders of the Idle No More Movement, Sylvia McAdam. McAdam (2015) shares how the medicine wheel is a balancing compass through which communities can teach, learn, and live *nêhiyaw* sovereignty. She intertwines ceremonial, educational, and political worlds in her work upholding *nêhiyaw* law in practice. She begins with good child rearing as a primary tenet of a strong nation, and shares of the gifts all children are given when they arrive to this earth walk:

“There are four gifts given to them: emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual. All four have to be in balance with each other, utilizing the nêhiyaw laws as the foundation at all times. These gifts have been described in a diagram called the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel symbolizes these gifts, while its four directions represent balance” (p. 29).

From a dignity-centred and Indigenous rights-based perspective, Métis therapist, educator and trail blazer, Dr. Catherine Richardson Kinêwiskwêw speaks about holism in relation to healing and self-determination practices that centre “Islands of Safety.” Richardson (2021) emphasizes a Medicine Wheel model when working with clients who have experienced violence and abuse, highlighting “physical safety, cultural safety, spiritual safety, intellectual safety, sexual safety and psychological/emotional safety” (p. 76) as primary tenets to assisting clients in their healing journeys. Safety is not assumed for our 2Spirit relatives in their healing journeys, and so it is imperative to look to practices which uphold personal agency, self-determination and sovereignty within a culturally grounded framework of collective care. Richardson’s healing framework for supporting Indigenous women, children and families to re-establish safety in their lives can be transferred to practices of kiyokêwin when connecting with 2Spirit relatives.

Reminding us that our bodies and spirits are experiential learners, 2S Michif Elder, artist and educator Fyre Jean Graveline outlines her process of teaching and learning through a transformational medicine wheel model emphasizing being ‘In-Relation.’ Integrating an arts-based practice with ceremonial and land-centred teachings, Graveline suggests, “The Medicine Wheel is an organizing principle; it is dynamic and developmental. And it expresses movement” (Graveline, 1998, p. 75). She highlights the importance of engaging our five senses to discover and know one’s relationship with the world, and she shares teachings from Pictou that in order to expand consciousness we must also develop our “six non-physical senses: thinking, memory, imagination, dreaming, visioning and spirit-travelling” (Graveline, 1998, p. 77).

“I envision a fluid pattern  
Medicine Wheel as “paradigm.”  
Paradigms are beliefs that Guide “action taken in connection with disciplined  
inquiry,” Guba says (1990, p. 17).  
Teachings of the Sacred Circle.  
Circular  
Flowing  
Integrative  
Honoring Interconnectedness of All  
Balancing Mental  
Spiritual  
Emotional  
Physical Dimensions  
How do I get from here to there?  
Pray to the Grandmothers” (Graveline, 200, p. 364).

This visual poem as created by Graveline presents a map, a pathway that suggests fluidity, intuition, and creativity are sacred and integrated with the ceremonial practice of honouring our four-bodied existence. In much of the creative practice within my work, I also arrive again and again at the process of praying to the grandmothers.

### 2.3. Deep Listening Framework

In a world predicated on distracting our sovereignty with hyper fixation on images and memes, engaging in practices of active or deep listening become critical acts of refusal (Simpson, 2014; Simpson, 2017). Practices of deep listening offer tools for more ethical and creative ways of being in relation with the sounds, songs and truths that animate our inner and outer existences (Ermine, 1995; Oliveros, 2005). Deepening these relationships is an act of reclaiming sovereignty of our bodies and lands (Simpson, 2014; Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019). Our ancestors knew that the land upon which we thrived had voice and spirit, and our original sounds and languages were intimately derived from the sounds and movements of the land (McAdam, 2015; Naytowhow, 2013; Yahyahkeekoot, 2022).

nêhinaw Elder Ron Cook shares teachings around the word “nikamow” to sing, when he breaks it down to mean ‘nikawiy: my mother’ and ‘ayamow: she/they talk(s).’ Beyond binary constructions of land, the core value here is that land is alive, and everything contained within askiy awa (earth) speaks. Listening to the voices of land and wind, of water and trees, is central to how I create and ‘song catch’ (Johnny, 2018), especially with têtewêhikan. I make an offering of cistêmaw, tobacco, before I begin, asking “wicihin, please help me” to the spirits and caretakers of the land and waters, help me listen so I may hear what wants to be sung into being (Cook, 2025).

For generations, the Yolnu people, an Aboriginal Nation from North Arnhem land in Australia, have carried on extensive cultural practices of songlines and songspirals as a means for remembering, honouring and transmitting important relationships between human and beyond human kin, including territories of land, water, sky, fire, plant, tree, animal, and mineral beings. Yolnu songlines encode deep layers of meaning in each breath, tone, and rhythm. When sung collectively, and in movement and relationship to the land, those songs, also called *milkarri*, are living reminders of long-time land rights. In *Songspirals*, the book storying these experiences, the Gay'wu Group of Women (2019) collectively describe:

“When the court failed to recognize Yolnu land rights, it was because they said we didn’t have their kind of agriculture or fences or anything that could see or recognize as using our land. We don’t use the land, not in that way; we sing the land so that new trees grow, new plants come, animals flourish...with our songspirals the land renews itself, our songspirals are our land rights” (pp. 258-259).

Notions of deep listening have been shared by pioneer electronic music composer, educator, and queer feminist, Pauline Oliveros, who underscored deep listening as a process of “learning to expand the (our) perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound...” (Oliveros, 2005, p. 15). Her teachings about “multi-dimensional listening” suggest sounds are both temporal and spatial, and that we can hear them consciously and unconsciously. Through her sonic meditations, she offered practices for deepening our felt and perceived connections to subtle, expansive, earth-based, universal, collective, and personal sonic worlds (Oliveros, 2005). These foundational processes of deep listening, practiced through Indigenous and Western modes interchangeably and simultaneously, become a primary framework I carry throughout my research creation.



(Gaudet, 2019) we are, as the late Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) put it, “taking back our spirits” (Gaudet, 2019, p.59). As we come home, there is renewed space for pawâtamowin (dreaming and visioning), more vibrant and inclusive futures, and by doing so, we awaken a sense of safety to reclaim wiyâtikosiwin (joy). As Naytowhow states, “It took several methods to even just get to a genuine joy. It took dreams, sweat lodges, drum songs... tragedy created beauty and medicine” (personal communication, 2025).

These seven guiding principles tether my knowledge bundle together, moving backwards and forwards through the work and process as collaborators. I utilize these seven values as a practice for weaving together the teachings and knowledge shared with six 2Spirit drum carriers. They also serve the collaborative process I undertake with creative kin and knowledge keepers, when creating and bringing the drum songs to life. Each collaborator has spirit, and requires these values be upheld throughout the process. By voicing, listening, and being witnessed in our lived experiences as 2Spirit kin, we collectively repair the fragmentation and hurt so many of us have lived, and sing our way home.

## **2.5. Personal Story #2: amisk maskihkiy: Honouring My Gifts**

As an integrative practice for bringing together the above-mentioned frameworks, I share another personal story. It’s a story of affirmation, one that centres decolonization from a position of deep listening, acknowledgment of four-bodiedness, and connection to the principles that guide right relation. This act of resurgence brought forth gratitude from kohkohmwak (grandmothers) in a moment where honouring my gifts could have negative recourse. I go back over ten years ago, on a winter night after a performance in a territory where women and 2Spirit drumming are contested things:

*For the first time, I had received an invitation to travel to Denendeh, up in Northwest Territories, to join a storytelling tour along the Deh Cho, Mackenzie River. Joining two other Indigenous artists, we were invited to share our stories, jokes, and songs with three local Dene communities. When I arrived, I learned that up in Dene territory only the men carry and are allowed to play drums. I travelled half way across the country to join this tour, and I had brought my drum with the understanding that I would be playing and singing with it. Caught between a rock and hard place, I did what I’d been taught to do, and I put cistêmaw (tobacco) down and offered prayers at the banks of their ancestral Dehcho (Mackenzie River). I asked for support and forgiveness that I wouldn’t be following local custom.*

*I’ve learned from Elders that my gifts are intimately linked to my role and practices of singing drum songs, and that if I don’t share them, I could get sick. This is the teaching of amisk, beaver. It’s well known that if amiskwak don’t use their teeth and continue to chew through trees and be master architects of the waterways, their teeth will keep growing. (Wilson, personal communication, 2023). Eventually they will grow so long, they will pierce through their hearts and destroy them. So, with these teachings held close to my heart, I carried my têtêhikan onto the stage and expressed that while I respect local teachings, I carry different ways and I will be honouring them by sharing some drum songs.*

*The performance was powerful, and afterwards I was greeted by four Dene kohkomwak who waddled towards me from the audience. They started congratulating me on the concert, and then introduced themselves by their drum group name, “Granddaughters of the Moon.” They chuckled and told me it was their oldest member’s 80th birthday and*

*they'd left drum practice early to celebrate at the show. They continued by sharing that up until recently, no women would have ever been caught dead drumming. But an old medicine man had visited them and offered them tobacco, saying that there was a need for the women's drum medicine more than ever, and would they consider picking up their drums. I was shocked and elated that these old ones had approached me and had also taken up drumming in their community. Their courage to honour their gifts and follow through with something that could potentially bring them harm, was inspiring and motivating. It gave me the gusto I needed to continue the tour at our final destination in Fort Smith and to carry my drum with a renewed sense of purpose.*

I share this anecdote because it was a surprise moment where listening to my instincts and trusting the teachings I carry, was affirmed by local kohkoms. I've been approached by women and 2Spirit kin in many controversial contexts and told that the medicine I've brought has empowered them to honour their medicine and relationship to tēwēhikan. These moments affirmed for me, the need to trust my spirit, to raise my drum and my gifts as a singer, and to reawaken and embolden others to do the same.

## Chapter 3 Methodologies

The blended research creation approach is grounded in nêhiyaw kiskêyitamowin (Plains Cree Knowledges) and relational ethics: truth telling, (w)holism, reciprocity, relational accountability, conversational method, and storywork (Archibald, 2008; Hildebrandt & Cardinal, 2000; Kovach, 2009, Gaudet, 2019). I combine “kiyokêwin”, kitchen table talks (Maria Campbell, personal communication, July 22, 2018) with “coming in” stories (Wilson, 2015), inviting participants to return to themselves and as valued members of “our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations” (Beaucage & Wilson, 2016). To synthesize these exchanges, the creation of new drum songs grounds the learning in a resurgent practice of “coded articulations” (Simpson, 2018), that, when situated in the body, can be transmitted to the community in acts of reclamation (L’Hirondelle, 2018).

### 3.1 têtêhikan okiskinwahamakêw: Drum as Teacher

têtêhikan is teacher, healer, helper, peacekeeper, protector, child, collaborator, and when we pick up and sing with têtêhikan we are reaffirming and remembering our place as intimate co-creators with the land, stars, and all of Creation. As such, têtêhikan creates a landing place, for learning new songs, remembering our place within the circle, and resounding in language. têtêhikan is a catalyst for dreaming, for recalibrating inner and outer worlds, for building community, for augmenting our prayers, for practicing ceremonies, for singing our languages... for coming home. As Sylvia McAdam shares, “There is a spirituality embedded in the words, songs, prayers, and history” (p. 25). As such, our connection to spirit and healing is dependent on our ability to learn to sing our songs, while carrying têtêhikan.

Drumming is one of the oldest technologies given to us by the Creator. têtêhikan is a methodology for embodied memory and cultural resurgence. Heart medicine and star teachings, as transmitted through the rhythmic and repeating motifs both in making and singing with têtêhikan, reinforce cultural reclamation and self-determination. Songs, once voiced, open thresholds of spirit between têtêhikan, the one who plays, and those who listen. Beyond the songs created with têtêhikan, there are embedded layers of meaning in making têtêhikan. têtêhikan is the circle of life, embodied in the coming together of animal skin and the hoop of life, made from tree relatives. Expressed as a feminine being, but by no means gendered in the work I do, Oji-Cree 2Spirit Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby shares:

“When we have our drum it’s all nice and round. She [the drum] is a circle, and we are in the middle. We are just a tiny little piece in the middle of this drum. She is our mother. She is our creator” (personal communication, 2021).

Experiential knowledge is where I begin my journey, with learning how to soak, stretch, wrap, weave and tighten (but not too much) to make new drums. I did this in the kitchens’ of other kin, at the site of feminist Camp Sis while learning from 2Spirit Elders Ma-Nee Chacaby and Blu Waters, or collectively making a big drum at the first 2Spirit fasting camp, with direction from 2Spirit Elder Charlotte Nolin. From here, I’ve received teachings for feasting, birthing, or “activating the heartbeat” of drums, as well as further understanding for protecting and uplifting the spirit and life energy of têtêhikan.

Through my own research creation project, I delved further into drum teachings as related to acâhkosak, our star relatives, as an integral means for deepening healing processes. As shared by Michif, nêhiyaw Elder and Sundance Chief, Tom McCallum, he teaches of the embedded relationships between mistik (tree) and acâhkosak (stars). In his teachings he affirms the vital

assistance needed at this time from our *other-than-human* teachers to support us in healing our relationships to ourselves, the earth, and one another. He shares:

“The ideas imparted to me by this sacred tree facilitate the transference of information from the Star People...who wish to assist us on our journey at this crucial time in history” (McCallum, 2019, p.206).

McCallum’s teachings are reminders of our cosmological interconnectedness to the stars and the healing maps they provide us when we listen, connect, and engage in ceremonial practices with our tree relatives. With this knowledge, I was called to weave star teachings into the making of *têwêhikan*, in the wrapping of the skin around the wooden hoop, in the tightening and tying off of the “umbilical cord” at the back of the drum, and in the lifting of the drum stick (tree spirit) when animating the heart beat (Elder Blu Waters, personal communication, 2021). These embodied, cosmological, and land-based relationships to *têwêhikan* have taught me how to take good care of *têwêhikan*, and in turn, myself, and my communities. *têwêhikan* serves as a reminder that all that is embedded in the spirit of *têwêhikan* assists us on our healing journeys.

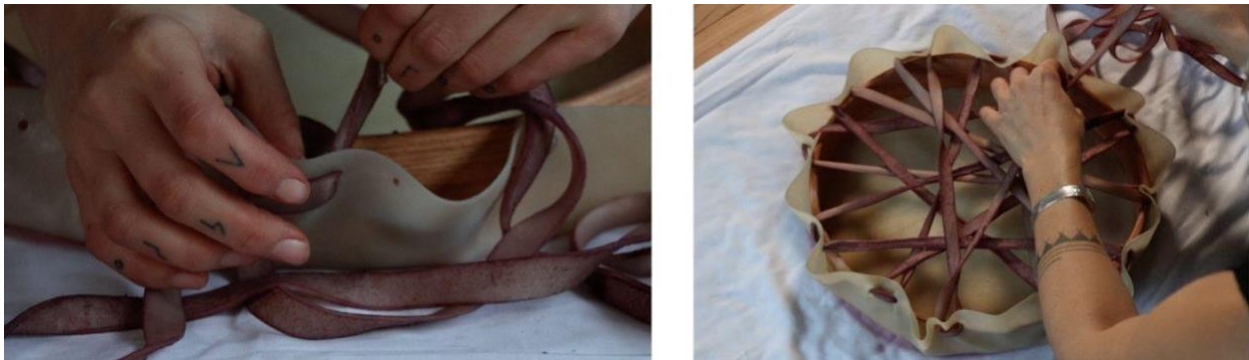


Figure 3.1-3.2 *têwêhikan* spirit tethering, Video Still, Moe Clark, 2021.

In my daily life I carry and sing with *têwêhikan* at protests, at the front lines of marches for MMIWG2S, in an Elder’s backyard during an ancestral skin markings (tattoo) gathering, in healing circles, and on performance stages the world over. Through teachings received from Elders and knowledge keepers, I’ve learned to take care of my drum as I would an Elder or child, kept with a braid of sweetgrass and wrapped in soft red cloth. *têwêhikan* is part of my bundle, and when I am in right relation to *têwêhikan*, I am embodying decolonial practices in everyday and intimate spaces (Simpson, 2018). As *nêhiyaw* scholar and Treaty commissioner Kathy Walker shares about bundles, “The bundle was not merely a ‘status’ symbol or recognition of the personal virtue of an individual or group, instead a bundle encompassed a real-life role and responsibility based on *embodying* and *living* its restorative thought and practice” (Walker, 2023, p108). As described by *nêhiyaw* Elder Joseph Naytowhow, “*ispimihk mistikwânihk kakocihk,*” he shares that when you honour your drum, you lift it above your head (Naytowhow, personal communication, 2021). In lifting up *têwêhikan*, as I would a pipe, I am acknowledging drum as an essential part of my bundle, and as I do so, I embody and lift up my roles and responsibilities as a 2Spirit person with the intention of bringing *miyo-maskihkiy* (good medicine) to the hearts of our communities, and to all living beings.

### 3.1.1. Drum Creation Stories

Throughout these experiences of creating and lifting *têwêhikan*, questions came up around the original teachings and Creation stories for how drums originally came to be. Who first received

the vision of the drum, and how were drums originally brought into being? During a Cree and Tea class, Joseph Naytowhow shared a drum creation story, and in it he shared the intention of drum was to be peacekeeper and bringer of balance for Nations at war (Naytowhow, 2022). Other stories passed down orally reiterated Naytowhow's sharing, of the original drums coming through spiritual visions and dreams, as tools for peacebuilding and peacekeeping within and between nations.

2Spirit Oji-Cree Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby shares teachings her grandmother first learned when she was four years old and later transmitted to Ma-Nee. In her story, she shares how the drum came from a spirit voice who communicated to a woman while walking in the bush. The woman was sad and missing her partner, and she was called to build a drum as a means of bringing her people back from war, to instill peace and call loved ones home. Her iterations of the drum as a site for embodying wellness, for calling relatives who are far away back home, and for connecting to our intuitions, are vital reminders that 2Spirit kin are meant to gather at the drum.

Similar to Chacaby, Tuscarora knowledge keeper and vocalist, Pura Fe shares the creation of the drum as she's learned:

"The big drum which came from a Santee women named Tail Feather Woman...in a time of war...It was her vision of this drum as she hid under water with a reed to breathe from, away from the soldiers who massacred her village. She saw the drum where many would sit together around it to sing and play. She heard the songs and was given the protocols" (Fe, online, 2021).

Pura Fe continues, stating that this vision was shared with a council of Elders who then agreed,

"that the drum would be made, and many drums were made and brought to many villages and nations. It was given to both men and women. It was meant to keep peace among all the peoples. Sitting in a circle represents all" (Fe, online, 2021).

In conversation with nêhiyaw Elder Joseph Naytowhow, he shares that the drum arrived in a spiritual vision while two nations were struggling to make a peace treaty, and right when they were about to fight again,

"A spirit came in the midst of the conflict and stopped everything. This spirit messenger pointed this way and that, a moose and a tree came, the drum strung itself together. The spirit reached over and grabbed a stick and hit the drum once. Then the spirit began to sing a peace song" (Naytowhow, personal communication, 2024).

In all of these stories, the central theme is peace. Peace as a ceremonial and participatory action. Through the resonant vibrations brought about through the songs and the heartbeat of the drum, as well as the practice of gathering in a circle around the drum, kinship relationships were restored. Members of the community were called back into the circle, to see one another again, to hear one another again, and to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all who sat together. Even though the majority of the visions to make drums were received by women, in all the stories, the drum was meant for all people. Sadly, as time has passed, the drum has been taken out of this original intent to be for all people, as Ma-Nee Chacaby states:

"The drum came from a woman's journey... She offered the drum to the men to hold it, to carry it, to share it with women and men, and sing with it. And the men started to practice music amongst themselves, and they wanted to keep it. They never gave it

back. Men don't know how to give it back, to share it back" (Chacaby, personal communication, 2021).

It is shared by many that the drum is the heartbeat of kikâwînow askiy (mother earth). As taught to me by my late Ojibwe adopted mosôm, Bob Smoker: "When we drum, we are connecting our heartbeats with the heartbeat of all creation" (Smoker, personal communication, 2013). nêhinaw Elder Ron Cook (2025) shares that even in the name of têtewêhikan there is an emphasis on "otêh" meaning heart (personal communication). As 2Spirit people, we need to have clear pathways for restoring, remembering, and returning to our rightful place as Creator beings. As Alex Wilson shares, we need to 'come in' as a means of realigning our life force and heartbeats with the heartbeat of all creation.

### **3.2. kiyokêwin (Visiting)**

As an artist and drum carrier, so much of the process for learning, exchanging, and creating music comes from gathering in intimate spaces with other kin through the practice of visiting. Integral to these moments of visiting, are stories of remembering, truth-telling, laughter, and personal accounts of healing. From these places of connection, space for improvisation, imagination, and transmission is shaped. Throughout my entire research and creation project, I have upheld the practice of kiyokêwin, which is inherently participatory and community-based in scope, drawing on intergenerational and interconnected transmissions.

Métis scholar Janice Cindy Gaudet highlights kiyokêwin, as 'the Visiting Way', a Michif practice of passing on knowledge through visiting, sharing stories, remembering, gathering, and making decisions for households and communities. As taught to her by Métis Elder Maria Campbell, Gaudet shares how kiyokêwin re-centres "Métis and Cree ways of being" and presents a relational research methodology, one that is "practical, social, political, and spiritual," and supports, "milo pimatisiwin, living and being well in relation" (Gaudet, 2019, p.48) Gaudet underscores her own personal process as a researcher coming 'home' through kiyokêwin, sharing how the outcomes of engaging in this way have shaped her healing process and journey (Gaudet, 2019).

Gaudet, in collaboration with Métis scholars Flaminio and Dorion, reinforces the intrinsic interconnection between Métis women's roles, responsibilities, and wellness to practices of visiting and taking care of one another. Flaminio et al. (2020) cite Métis Elder Vivian Meabry (2018) during an interview they had where she shared: "visiting was once embedded in our everyday way of life" (2020, p. 56). Furthermore:

"visiting, both with the land and with relatives, was also a method of survival, of dialogue and deliberation, of decision-making, of responsibility, of celebration, and of sharing and caring for our relatives" (Flaminio et al., 2020; Gaudet, 2019).

Through kiyokêwin, Métis kinship roles and responsibilities are restored, thus affirming a sense of belonging, connection, continuity, and wellness across generations. These values translate deeply into my work (Flaminio et al., 2020).

kiyokêwin plays out regularly in drum circles and song creation practice: someone opens the space, welcomes, smudges the community and drums, or other sacred/musical instruments, and invites deep listening and heart opening throughout the sharing. In between songs there are personal stories, creative insights, and prayers shared. Decisions and transformations are made

together over tea, food, laughter, tears, and the drum. In addition, ways of taking care of one another are integrated in the gatherings, deepening kinship relationships and ways of knowing and being together, and with ourselves. As Gaudet (2021) asserts:

“Visiting leads to self-recognition, and the irrefutable knowledge that internal self-recognition is not a duty; it is a skill, a living practice that is strengthened over and over again through the way of visiting and being visited (p. 56).

Cree scholar Margaret Kovach and Laura Forshaw have identified the conversational method as a way to gather knowledge that is inherently Indigenous and based on *nêhiyaw* relational ethics as it values oral storytelling through dialogue, to pass on our collective memory and knowledge. The values inherent in the circle and conversational methods, combining elements of *kiyokêwin* and *wâhkôhtowin*, have been applied throughout all of my drum and song creation practices as a way to respect the participants' thoughts, boundaries and time (Kovach & Forshaw, 2024).

### 3.3. *wâhkôhtowin* (Relational Ethics)

Whenever we gather to sing and drum, we smudge ourselves and *têwêhikanak* (drums) before we begin, often praying and calling on *niwâhkômakanak*, “all my relations.” We do so, knowing that our lives and existence are intrinsically interwoven with all life forms who sustain us and give us life. In *nêhiyawêwin*, we call this form of kinship, *wâhkôhtowin*. *wâhkôhtowin* is intimate and personal, it is acknowledgment in relation, spanning beyond blood family relations to encompass earth, animal, and star relatives. *wâhkôhtowin* is a constant weaving that ensures recognition, reciprocity, right relation, responsibility, and shared accountability remains at the core of how we walk in the world. Citing Wilson (2008) Métis writer and scholar Cindy Gaudet (2019) shares how *wâhkôhtowin* expands outward and inwards:

“Wilson refers to this as “relational accountability,” which aims to promote balance and harmony. Self-recognition that is anchored in relationality brings us back to our bodies, allowing us to derive meaning and develop self-reliance in our lives” (p.56).

Métis Elder and writer, Maria Campell shares her memories and understanding of *wâhkôhtowin* as core to all of existence. Cindy Gaudet (2019) also cites Campbell (2007):

“At one time, from our place it [*wâhkôhtowin*] meant the whole of creation. And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and inter-connected to all things within it. *wâhkôhtowin* meant honouring and respecting those relationships. [It was] our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us.” (p. 48)

*wâhkôhtowin* as methodology animates how 2Spirit relationships can converge across nations, timelines and dimensions, while ensuring all relations are upheld with an ethic of care and accountability. As ‘researcher’ I refuse notions of hierarchy, and sit down with each ‘participant’ I am ‘interviewing’ as mutually respected kin. Thus, working with the participatory methodology of *kiyokêwin*, we begin each visit by warming up the space where we gather with prayer, acknowledging our relationships to place, to self, to ancestors and family, then to one another. As we smudge and work with our sacred plant medicines, we expand the prayer outwards to ensure we give gratitude to our entire circle of relations; all who uphold our ability to maintain life. As Cindy Gaudet (2019) shares: “The visiting way can serve us in leaving no part of ourselves behind, returning to the principles of *wâhkôhtowin*, and as the late Jo-Ann Episkene

(2009) put it, “taking back our spirits” (p. 59). During the kiyokêwin we uplift our relationship alongside our sacred medicines, whether through sipping tea, additional smudging or lighting a candle, and ensure practices of gift-giving and putting down cistêmaw (tobacco) are upheld before and after. I also acknowledge how our kinship relations are enacted, and how community members live and maintain principles of wâhkôhtowin, differs between nations, as they are manifestations birthed by land, language, ceremony, and culture.

nêhiyaw Elder and knowledge keeper Senapan Thunder shares her mother’s teachings about the interconnected circles of *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship circle of life), which highlights care, protection, reciprocity, and mutual respect from a nêhiyaw worldview. Similar to Kathy Absolon’s medicine wheel teachings, at the centre of Senapan’s wheel is niya (self) and radiating outwards in concentric rings are our relationships with 2-legged relatives (family and human community), askiy niwâhkômakanak (earth relations including: plant, insect, stone, animal, tree, sky, water beings), and on the outermost level, connections to star, cosmological and universal relations. Nothing can exist without the other, and it is our job to uphold reverence for the co-existence of all aspects of the circle (Thunder, personal communication, 2025).

Senapan deepens into wâhkôhtowin understandings through four stages of relationality, and she shares that all relations are “written in the land, and in the stars. They are Creator’s Laws.” (Thunder, personal communication, 2025). She begins with our four-bodied existence, and the four elements that help us come to know ourselves, how we come to understand our feelings and where we come from when we take our human, physical forms. Thunder (2025) invites the question:

“How many of us can tie ourselves to the land? Creator marked the land with those laws [of Creation]. Creator made them visible. Do you see it?” (personal communication).

She affirms how our entire existence is dependent on all those who exist within creation, and the greater cosmos. In her teachings, she clarifies the roles of the shapeshifting ones, of our deep connection to star relatives, and even though she barely grazes the surface of it all, Thunder still helps us understand wâhkôhtowin is the most holistic and all-encompassing form of kinship and being in relation. These four layers of relating, as taught by Thunder (2025), are visualized and further defined in the diagram below:

## wâhkôhtowin relations



### wâhkomisowin: (centre)

being related to self, knowing oneself, in the here and now.

### wâhkomitowin:

being related to others; all those who live and grow on the earth, in the skies and waters; two-leggeds (humans), plants, animals, trees, grasses, birds, insects, fish.

### wâhkôhtamowin:

being related to all of creation and all those who sustain our ceremonial ways; fire, water, stone, earth, mountains, wind; thunderbirds, tornadoes.

### wâhkôhtowin:

being related to the entire universe and all those who sustain creation; those that will never be changed; sun, moon, star relatives, Milky Way, aurora borealis, cosmological realms.

teachings: Senapan Thunder

Figure 3.3: wâhkôhtowin relations, teachings by Senapan Thunder, image Moe Clark, 2025.

1. wâhkomisowin: being related to self, knowing oneself, in the here and now;
2. wâhkomitowin: being related to others; all those who live and grow on the earth, in the skies and waters; humans, plants, animals, trees, grasses, birds, insects, fish, etc;
3. wâhkôhtamowin: being related to all of creation and all those who sustain our ceremonial ways; fire, water, stone, earth, mountains, wind; thunderbirds, tornadoes;
4. wâhkôhtowin: being related to the entire universe and all those who sustain creation; everything mentioned in the first three rings as well as those that will never be changed; sun, moon, star relatives, Milky Way, aurora borealis, cosmological realms (Thunder, personal communication, 2025).

Guided by these interconnected layers of relation, I endeavor to uphold an ethics of reciprocity, inclusion, responsibility and acknowledgment throughout the research creation as it unfolds in creative and ceremonial ways. From the first intention set to engage in this work, all the way until the creation of nikamowina (songs) and the writing of this thesis, I have practiced being in “right-relation” throughout. I honour wâhkôhtowin as relational ethics.

## Chapter 4 kakêskomowina (Knowledge Keepers Guidance) and Literature Review

Within the larger context of Canadian law, between 1884 and 1951, under the Potlatch Law of the Indian Act, it was punishable by law for Indigenous people to gather in ceremony, thus prohibiting the use of all drums and drum songs (University of British Columbia, 2021). It is no surprise then, that so much trauma still exists and therefore much healing to be done in relation to the drum, given only 75 years have passed since it was made legal again. Settler colonialism's gendered process have forced patriarchal social systems on Indigenous communities (Arvin, M., Tuck, E., & Morrill, A., 2013; University of Alberta, 2021), imposing the ongoing gender binary and suppressing leadership roles Two-Spirit (2S) people and Indigenous women held in many Indigenous communities (Labelle, 2018).

2S people continue to be harmed by colonial and gender-based violence, resulting in higher rates of suicide and loss of cultural identity. (Fiola, 2020; Pyle, 2020; Wilson & Laing, 2018). In response to this ongoing systemic cultural erasure I have committed my master's research and creation to reanimating our sacred 2Spirit relationships to drum. Aside from drum being seen as a piece of "cultural" controversy, carrying têtêhikan has also been central in my process of miskâsowin, assisting me to reclaim my place of belonging (Cardinal & Hildebrand, 2000; Naytowhow, 2013) and pawâtamowin, affirming my ability to dream more radical and inclusive Indigiqueer futures. Drumming has also played an active role in my nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree language) embodiment through song creation with Elders and creative collaborators.

Through the radical and rigorous work of 2Spirit authors, Indigenous educators, Elders, and artists, more and more literature and teachings are coming into view. Namely, I am led by 2Spirit Cree, Michif, and Anishinaabe knowledge keepers, all who I've met along the road and admire greatly for their contributions to the resurgence of Indigenous futurisms and 2Spirit knowledges. I am also in ongoing relation with nêhiyaw Elders and knowledge keepers who guide me immensely in cultural and ceremonial practices, ensuring I am uplifting my responsibilities as an oskâpêwis (helper) in everything I say, do, and write. As Anishinaabeg scholar, activist and artist, Leanne Simpson states, we need to move from a place and practice of "grounded normativity," (Simpson, 2018) by re-centring our 2Spirit and Indigenous teachers and teachings of first person narratives as the foundation from which we learn, grow, and uplift our communities.

I don't come into this work as an academic, but as someone who is engaged with 2Spirit and Indigenous community practices, and continues to participate in creative and ceremonial processes with many of the knowledge keepers and community members cited here. Thus, the "literature" that informs much of my journey is derived from embodied and experiential learning that dances on the edge, and often outside, the parameters of academia. As Mâori scholar Kelly Ratana states,

"I hope to highlight the way in which we as Indigenous researchers in science do not have to re-articulate, or re-theorize what Professor [Linda Tuhiwai] Smith so masterfully articulates, but we are instead a bridge for these theories and their practice. In my approach to my work, I am a bridge" (Ratana, 2022, p.91).

To further this notion, Cree scholar and writer Shawn Wilson specifies what differentiates an Indigenous literature review, "By doing the review in a style that is not critical, but builds upon the work of others, it can also form the context for relational accountability in working from an

Indigenous paradigm” (Wilson, 2008, pp. 43-44). As a Michif, *tastawayihk-iyiniw* person, I resonate with these gestures of bridging Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and relating in the ways with which I carry out the research and further communicate findings. I am accountable to the communities I have named above, and to the many kin who shared their stories with me in order for this research to happen. It is my goal to tether 2Spirit and Indigenous experiential knowledge and creative practices into a synthesis of songs and writing that can be accessed for future generations of Indigenous scholars, community workers, ceremonial helpers, and artists.

For this literature review, I chose to name and centre Indigenous knowledge keepers, artists and Elders; some of whom exist within the academic sphere, and many who don't, but rather provide knowledge transmission in ceremonial, activist, artistic, and community-engaged contexts.

#### **4.1. Song Sets a Horizon for Indigiqueer Healing**

There are numerous songs I have received on and with the drum; whether transmitted inside a sweat lodge, created through my creative arts practice, or received through the intuitive practice Veronica Johnny calls 'song catching.' Song catching can be done almost anywhere, but requires one to enter into a process of deep-listening for spirit to bring or *birth* a song, perhaps while sitting next to a river, walking the land, or in ones' dreams (Johnny, 2018). Each time a song is born, or transmitted, I come home. Part of my being, body, and spirit returns to a place of coherence, a concept formally defined by somatic practitioners as a felt sense within the nervous system of resonance and alignment, which calls to the spirit and body, assuring them it's all ok.

Up until recently, none of the songs that I've learned in sweatlodges, ceremonies, or other cultural gatherings ever specifically 'called home' our 2Spirit relatives. As I say this, I want to name the multitude of 2Spirit musicians creating beautiful music today, receiving recognition and high esteem for their Indigiqueer brilliance and radical ways of shapeshifting song practices as we have known. As shapeshifters, they defy rules which draw a line between traditional and contemporary music, with their innovative practices of incorporating language, electronic music, interdisciplinary collaboration, and experimental modes of presenting their work. Not many of them are creating drum songs, however, and from those who are, I have yet to hear one that also translates into ceremony and is 2Spirit focused. Esteemed artists such as Jeremy Dutcher, Cris Derkson, Melody McKiver, G.R. Gritt, Bobby Sanchez, and Laura Niquay, are but a few 2Spirit identified musicians who are actively contributing to the living archive of 2Spirit music. However, when researching 2Spirit drum songs that might also transfer from the stage to the lodge, there is a huge gap.

While I speak to this fragmentation, I pay no disrespect to the integrity, sacred significance, and *mamâhtawisiwin* embedded within each of the drum songs I've received. As expressed by *nêhiyaw* Elder Willie Ermine (1995): "mamâhtawisiwin ... describes the capability of tapping into the 'life force' as a means of procreation." All of the songs that have been transmitted to me contain deep lineages and cosmologies, and they are part of a wider *wâhkôhtowin*, kinship system. The songs have brought incredible healing, protection, emancipation, and connection in moments of great suffering and transformation. I am forever indebted to the Elders, singers, and lodge keepers who have taken me under their wing, so to speak, and given me permission to carry their songs.

Many of the songs I've learned acknowledge *okawimaw-askiy*, Mother Earth, as a feminine representation of all earth-centred creation, which sustains the continuum of all life (Walker,

2021, Naytowhow, 2015). One of my favourites, a song that I learned through Uncle Joseph Naytowhow around a fire, gives thanks to “nohtiwiy êkwa nikaway,” our father and mother. It’s a song I’ve carried for almost ten years, and one I hold in high regard as an honouring and acknowledgement of those greater powers and beings who support miyo-pimâtisiwin (living good life). None of these songs, however beautiful in their essence, points to or honours tastawayihk-iyiniwak, the in-between people or 2Spirit relatives. The songs often affirm a binary, even though in language many of the original teachings do not enforce a gendered space. I name these gaps with the hope of generating more inclusion and representation in ceremonial and performance spaces with the drum, as tender openings for our 2Spirit relatives to sing their way back into the circle.

## 4.2. Personal Story #3: 2Spirit Song Shoots an Arrow to the Heart

Story 2: At the beginning of this research, I could only recall hearing one 2Spirit drum song, sung by a queer relative at my fourth year of Sundance. The song, as they shared, originated from a 2Spirit Elder and was gifted to them by the late Leonard Saddleback:

*It was mid-day and I could feel my mouth starting to dry up and my body weaken from fasting for the past two days. My friend, who had completed their fourth year of Sundance the year before, was invited to come into the arbour (ceremonial circle) and share teachings. As they entered, in their hands they carried a 2Spirit pipe I’d ever seen. They approached the sacred tree with their pipe, lifting the stem to touch pipe to tree, and simultaneously, I felt my heart burst open and tears come streaming out. I felt something shift inside me. It was as if I could feel a sense of safety, acknowledgement, and protection, for the first time in that four years of ceremony. While I respected the teachings and received much healing from my Sundance experience, I also struggled with the binary imposed on us, and specifically, the ways with which 2Spirit and women on their moontime were excluded.*

*As my friend stepped back from the tree, they followed with a song. In their words, they shared how they made the song their own, and before they sang it, they gave the meaning: an offering of protection and looking out upon nosisim (my grandchild) from apitawikisikanohk, the Southern doorway, or mid-day sun place. In the Elders’ teachings, this direction was specified as a powerful position for 2Spirit people. As my friend continued to sing, it felt like an arrow to my heart; I felt a softening of the stored tension in my nervous system and spirit. Through the vibrations that 2Spirit song carried and transmitted, the impacts of the hyper-heteronormative and patriarchal practices in the ceremony were tangibly released. I was grateful.*

The release and relief I felt stuck with me. Later, I asked my relative to teach me the song and upon giving them cistêmaw (tobacco) and wêpinâsowina (cloth), they shared the meaning and song again on the edge of a lake in Elk Island, Treaty 6. An hour after sharing the song, we were visited by paskwâwi-mostoswak, our bison relatives, while leaving the park.

## 4.3. Two-Spirit Sovereignty + Indigenous Futurisms

It has been a challenge to dig into the archives and hunt for stories which reference the existence of 2Spirit or tastawayihk-iyiniwak in historical documents, books, or songs. Even though conversations with Elders and 2S knowledge keepers state we have always been here, as valuable contributors in community, it is near impossible to find any reference of our existence that dates back.

As in-between people, the practices and processes with which we create, envision the world, and make relations, deviate from binary and heteronormative contexts. I highlight the word, 'deviate', and position this language in a context of empowerment and celebration. Too often have I been told that my views and positionality as a 2Spirit person are stirring the pot, and that my needs, which don't fit inside the heteronormative box, are taboo or unwelcomed. 2Spirit sovereignty celebrates a non-linear reconstruction of the spaces we take up. I draw inspiration from so many who have been pushed to the margins for their ways of being and knowing, and from these very edges, have found radical and bold ways to weave their ways back into centre, as portal shifters, storytellers, healers, and dreamers.

I am inspired by 2Spirit Sovereignty, which exists and oscillates in an ever unfolding freedom and self-determining 'in-between' place. From this dynamic point, I explore the teachings of 2S relatives Chantal Fiola, Mel Lefebvre, Alex Wilson, Ma-Nee Chacaby, Jeremy Dutcher, and Joshua Whitehead, all of whom are living examples of 2Spirit resurgence, intelligence, and an always evolving capacity to envision more inclusive and resilient futures for our communities to thrive. As my Māori takatāpui wife and artist Victoria Hunt shares, "we are walking backwards into the future," and to expand on this I propose "we are dreaming backwards into the future" (personal communication, 2018). Leanne Simpson quotes Jeff Corntassel's research on Indigenous resurgence with the question, "How will your ancestors and future generations recognize you as Indigenous?" (p.192) To take it further, I invite the question: how will our ancestors and future generations recognize us as 2Spirit/ Indigiqueer? As 2S people, when we have opportunities to share our truth, to speak and listen to one another's stories with empathy and love, we mend our present moment, and open portals for healing across and between generations and timelines.

From this place of learning, receiving and growing as 2Spirit kin, I highlight the teachings of 2Spirit and Indigenous relatives who are shaping the way.

#### 4.3.1. 2Spirit Traplins

2Spirit Red River Michif scholar and ceremonialist Chantal Fiola (2020) envisions 2Spirit or naawenangweyaabeg traplines set by 2S Elders and knowledge keepers as safety nets, for restoring love, community connections, and as means to "prevent members from wandering off" (p. 137). Fiola's proposal encompasses seven generations forwards and backwards. Highlighting a more inclusive vision of gender roles, Fiola lays a template for 2Spirit sovereignty, suggesting that returning to Indigenous languages and Nation specific understandings of 2Spirit roles will strengthen cultural continuums. Speaking at the intersection of Indigenous feminism and 2Spirit futurism, Fiola holds critical conversations with leading 2Spirit Elders and knowledge keepers, as a means of re-centring 2Spirit creation stories, sacred roles in community, sexuality, sovereignty, and practices of non-interference (Fiola, 2020). I draw inspiration from Fiola's approach to kiyokêwin (visiting) with relatives in these conversations, and how she embodies and defines relationality through a lens that is anchored in ceremonial ways of knowing and being.

In her chapter 'Indigenous Queer Normativity' Anishinaabe scholar, writer, and artist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson highlights Indigenous 2SQ (2Spirit+Queer) normativity as an essential process for affirming queer resurgence in community, ceremonial, political, and personal contexts. She speaks of heteropatriarchy as an ongoing tool for erasure and destruction of "the intimate relationships that make up our nations, and the fundamental systems of ethics based

on values of individual sovereignty and self-determination” (Simpson, 2018, p.123). Further to this, Simpson highlights the need to shift traditional concepts of gender within ceremonial and community contexts, stating that our Ancestors and the Spirit World are benevolent and would support the ability to reclaim “our foundational ethics of consent, noninterference, respect for self-determination, and diversity” (Simpson, 2018, p.140) specific to the roles, responsibilities, and dreaming 2SQ kin take up in society. Much of the writing in my thesis is situated within 2SQ normativity. As much as I share what I have learned and received in research and conversation with others 2S kin, I also position my own experience within the circle, as part of the larger whole.

#### 4.3.2. Coming In

I hold great respect for the work of many Elders and Knowledge Keepers who have set these traplines, so to speak, for 2Spirit relatives. One leading voice in this work is 2Spirit Cree scholar Alex Wilson. In addition to developing more pedagogy and practice around ‘queering Indigenous land-based education,’ Wilson adds the term ‘coming in’ to the theoretical lexicon. They state, “coming in [which does not] centre on the declaration of independence that characterizes ‘coming out’ in mainstream depictions of the lives of LGBTQQIA+ people. Rather, coming in is an act of returning, fully present in ourselves, to resume our place as valued members of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations” (Wilson, 2015). This form of 2Spirit reclamation is essential if we are to fully uphold our roles as 2Spirit people. Similar, from a nêhiyawêwin linguistic context, I draw on the term miskâsowin within these writings, and when I do, I am aligning miskâsowin, which means “finding one’s sense of origin and belonging, finding one’s centre” or place within the circle, as a culturally specific way of naming this practice of “coming in” (Cardinal and Hildebrand, 2000).

#### 4.3.3. Portal Shifting + Non-Linear Timelines

In her pivotal work with ancestral skin marking resurgence, 2Spirit Michif scholar Dr. Mel Lefebvre shares how she uses visual symbols as markers of deeply held, *always has been, always will be*, sacred roles and relationships 2Spirit kin carry. Moving beyond linearity and colonial mindsets, these symbols carry power and act as portals between dimensions, giving rise to 2Spirit futurity. Lefebvre (2024) shares,

“To counteract these disruptions, we can reconnect and celebrate our multitudes of genders and sexualities through the triangle, a marking that reaches out to the brilliant echoing phantasm of who we could have been as non-binary Indigenous peoples if colonization never was and manifest it in the now” (Lefebvre, 2024, p110).

Similar to visual symbols, Lefebvre’s work is a reminder for all 2Spirit song carriers, that every harmonic tone and sung vocable, shapes this “echoing phantasm,” to transport us between dimensions to reclaim and rename our place as vibrant carriers of 2Spirit lifeways.

Two-Spirit Métis and Sault Ste. Marie Nishnaabe writer and scholar Kai Pyle articulates notions of relational ethics that connect across space and time with their proposal of ‘trans\*temporal kinship.’ Pyle refuses linearity, suggesting that non-binary Indigenous kin inherit the capacity to heal and claim who we are and have always been, from both our ancestors and future descendants. Gender fluid means time fluid. We reveal the always-alive creation stories and connectivity to our gender fluid ancestors as essential to who and how we live today (Pyle, 2018).

Further to their work with trans\*temporal kinship, Kai Pyle refuses notions of heteropatriarchal gender roles brought on by the colonial project, and foregrounds 2Spirit autonomy for redefining what and who is 'traditional' in our understanding of roles. Pyle underlines new frames for what it means to be authentic participants in our Indigenous ceremonies. Through a decolonial lens, Pyle offers insights into 2Spirit sovereignty and belonging, proposing a re-centring of 2Spirit perspectives as a step towards harm-reduction for all Indigenous communities (Pyle, 2020).

#### **4.4. têtêhikan okiskinwahamakêw / Drum as Teacher**

##### 4.4.1. Healing through Drum Practices

Through a circle of life or medicine wheel framework, Anishinaabe researcher and scholar, Tamara Dicks offers holistic and relational practices for engaging women drummers in talking circle research. Centring relationality, protocols, and accountability as guiding frameworks for ethically working with personal stories in collective contexts, Dicks highlights the power of the drum in Indigenous women's healing journeys through reconnection to self and community (Dicks, 2017). Dicks' work is one of a small handful of documented works emphasizing the healing journeys of women through drum practices. Even though none of her participants identify as 2Spirit, her framework and research sets a precedent in drum practices as they link with healing and resurgence. She also shares detailed teachings about different forms of drums, primarily within Anishinaabe contexts. She shares, "The circular nature of the drum is symbolic of the circle of life teachings and," citing Goudreau (2006), "reminds us that we are all one; we are all interconnected spiritually" (Dicks, 2017, p. 17). Dicks affirms the integrated wholeness of working with the drum as generative pathways that further deep healing.

##### 4.4.2. Drum Creation Stories Reinstating Place for Women + 2Spirit

2Spirit Oji-Cree Elder and activist Ma-Nee Chacaby highlights love as the guiding principle in the work she does, re-centring 2Spirit people and women as integral, vital, and loved members of our communities. Chacaby shares a drum creation story she learned from her grandmother, who received it from Elders when she was only 4 years old. A very old story, anchoring her understanding back multiple generations, Chacaby shares, "drum came from women" and should "be brought back" into our circles to restore women and 2Spirit roles as drum carriers, creators, and singers. Chacaby is a revered 2S Elder, and her gentle and approachable energy when speaking about the drum helps mend safer pathways for 2S kin to return home inside these creation stories (Chacaby, 2021).

Similar to Chacaby, in her oral teachings, Tuscarora musician and knowledge keeper, Pura Fe, attempts to re-centre Indigenous women and 2Spirit people as drum carriers, singers, and keepers. She shares the story of a Santee woman who received the vision of the drum for her community who was at war. Once the war ended, the woman shared her vision and brought the gift of the drum to the people. Pura Fe shares "It was given to both men and women. It was meant to keep peace among all the peoples. Sitting in a circle represents all." Pura Fe's teachings, through story and music, layers multivocal parts, language, drum, and other instrumentation, to inspire ways to make the circle whole again with resurgent acts of creative manifestation (personal communication, 2021).

#### 4.4.3. têtêhikan heart re-connection

nêhinaw Elder and knowledge keeper Ron Cook shares, “we need to understand what language is telling us and break it down” (Cook, personal communication, 2025). For years, his work in ceremony and community education and healing has brought him into a deeper relationship with language that connects to the heart. At The Manitoba Collaborative Indigenous Education Blueprint (MCIEB) Gathering in Treaty 1, Winnipeg in 2025, Cook turned to me to offer his understanding of concepts for têtêhikan (drum). He’d seen my singing and asked if I knew what têtêhikan meant. He shares, “têtêhikan reminds us of our connection to earth, to the land that we live on, and the responsibility we have to look after the land.” He shares, the root for têtêhikan is otê, which means heart. Through song creation in nêhiyawêwin, and the embodiment of our drumming practices, we reconnect our hearts to our purpose, and remember how to take better care of ourselves, one another, and the land (personal communication, 2025).

### 4.5. ê-môsâhkinamahk nêhiyawêwin / Picking Up the Language

My language journey began in 2013 through "singing the land" with nêhiyaw knowledge keepers Joseph Naytowhow and Cheryl L'Hirondelle, who guided me through ceremonial teachings and collaborative song creation in nêhiyawêwin. Through practices of learning protocols, making offerings, strengthening my relationship to prayer, and engaging in deep listening with the land and Elders, I learned the process of composing what Naytowhow calls "singing our soul songs." These foundations led to ongoing study in weekly Cree + Tea classes with nêhiyaw Elder and teacher Senapan Thunder and nêhithaw knowledge keeper and teacher Charlotte Ross. Alongside a group of Cree language learners, I have been learning, speaking, and connecting with the community weekly for close to four years. At the start of my thesis research, I also worked intensively over the course of six zoom sessions with nêhiyaw Elder and language teacher, Leo Yahyahkeekoot. Yahyahkeekoot shared his extensive and precise knowledge of spirit markers, the original alphabet in nêhiyawêwin, and the origins of each sound as they came to encapsulate the larger system of language. Over time, these teachings and language practices have become medicines in my sacred bundle.

Learning and embodying nêhiyawêwin through song has become a conduit for reconnecting to my blood memory, to transmitting ancestral knowledge encoded within nêhiyawêwin's spiritual and cultural frameworks. As a vocalist, I've worked extensively to learn the spirit markers and their accompanying visual symbols and stories, as taught by Yahyahkeekoot. I vocalize them in their originating pattern, the star chart, as a means of warming up my spirit, mind, heart, and body. As I do, I animate healing pathways that extend beyond linguistic acquisition into embodied remembering. This approach to language as living ceremony—where syllabics carry story, sound carries spirit, and song carries memory—grounds my research in the understanding that nêhiyawêwin serves as both vessel and catalyst for reclaiming ancestral connection through creative practice. This healing and reconnection deepens when the words and messages being sung contain coded articulations of 2Spirit belonging.

#### 4.5.1. Language as Spirit

nêhithaw language teacher Charlotte Ross hosts weekly Cree + Tea zoom sessions, which she began through her doctoral work in 2020 to keep connected through the pandemic. Weekly gatherings reinforce wâhkôhtowin (kinship + community) through kiyokêwin (visiting) with other Cree, Métis and non-Indigenous language learners. Charlotte shares a multitude of teachings in

the language, and one of the most important is the notion of helping the language spirit know it's safe to come through. We do so through smudging, prayer, honouring gifts and setting intentions to speak and connect with a good heart. In much the same way, the pathways being opened for 2Spirit relatives are aligned to these practices of safety and safe keeping. A layer of this practice also includes laughter, a much-needed medicine we can't forget (Ross, 2021-2025).

nêhiyaw Elder and language teacher Leo Yahyahkeekoot shares his exemplary understanding of the star chart and spirit markers (syllabics). He proposes the breakdown of each 'phoneme' or sound of language as a spirit marker, with in-depth relations to land, cultural concepts, spiritual teachings, and cosmological frames of knowing and being. The star chart acts as a map, a constellation of knowledge that guides our language journey across timelines and emphasizes the sounding body as a catalyst for backwards into the future dreaming (Yahyahkeekoot, 2022).

Weaving nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree language) poetics from an Indigiqueer perspective, nêhiyaw writer Joshua Whitehead tells of his experiences of "making love with the land." Land as personal body, sexual body, bodies of memory, bodies of earth, and of a supposed colonial 'brokenness' becoming whole again. Whitehead reinstates Indigiqueer joy, as a non-linear and tactile practice of being in relation to one's pain, both personal and inherited, and in relation with other bodies in sensual and intimate spaces. In his words, "Sometimes I wonder where nêhiyawêwin exists, where it moves within the body? I think of English as cerebral and nêhiyawêwin as kinetic; I move through language as it mutates in my flora" (Whitehead, 2022, p.126).

#### 4.5.2. Language Bundles

Revered nêhiyaw Elder and language teacher Senapan Thunder shares how nêhiyawêwin helps us heal through a direct connection to spirit, and that by taking care of nêhiyawêwin as we would a sacred bundle, we strengthen our understandings to nêhiyaw laws/natural order as gifted by Creator and the Old Ones. She deepens teachings with spiritual knowledge, embedding ceremonial understandings and relationships to cosmological beings as part of healing and restoring the larger wâhkôhtowin circle (kinship relations). She shares: "if you treat that language like a bundle ... you will carry those understandings, those truths, a long way" (Thunder, personal communication, 2025). Transmission of cultural and sacred concepts is central in Senapan's generative and immersive approach to teaching.

nêhiyaw educator, and writer, and Saskatchewan's Treaty Commissioner, Kathy Walker, further emphasizes teachings about our sacred relationship to okâwimaw askiy (mother earth) and the vital practice of weaving together language as a bundle, "A relational word bundle is an effective technique for furthering a wholistic balance among narratives because it can connect linguistic, rhetorical, spiritual *and* community, kinship-based contexts" (Walker, 2021, p.183). When we carry these bundles through song practices, we are further connecting these contexts through embodied practice. It becomes my responsibility, then, to ensure that I am taking care of every word, every concept and every sound that will play a part of the culminatory resonance the bundles will invoke. As Walker (2021) further shares,

"The bundle was not merely a 'status' symbol or recognition of the personal virtue of an individual or group, instead a bundle encompassed a real-life role and responsibility based on *embodying* and *living* its restorative thought and practice" (p. 180).

### 4.5.3. kinêhiyawêwininaw: Gift of Language

nêhiyaw knowledge keeper, writer and activist Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum speaks about kinêhiyawêwininaw, the gift of language, as an essential gift brought by Creator and taught through family relationships at an early age for good child-rearing. McAdam foregrounds the importance of teaching, learning, and using nêhiyawêwin in community and ceremony as a tool for cultural continuity. From a lens of natural law and sacred law, McAdam (2015) shares:

“Language is believed to have a sacred spirit, and this spirit will leave if the language is not utilized. There is a spirituality embedded in the words, songs, prayers, and history. Oral tradition depends on language to transfer and transmit the critical and integral terms, names, histories, and songs of Indigenous peoples” (pp. 24-25).

nêhiyaw knowledge keeper and ceremonial Elder Willie Ermine furthers these teachings of natural and sacred law embedded in language as they pertain to our capacity to tap into creativity. Ermine states,

“We need to experience the life force from which creativity flows, and our Aboriginal resources such as language and culture are our touchstones for achieving this. It is imperative that our children take up the cause of our languages and cultures because therein lies Aboriginal epistemology, which speaks of holism. With holism, an environmental ethic is possible” (Ermine, 1995, p.110).

As a 2Spirit drum carrier, it is my responsibility to “take up the language” as a means to “experience the life force from which creativity flows” and honour the spirit and blood memory through which our creation stories began. It is imperative that we speak and sing into being the missing sounds and words and creatively re-animate the sacred and holistic relationships 2S people have to land, ceremony, healing practices, community roles, and relations.

## Chapter 5 Research-Creation Field Work

### 5.1. Preparing for kiyokêwin

For my research, I invited six 2Spirit drum carriers to sit with me for tea, strawberries, and visit. Each of them were already kin or relatives, through ceremony, creative kinship or community work. I resist the term participants, given that these relationships are ongoing and didn't begin or end after the visit was done, and as much as possible, an ethic of non-hierarchy and kinship relationality were upheld. For all the conversations, we sat close to one another, side by side on a couch, or in comfortable chairs, and not directly across from one another, in an effort to "see the horizon" more clearly in front of and between us. Drawing from Cree scholar Shawn Wilson's Research is Ceremony framework, he shares:

"By reducing the space between things, we are strengthening the relationship that they share. And this bringing things together so that they share the same space is what ceremony is about. This is why research itself is a sacred ceremony within an Indigenous research paradigm, as it is all about building relationships and bridging this sacred space" (Wilson, 2008, p.81).

Aligning with this understanding of "bridging sacred space" I invited participants to bring their drums with them, both as a song collaborator and as co-witness, during each of the kiyokêwin. This invitation for closeness, both between our physical human forms, and our drums, was another way of affirming ceremony and inclusion.

Following protocols set by nêhiyaw and Michif cultural practices, I offered each 2Spirit relative cistêmaw (tobacco), a small gift, some sônîyaw (money), and we began each visit with a ceremonial prayer and smudge with sage or sweetgrass. The use of nêhiyawêwin was incorporated throughout each kiyokêwin, in the opening kakisimowin (prayer), in offering ninanâskomowin (thanks) whenever possible and reaffirming the naming of our in-betweenness as tastawayihk-iyiniwak. Language was also layered into the song sharing component, as we opened and closed each kiyokêwin with a song offering. We sipped tea and ate strawberries or other snacks in an intimate and informal way while we visited. I invited them into my own home, they invited me into theirs, and for one of the interviews, we met by zoom, but followed these similar practices and took a break for tea.

For the interviews, the Michif and nêhiyaw practice of kiyokêwin was upheld. I first learned this concept while sitting around the kitchen table with Métis matriarch Maria Campbell at Gabriel's Crossing near Batoche, in Saskatchewan.

Working closely with Maria, Métis scholar Cindy Gaudet (2019) describes kiyokêwin:

"Keeoukaywin points to special times and spaces in which connections are strengthened, stories are heard, remembering occurs, and we are reminded of who we are and of our responsibility for the well-being of the whole. It offers an Indigenous view of community-based, participatory research methodology, and stands on its own as a viable methodology" (p. 55)

These visits varied in length from one hour to almost three. Sometimes we took breaks, oftentimes serious conversations and truth telling was interspersed with intense uproars of laughter, joking, and tears of both grief and joy. These layers of intimacy, that deepened throughout each kiyokêwin, became everyday acts of refusal and embodied radical resurgence. (Simpson, 2017). In her chapter "Embodied Resurgent Practice and Coded Disruption,"

Anishinaabeg writer and scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) asserts notions of refusal through resurgence theorists Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes work,

“They ask us to actively take up decolonization in intimate spaces– with friends and family and in our homes– and to encourage us to engage in critical conversations within these spaces as a mechanism to see, hear, and think differently. They challenge us to embody our decolonial politics and practice them in our daily lives” (p. 191).

This is precisely what we did, together. From these six kiyokêwin I assembled bundles of understanding and meaning, which became the seeds for the resulting songs from these transmissions.

I’d like to mention that even though I interviewed six kin, my own story and how I synthesize these teachings fills the seventh voice, the “plus one” space, which I will speak about in further detail later on. Together, we make seven, and dare I propose, our seven stories, seven spirits, make a full circle which sings backwards and forwards across seven generations in space and time.

## 5.2. Guiding Questions for tastawayihk kiyokêwin:

The following are the guiding questions for the ‘kiyokêwin’ with 2S drum carriers:

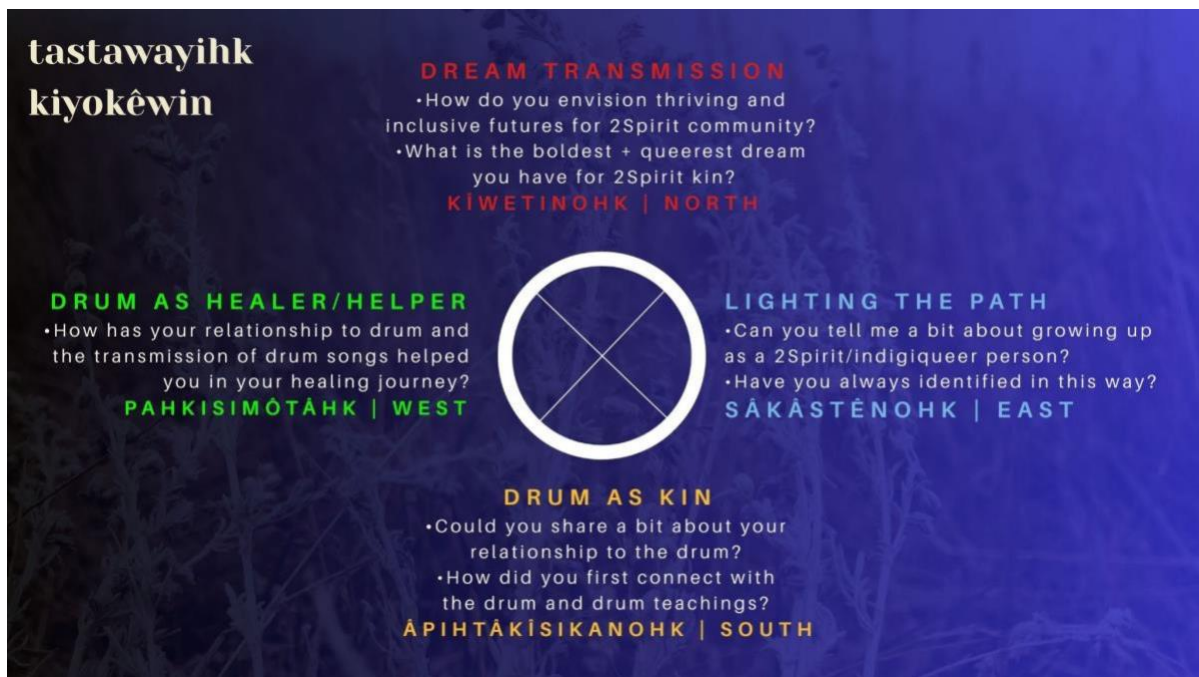


Figure 5.0: *tastawayihk kiyokêwin, Medicine Wheel Questions, Moe Clark, 2025.*

Question 1: Can you tell me a bit about growing up as a 2Spirit/Indigiqueer person? Have you always identified in this way?

- Where did you grow up and how did the experiences you had while growing up impact your 2Spirit-ness?

- Were there special mentors, family, or beyond-human connections (animals, plants, places) that had a significant influence on you?
- How do you show up in the world now and what roles do you play in supporting community? In Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts? In ceremony?
- What barriers have you experienced as a 2S person that have restricted safe access to gatherings and public spaces? With Indigenous community? Land-based gatherings? Mentorship? Cultural transmission?

Question 2: Could you share a bit about your relationship to the drum?

- How did you first connect with the drum and drum teachings? Was there ceremony involved?
- Can you speak about a specific experience you've had with the drum where you felt empowered?
- What has being a drum carrier taught you about practices of care? practices of refusal?
- In thinking about how your own relationship has developed with drum and song transmission, can you describe how you've been able to use these learnings in different aspects of your life?

Question 3: How has the transmission of drum songs helped you in your healing journey?

- How has being a drum carrier helped you to make connections with community? In ceremony? In professional/ political spaces? To uplift 2Spirit voice? In artistic practices?
- Can you speak about an experience you've had where you were directly or indirectly restricted from drumming and/or carrying a drum? Were the restrictions a result of the gendering of drum practices? If so, who enforced the gendering of these knowledges and/or practices?
- When you think about this/these experience(s), are there teachings that you wish you could have received in those moments? What teachings do you have now that you would have shared in that context?

Question 4: How do you envision thriving and inclusive futures for 2Spirit community – what is the boldest and queerest dream you have for 2Spirit kin?

- Are there specific songs, words or concepts that you would love to hear being sung by 2S drum carriers? Do you know these words in language?
- From your experiences, how are relationships between 2S/ Indigiqueer peoples and land-based/ceremonial practices best affirmed and supported?
- If you could speak to your younger self, what words of encouragement would you share?
- Do you have any messages for 2S Elders and those who have made it safer for us now?

Closing off the questions with this intention of holding space for kin to voice their wildest dreams, to speak or sing into being their queerest vision, helps animate a collective future imaginary, one that resituates 2Spirit kin in the centre. To quote Jason Lewis (2024), in his conception of the “future imaginary,” he shares:

“A “future imaginary” is a vision of the future that is shared by a group of people and used to motivate change in the present. Future imaginaries provide groups with shared vocabularies for envisioning the future and strategies for getting to the future they desire” (p.11).

My work as a vocalist and performance artist, aims to not only write and think my way through these practices, but to further embody them, in critical and collaborative ways, with other artists, with the land, and with the deep ancestral knowledge passed on through ceremonial practices. Jason Lewis (2024) quotes renowned Kiowa poet and novelist N. Scott Momady (1997):

“We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (p. 14).

Throughout the research and creation, this practice of imagining better worlds for ourselves and others held a central role before, during, and after the *kiyokêwin*. There was a progressive deepening into realms of possibility and imagination, that awakened through the intimate and constant unfolding of prayer, empathy, listening, and remembrance.

### 5.3. Song Creation:

For the song creation component of this work, I want to emphasize that intentions aren't just to “perform” the songs in a creative context, but to ensure that the songs can be embodied, transmitted, learned, and sung in intimate spaces, in ceremonial contexts, with 2Spirit relatives, by 2Spirit relatives, and for 2Spirit relatives, as everyday acts of celebration, resurgence and healing. Yes, the songs will be presented in other contexts as well, but these are not the primary audiences I hope these songs will serve. My hope is for this song bundle is to engender a space for self-determination and sonic sovereignty, a tool for 2Spirit kin to utilize, engage with, and affirm their voices, roles, and places within the circle. These songs are about returning the missing or fragmented pieces of our languages and selves, through a process of sonic survivance that calls out, “like the uninterrupted constancy of a birds’ song that announces: ‘we’re here, we’re still here” (L’Hirondelle, 2015, p. 52) and supports relatives to sing *themselves* home.

Creating a song bundle primarily in *nêhiyawêwin*, with additional words in Michif and Anishinaabemowin to uplift participants’ languages, is essential in this work. As a language learner for nearly fifteen years, this practice of singing in *nêhiyawêwin* is one that has assisted ongoing healing through a process of re-weaving my place within the larger circle of relations. Singing and creating songs in language has assisted in restoring relationships to the vibrational frequencies of earth, ancestral and cosmological realms, and provides our four-bodied beings with a living practice for regeneration and re-connection to ceremony.

*nêhiyaw*, half-breed artist and Knowledge Keeper Cheryl L’Hirondelle (2015) points out these relationships in her seminal project and thesis “Why the Caged Bird Sings: Radical Inclusivity, Sonic Survivance and the Collective Ownership of Freedom Songs”:

“Nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) is based on both metaphor and metonymy, not only as linguistic devices—rather as part of a holistic web of relationships between the four-bodied-ness of our existence. We are at once mental, spiritual, emotional and physical beings; we are at once one with an infinite matrix of air, fire, water – and our beautiful Mother Earth” (p. 28).

As L'Hirondelle shares, we are interconnected and interwoven into the generative and living fabric of miyo-pimâtisiwin, ensuring we maintain a good life. One practice for doing this is through song creation and singing. Songs, specifically in language, carry great power and are essential tools for expanding consciousness and engendering mâmâtawisiwin, imagination, (Ermine, 1995) in singers and listeners alike. Kathy Walker speaks to the power of nêhiyawêwin:

“nêhiyaw law fully recognizes this living power of words and the need to use words responsibly, because once uttered, (citing McAdam) “the words are outside of you and have a life of their own” (Walker, 2021, pp. 183-184).

The songs created throughout this process embed nêhiyawêwin words into resonant sound vibrations to carry the teachings, knowledge, and resurgent life-giving experiences of being 2Spirit... backwards into the future. As Walker (2021) shares: “The unfolding of meaning is like a gentle hand guiding us back in time into the present to a future of treasures” (p. 184). May the songs that are generated and synthesized from the kiyokêwin with 2Spirit relatives, provide a much treasured bundle that will carry forward for generations to come. L'Hirondelle (2015) states:

“Many of my Indigenous colleagues understand, as I do, that the importance of utilizing our gifts is in the sharing of them, not only now, but also for seven generations still to come” (p. 33).

## Chapter 6 Findings: kiyokêwina 2Spirit Knowledge Synthesis

Anchoring teachings from the kiyokêwin with the six 2Spirit drum carriers, I draw from nêhiyawitâpsiniwin, Cree philosophy and worldview, and follow seven nêhiyaw guiding principles or values to uphold the stories and tether them together as I would a drum. The synthesized knowledge that “tightens the skin of my drum,” and from which all sound resonates, vibrates and is amplified, is secured and able to expand or contract with the listening and learning. As nêhiyaw indigiqueer author Joshua Whitehead shares,

“The poetics of pimâtisowin are embodied through an engaged orality that is entirely about the wellness of the whole. Indeed the very act of putting breath to language, of making sound, is an entry into community-based care. Orality, by which I mean a tool of storytelling, is therefore an entry point into community enrichment and the building of futures through the interlacing of our histories” (Whitehead, 2022, p90).

Each nêhiyaw principle acts as a tether through which layers of meaning from the kiyokêwin are interlaced, slowly shaping the collective drum and awakening space for future dreaming. Similar to nêhiyaw and Michif ceremonial practices, these principles do not exist in a linear structure, and even though they are presented here as such, layers of meaning and understanding overlap and intertwine throughout the kiyokêwin, to strengthen, reinforce, affirm, and secure concepts in an interconnected and ever-evolving process. From the first kiyokêwin until the sixth, many layers of my own process and understanding as a 2Spirit drum carrier, ceremonial helper, and creative, have transformed. I return to these values in almost everything I do, and align with them as seven foundational teachings that uphold my responsibilities to support and live miyo-pimâtisiwin, a good life, while uplifting wâhkôhtowin, all my relations.

The seven principles that I follow are:

1. kiskisiwin: remembering;
2. miskâsowin: belonging;
3. nitohtamowin: listening;
4. tâpwêwin: truth;
5. kitimâkêyihowin: empathy;
6. pawâtamowin: dreaming;
7. wîyâtikwêwin: joy.

### 6.1. kiskisiwin: Remembering Who We Were + How We Came to Be

*kiskisiwin* is defined as “remembrance” or “memory” (Online Cree dictionary, 2024). *kiskisiwin* is a process, in which one actively remembers their lived experiences that have informed how they came to be who they are and how they move in the world today. *kiskisiwin* can also be attributed to four-bodied being, knowing, and relating, that in order to remember, one must animate their relationship to the mind: what they imagine their experiences were; to the physical body: what their embodiment of an experience was; to the emotional context: what they felt and still might be feeling from an experience; and to the spirit: what existed beyond them, what they believed about the experience, and perhaps, what prayers helped them move through the experience. These different modes of thinking, feeling, relating, and believing, help generate understanding for the life one is living today.

Most of the 2Spirit relatives who shared their stories began their introduction with a few words in their ancestral tongue, and primarily spoke English throughout. Collectively, they shared in

nêhiyawêwin, Michif, Anishinaabemowin, and some Northern Cree. Most of them shared their Spirit Names, affiliation to clan, and named the territories and lands where they come from, grew up, are reconnecting to, and now reside. Throughout the kiyokêwin, everyone shared how they now identify, and provided specific terms, both in their Indigenous language and English, and how all of them, in some way or another, identify as 2Spirit. As I continue to listen and bring their voices together, I hold each and every one of the participants in a circle, as if sitting around kotawan, a sacred fire. In the teachings of Senapan Thunder, “ê pê kohtâwêyahk ôta askiy, we come to light a fire on this land” (Thunder, 2025). With this intention, may we gather in a good way, and begin by lighting the fire of remembrance, as we enter these stories and teachings.

### 6.1.1. Introductions

Morning Star:

“I grew up in Abitibi, which is seven hours of driving from where we're sitting today. So I didn't grow up in my community. I believe I didn't really identify as 2Spirit. I mean, I was also queer from the beginning, but I believe that people would see it before me, you know what I mean? I grew up with a white mom displaced from my community and my mom never brought me back...For years, I was basically in an identity crisis right until I was already an adult...there was a long part of my teenage years where I was deeply struggling with identity while also being the different one in my white family...I always knew I was Indigenous and mixed, but didn't really know what it meant...I was looking for myself for most of my life...I discovered the 2Spirit community...as an adult.”

Lori Campbell:

“[My name is] Lori Campbell. I identify as 2Spirit and sometimes...when it asks for pronouns and things like that...she/ her/ hers. I also put 2Spirit on there. I'm from the 60's Scoop generation, and I am Cree-Métis and I now have my status. And I'm a member of Montreal Lake Cree Nation, and spend as much time as I can reconnecting up there. And that's been really cool. And sometimes I say I'm Indigiqueer but usually when I'm saying that, I'm just being fun.”

Barbara Bruce:

“I come from a small Metis community, north of Winnipeg – St. Laurent. I'm known as Kitchi Pinêsiw Piminaw and Tapwêwin Ayamê (Flies High Thunderbird and Truth Talker). My names represent something, it's just not a name, you have a role and responsibility for your names. And that's what I'm trying to teach younger people that it's just not for the sake of having a name, you know? My role and responsibilities under Flies High Thunderbird is to take care of people and see who needs help and to take care of the sacred ones. 'Truth Talker' is very simple, to speak my truth. Coming from my heart and my spirit.”

Charlotte Nolin:

“Greetings, my relatives, I introduce myself by the names that I walk with, which are Stand Strong Eagle Woman, Red Horse Running, and Charlotte. Charlotte wasn't the name that my parents gave me. And I'm from the Eagle clan, from my grandmother's side. And I was born in the Red River settlement, which people now know as Winnipeg. And recently, since I started saying I was born in the Red River settlement, other people

have started to do that, and maybe we'll change the name of Winnipeg to Red River settlement.”

Melody McKiver:

“So my English name is Melody McKiver. I'm a member of Lac Seul First Nation in Treaty Three. Specifically, my mother's family comes from the community of Frenchman's Head within Lac Seul First Nation. I'm part of the Buffalo clan, and in my day-to-day practice, I am a musician and composer. I'm also assistant professor of Indigenous Music at the University of Manitoba, and...[I am] broadly interested in Anishinaabe cultural practices and performance, both, in air quotes, “traditional and contemporary settings.”

Benny Michaud:

“I'm originally from St. Boniface in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I'm Michif on my mother's side and settler on my father's side. Born of a Scottish man, raised by a French man, and my Metis mother, and I'm a proud tastaway-iyiniw person. I'm an Eagle Clan person. Tastawayiyiniw, which I've been told is a person in-between, and that makes a lot of sense for me. I think in English, I identify as transgender, not a trans man, not a trans woman, just trans.”

Within the stories of remembering, there are numerous accounts of silencing and withdrawing from particular experiences and perceived harms while participants were growing up and coming into themselves. In centering a strengths-based approach, I choose to frame these adaptive strategies as refusal and resistance; how as 2Spirit people, this silence brought with it an exceptional capacity to be deep listeners, to bring heightened sensitivity to situations, and to witness the wholeness of an experience before speaking or taking action. These carefully attuned skills are described by Pauline Oliveros in the sonic sphere as,

“Deep has to do with complexity and boundaries, or edges beyond ordinary or habitual understandings... Deep coupled with Deep Listening for me is learning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound— encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible” (Oliveros, 2005, p46).

It is within this realm of *deep listening*, that kin were able to perceive that which existed beyond, that which existed deeper within, and *listen* to a part of the self that knew something wasn't fitting into the heteronormative or dominant molds. This tension between the inner listening and outer listening created a dynamic space, one might name *intuition*, which later in life fueled immense empathy, responsiveness, and a capacity to be leaders and community caregivers, while holding important roles and responsibilities. Each participant has become the role model, Elder, auntie, warrior, healer, and/or teacher that they were often missing in their younger years, proving that resurgence is an active and ongoing process, and cultural continuity is possible when we are able to name our pain, and reconnect with community, culture, ceremony, and land. As Nêhiyaw scholar and Treaty Commissioner, Kathy Walker shares, “Continuity does not entail *unchanging* tradition, but instead shows that *creative change* is often necessary” (Walker, 2021, p.9). Within these kiyokêwin, cultural continuity is most certainly demonstrated through courageous, tender, and creative transformative embodiments of healing and change.

Charlotte shares:

"I'm a warrior of the 60s scoop, I'm not a survivor, I'm not a victim. I lived with the Residential Schools, the Indian Day Schools, and stayed in the child welfare system for 19 years. I was taken away at six months of age, and when I left the child welfare system, I had dropped out of school, and I found my family on the streets, other young people like myself, and we became family, and we did what we had to do to survive. When I was 17, I came out as me, but Canada at that time was a racist, homophobic and transphobic country, and there was a lot of violence attached to our lives."

Charlotte continues, speaking about finding work within a system that was premised on racism and homophobia:

"I did the only work that I felt that I could do. People wouldn't hire you to work in a restaurant. They wouldn't hire you to work, you know, anywhere else, because they were so homophobic and transphobic. And so we, myself and lots of my sisters, we engaged in sex work. And I've shared with people that back then, most of us didn't come out during the day, we came out at night."

Through these experiences and the challenges Charlotte lived through growing up, she became a revered ceremonial Elder, teacher, and continues to work extensively to protect the children"

"You know, I shared my upbringing with this group from down East, and at the end of my presentation, this woman says, "I'm so sorry that happened to you." And I says, "Please don't apologize." I says, "I know what I know today, because I lived it." Yeah, you know... And I says, "Today I protect our children because I know what it's like and even at Child and Family Services, they knew that I had been in care, but they didn't know the whole story, and I shared it with the board."

Similar to Charlotte, Morning Star shares how she grew up away from community, and longs to return:

"My dad's from Waskaganish. So there's a lot of my peeps over there. And there is this place where it's more a traditional camping site, they call it Nooscan. And that's where I look forward to...go and sit with aunties and nephews and other siblings and relatives and yeah, I can picture that. I don't know when it's going to happen..."

Morning Star further shares when she was eventually able to sit with her relatives up in Waskaganish, that notions of sexuality, queerness and other realities close to her heart came up in conversations. As someone who advocates extensively for sex workers' rights, there was a bit of hesitation at how she might be perceived from family she was only just getting to know,

"I didn't like, stop myself from saying some stuff out loud. I was a bit nervous [for the] multiple identities I carry, also...at that time, [I was] really really out there supporting sex workers rights, and being in the media. All of my cousins, you know, we were always laughing and they were trying to teach me Cree words for sex and that kind of stuff. But I still had...a bit of, not shame, but fear, of how...the people, my people would see me. I didn't know a lot about the community and the realities and I've realized that my lived experience, for example, being on the street and related to the substance use...I thought I was different, but I've realized that those challenges are...in community, in urban spaces, and they are not separate...I've learned I can be myself and my people are...we are all connected."

Morning Star further shares how she feels most connected with urban kin:

“I identify a lot with the urban Indigenous community from here for sure. Because that's where I live, you know, learn, play...and connect with Kanien'keha:ka people and Elders...and people from all over, Indigenous from all over. I think that there's also a strong connection with this urban Indigenous community of Tio'tia:ke.”

Barbara is the only participant who grew up in her small Métis community of St. Laurent. Raised in a community of devout Catholics, there wasn't much space to share or identify as queer or gay while growing up. She also shares the pain of being a descendant of Michif land scrip holders,

“I'm a descendant of the land scrip holders. And it was right to the lake. So we lost all of that. All the land scrips. And so I was part of that. I remember. I wasn't 2Spirit at the time. No, I didn't even know what the word...I don't think that even was mentioned.”

She shares how she went through a lot of challenges:

“I suffered a lot of trauma. A lot of trauma. So I thought, okay, I feel different. I feel different. I was a young adult. And I went, okay, still go out with guys. But it never lasted.”

After being married twice, Barbara finally came out much later in life,

“And then I started being involved with the Native Gay Association and all those people. And I felt totally at home. You know, and so I came out, really to myself probably in the early '80s, but not really out there until '88.”

For Lori, growing up in rural Saskatchewan in an adoptive family, she always felt she was different:

“I grew up in a rural farming community in Saskatchewan and did not know anybody that was queer. [It] wasn't a term that we used and [I] grew up in a place that was quite homophobic...It's like...people were...still equating [being gay] with an illness or sickness and pedophilia and stuff like that...I knew I was different than my friends...I thought maybe it's just about being adopted or being Indigenous and sort of having a secret because I didn't really tell anybody. I didn't know anybody [gay] still in my early 20s. I didn't know anybody or didn't think I knew anybody, and so I was very closeted.”

After beginning to reconnect with her Cree-Métis birth family, Lori's perspective of her identity specific to her Indigeneity and queerness shifted:

“I never came out as a queer person, like 'out to my family' until I was in my 20s. And then, because I was 60's scoop, and reconnected with...my birth family and [found out] who I really was as an Indigenous person, not just that I was Indigenous, but that, [I come from] specific Indigenous people and who my family was.”

Melody, who grew up outside of community as the child of a 60's scoop mother, shares their story from a slightly later timeline:

“When I graduated...I came out...like grade 12, like late teen years, and at the time... mid to late 2000s, there was awareness of 2Spirit as a thing, but it seemed like this very elusive, like what does it mean? Like, where do you get these teachings?”

Melody shares the importance of Nation-specific understandings when identifying as 2Spirit and acknowledging the longer timeline of experiences that community Elders have lived through:

“...I think it took me a good decade to be more comfortable identifying in such a manner and trying to do so... when working in 2Spirit spaces. [I’m] always trying to have consideration [for] both Nation-specific understandings and also looking at the longer form of the 2Spirit movement as a 20th century practice, recognizing what that means for our community Elders to have lived through the years of the worst HIV AIDS crisis in the 80’s, which is something I didn’t live through. Looking at younger generations now behind us that are more removed from that, it seems like such an abstraction...”

As the child of a military mother, Benny shares how there was constant homophobia and transphobia in the environments where they grew up:

“My mother joined the army when she was 17 to escape violence in the home, and her life was such that going and becoming a part of the military was like winning the lottery because she had a safe place to sleep at night. All she had to do was jump when they said jump, and they paid her. She never had anything that belonged to her before she joined the military, and we know that the military often preys on vulnerable communities to fill their ranks. And for my mother, it was a blessing and a curse, because the military was not good to her, but that meant that we moved around quite a bit, and the culture within the military is one that is well known for being transphobic and homophobic. And so, I was in schools where gender diversity was not promoted and not accepted.”

For Benny, who didn’t have any examples of being gay growing up, but knew they felt different, they were forced into the mental health system in an attempt to be “fixed” from being trans:

“There wasn’t a lot of knowledge. There wasn’t any representation to the extent that I didn’t know what gay was. I didn’t know what I was. All I knew was that there was something wrong with me...So I was passed off from one mental health professional to another, all with the intention of trying to help me remember how to be a woman, and the way I understand it now is I was meant to sit with women. I was meant to sit with women for a very long duration in my life, and learn from women, the people in my life that have... it’s funny, when I was young, I always looked to the men. I always was trying to be like the man. I was always trying to walk like them, talk like them, act like them, which in many ways was inheriting a lot of like, toxic masculinity, in retrospect.”

Benny shares how this experience of sitting with women helped guide them to become who they are today:

“But it was the women around me who were always my guiding compass. They were always my teachers, my teachers were always women. Men were not accepting of... were *less* accepting of my gender diversity or my authentic self than women were. They [women] were a safer space for me, and so I sat with them for a really long time before I was comfortable acknowledging what they already knew, which was that I wasn’t a woman.”

### 6.1.2. Connection to the Land

Most of the participants shared having some form of special connection to land or animals, throughout their upbringing. They each have a different relationship to the role that land played in their feelings of safety, freedom, and connection to the world around and within them. Some share how that connection provided reprieve from difficult experiences, and others share how the connection still felt sparse and at times, fragmented due to the colonial process of separating Indigenous peoples from land.

Barbara shares about being raised connected to the land:

“We were 11 children. The first seven children lived in a one room house, like one room with two parents. And I came in the middle. And I was born at home, the only one born at home...We had no electricity, we had a wood stove, like a beautiful wood stove that we did our cooking and heating with no running water. And no sewer. So that's that part of my life that really taught me about the land. And when you look back, everything was on the land. Eating was outside, playing was outside. Going to the lake, Lake Manitoba is right beside our community.”

Lori grew up on a farm with a close connection to the land. She recalls using her imagination to build things for the animals, and how her athletic skills meant it was ok for her to be a tom boy:

“I was, I mean, outdoors, I grew up on a farm. I was lucky enough to have horses. And I would just go out literally like in the pasture, in the fields or in the bush, around our place. And you know, I prided myself in like being able to make everything I needed to make, make little hammocks out of baler twine and make, you know, even though we had perfectly good shiny leather halters and stuff for the horses, I'd...braid up ropes....I think at that time [I] was like, connecting to, I don't know, if I really want to say...my indigeneity. But just decolonizing [my] experience and you know, gender wasn't a thing, right? And in those spaces, I was a good athlete. And so that was kind of an outlet, because it was, you know, okay to be a girl and a good athlete. And, you know, be a tom boy, because I was a good athlete.”

Benny shares a more fragmented experience of their relationship to land:

“My parents were in survival mode. They were coming out of homes that were horrifically abusive, and...I don't want to speak on anybody's behalf, but I feel like when you come from an abusive home, you tend to not want to have your children connected to that, but there wasn't a lot of time for communing with nature. Let's just say that there wasn't a lot of time for developing those relationships to the land,...so in terms of animals and the land and being able to appreciate those things, I think it's a privilege when people can live a life that allows them to have those relationships and honor those relationships. I think trauma does a great job at destroying all those things that are there to help us live a good life.”

Benny shares, in spite of these feelings of separation from an intimate relationship to land due to intergenerational violence, they still feel a strong sense of home whenever they return to the Red River:

“I spent six years on a [military] base in Nova Scotia, and I remember the connection I had to those lands, but for me, it's going to Winnipeg, where I feel connected. Like when

I see the river, when I'm flying in on the plane, I think to myself that that's my river, and I know that's where my origin story,...that's where I come from.”

Melody shares their summer trips of going out on the land and blueberry picking with their mother as their land-based practice:

“In terms of land, my mom kept a relationship with her adoptive father, not the best, not the worst, but he spent his life in Dryden, and so it was kind of like those ritualized...every second summer our family vacation is driving across Ontario and spending two weeks in Dryden...we would almost always go in August, usually around my birthday, and so we're there, and like, blueberries are in season. And my mom, with this religious devotion to blueberry anything in northern Ontario...that was that land-based practice.”

Melody further explains, how even though they didn't have access to specific Anishinaabe teachings, there was still a relationship to harvesting and the lifeways of Northern Ontario:

“[My mother's] father was a great outdoors person, like many people in Dryden are. So that connection to land remained really present for her where she grew up fishing with her dad. He was a good hunter, like, really knowledgeable moose and deer and the like. So he shaped that understanding of being a harvester, even if detached from the Anishinaabe protocols behind that, like understanding...those lifeways of Northern Ontario.”

Charlotte shares her experiences of taking refuge in the woods, where she developed intimate relationships through the witnessing of animals, and felt safe with them. With very little teaching, she shares how resilient and resourceful she was with building things from the land:

“When I was six years old, the home I was in in Saint Pierre, it was...We lived right by the Rat River, and I would go play in the forest by the river, because [my adoptive mother] was mean as hell, like she used to lay beatings on me. And he was nice, Albert was nice. He taught me how to cut wood and everything else...you know, different plants and...But, playing in the forest by the river, I watched the beaver when they came by with their kits. The muskrat would swim by, the deer would walk in the forest, and they weren't afraid, you know. And I could build a tipi and a wigwam at the age of six.”

## **6.2. miskâsowin: Coming Home (to the Drum)**

The question of how we locate ourselves in relation to the drum points to the nêhiyaw concept of miskâsowin: finding one's place within the circle, having a sense of belonging. This is one of the first foundational principles of treaty making as presented by the Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan (Cardinal and Hildebrand, 2000). In the teaching of miskâsowin, the Elders speak about the need to be able to locate and see ourselves within our creation stories, to re-establish our place within our communities, and as a means of repairing the fragmented relationships that colonialism has violently enforced upon Indigenous communities (Cardinal and Hildebrand, 2000). Shared among many Nations and communities, to belong is one of the first tenets of miyo-pimâtisiwin, living a good life. The Elders wanted a livelihood that would support the foundational development and continuum of all members of the community. For 2Spirit kin, when we can locate ourselves as essential members of creation, and more specifically, when our gifts as drum carriers are uplifted and honoured, we can pick up the work

to actively engage in our cultural practices, and by doing so, we can assist in re-establishing the balance in the circle.

As taught to me by nêhiyaw Elder and nêhiyawêwin language teacher, Leo Yahyahkeekoot, who anchors his teachings in the originating sounds of language, otherwise called 'spirit markers,' miskâsowin can be divided into '*miska: find it, to search*', and '*sow*', which comes from the word '*sôhki: strength, with power.*' So the process of miskâsowin (belonging) is having the strength and courage to continue to search and find your place within the circle. That place of belonging is not static, much like one's connection to the drum, it is an ever-evolving relationship to the roles and responsibilities one carries within the community.

Throughout the kiyokêwin, there were varying degrees of trepidation and connection to the drum as a homecoming place. Fear and shame presented strongly for many participants, as a result of the strict binary imposed on them, whether through overt or covert messaging from certain communities. These messages reinforced heteropatriarchal modes of hierarchy and exclusion, dictating who could or couldn't drum, and thus removed a sense of safety for 2Spirit kin. This has meant that some of the drum carriers felt uneasy, even terrified to admit they wanted to play or be close to the drum.

Some of this trepidation was met with a body-based discomfort or desire in response to the intensity of the resonance of the drum. From a somatics perspective, the vibration of the big drum or heightened frequency of many hand drums played together, felt so strong that it created an overwhelm and activation in the nervous system (Haines, 2019; Levine, P. & Frederick, A., 1997, Menakem, 2017, Van Der Kolk, 2014,). For some, it took a long time to build up the trust and find safety in their bodies, to pick up or play the drum. This trust to pursue the drum as a possible tool for healing and learning songs often came about through sharing and having experiences of drumming with Elders, Indigenous relatives, and other 2Spirit kin in intimate spaces. As somatic abolitionist Resmaa Menakem highlights this process can give, "bodies the right context and encouragement, and they will begin to harmonize as well." He further shares the impacts this can have on community wellness, "When, over time, enough bodies heal from historical, intergenerational, and personal trauma and learn to harmonize, that harmony can turn into a culture of resilience and flow" (Menakem, 2017, p100). Finding coherence in the body while connecting to the drum, participants shared a heightened sense of connection to their own hearts, to the heartbeat of Mother Earth, to Creation, and as a result, this created a flow of energy to connect further. nêhiyaw uncle and revered drummer Joseph Naytowhow describes this flow:

"The one thing about the drum I will say is that when it calls you, when it's time for you to return to the drum...it's a flow. There's no disruption. You start drumming and the drum is going deep into your cellular system, you know, there's no return" (Naytowhow, personal conversation, 2025).

I was curious about this notion of "no return," from a 2Spirit perspective, and how participants had experienced these different states of flow and tension, ultimately leading each of them to a deepened sense of belonging and resilience in carrying a drum.

Lori speaks about some of her first experiences of being close to and hearing the drum, and the resulting feelings she had:

"I was in spaces and places where I was hearing the drum a lot. And for the longest time...for probably two or three years...I would just want to cry....[I was] so moved,

whether it was at a powwow or just somebody playing a hand drum,...it was just so vibrationally overwhelming in a deep soulful way, I didn't know how to respond other than I just wanted to cry."

Lori continues, sharing how the sound and feeling of the drum connected with her deeply, but was also met with confusion:

"It just felt like it vibrated my very being, but...I was led to believe that...women didn't drum. I didn't know any 2Spirit people at the time."

Like many others, Lori was "led to believe" that women didn't drum. These gender biases have been ingrained in certain community contexts such as pow wows, sweatlodges, and other ceremonies, that Lori, among others, initially steered away from picking up a drum. Lori further shares just how overwhelming these feelings of wanting to get close to the drum became and how she didn't know if it was safe to have all these feelings until eventually she did reach out:

"It felt like the harm of holding in what was bursting inside of me, was starting to cause me more harm than what would happen if I told [someone]."

This feeling of being compelled to play the drum extended beyond waking moments. Lori shares:

"I'm around the drum and it's like, I just, I want to, you know, like I dream about it. I feel it. I feel myself, you know, playing the drum and singing. I don't know what I'm singing, but I feel like you know, I'm there..."

Similar to Lori's experience of intensified feelings near the drum, Barbara shares her response to the vibration of the drum:

"It is very spirit opening. You know, because I always think...the drum calls people. You know...when you hear that drum, you want to hurry up and get there. It's like a magnet almost...and it vibrates in your body. And that's how it felt for me. I was actually coming home, with that drum, in that ceremony."

Morning Star shares about having questions of whether or not drumming was safe, was for women and 2Spirit kin, but through her connection to a wise Elder, she found her place:

"I think it was somewhere in Ontario near Sudbury. I was in a circle with, there was this elder...she was the first elder I sat in a circle with and she had her drum. And I think maybe it was the first time where you know, I was like, "Ooh, I think maybe someday I want a drum." But then I've already started to hear, you know, we all have different customs and traditions over that. And me, I was so far from my Cree community at that time, I was still struggling with my identity. And so I didn't know what was okay for me to do or not do, and that woman, she was just like, "you will not hurt...Creator or whatever. Like, if you reclaim your stuff, if you feel that attraction and connection, you know, it's fine...if you're called to it, just go and get it." That's what she told me at that time. So that's where I started slowly to be more comfortable. And, you know, building my little medicine bundle and connecting with ritual and ceremony that speaks to me."

Barbara shares how some of the comfort one feels near the drum comes from the belief that drums are helpers of spirit:

“You know, when you're a helper, these [drums] are helpers. That's all they are. It's your spirit. And here, it's a reminder, connect with your spirit. That drum, you've seen it many times, you know, somebody starts drumming, you just gravitate to where they are, to listen...”

Benny shares how they felt a sense of ‘magic’ after they learned to make a drum and joined a women’s drum group:

“I was part of a drum making workshop 20 years ago, and we made our own drums. We birthed our drums...and I carried that drum for a number of years, not really knowing how to best engage with it, but I joined a drumming circle, a women's drumming circle in North Bay, Northern Kwe Drummers. And...it was magic. It was a whole new way of connecting to spirit that I had never experienced before, when I would be in that circle with those women singing. And what I think is interesting is that the drum has become so important to me, this relationship that I have with my drum, despite only knowing two drum songs.”

Lori shares how she started drumming with a women and 2Spirit drum group at the Paskwa Hospital in Regina:

“I relate to the drum, and the big drum is very much...it's like a healing drum. [It was a] 2Spirit drum and women's space. We used to play, like we played for healing and for each other. We used to gather at the Indigenous Health Services, [in] a space at the hospital here. Nice big circle space.”

Lori also shares about the harm reduction that she ensured happened around the drum, where they would invite folks who were using substances to sit in the space, on the edge of the circle, to still have access to the healing vibrations:

“I always just felt strongly like, you know, we're at the Paskwa Hospital...it's a difficult, challenging neighborhood...And it was new for me to be at it. But I was always like...there's a big circle, like a place to sit on the outside...they can come in, and they can sit there.”

She also shares the emotional responses kin would have while listening:

“Sometimes, like, women would just come in there and...they would just sit there...and cry, and sometimes we would visit with them. Sometimes they just wanted to be there. And we would just play.”

Melody recalls their mom mailing them a special drum designed by a Métis artist, when they were doing their graduate degree in St. John’s:

“I remember my mom mailed me one of her hand drums. We still have it upstairs...Yeah, it was sharpied by Jamie Koebel like, not painted. And I think it was...late 2000’s artist practice for Jamie...It was just such beautiful artwork...I think I maybe knew Strong Women’s Song, some kind of urban, Indigenous kind of woman's hand drum [song].”

### 6.2.1. Making Drums

Most relatives shared that they were never really taught how to make a drum, but somehow they always knew how, whether by intuition, through a vision or a dream, or perhaps blood memory. As shared by Sandra Lamouche, blood memory can be understood as, "...the belief that we carry the wisdom of our ancestors and our culture in our blood." Lamouche also shares that in addition to inheriting trauma from parents and grandparents, "we also carry intergenerational wisdom and through listening, mindfulness, curiosity, we can discover for ourselves healing and wisdom that we carry within." (Lamouche, 2023).

Lori shares how making drums has been something she's always somehow known how to do:

"I mean like, it's almost like ever since I can remember, it's like I also knew how to make drums. Like I have no conscious...well no, like in my adoptive family like never seen that. I had never...Yeah, it was like when we were out at the 2Spirit Lodge and kookum Charlotte's making the drum. It's like...I've been doing that forever, but I've only literally made the two hand drums and that big drum. But it's like, I just know how to do it."

Lori continues, sharing how visions play an important role in her capacity to make a drum, "I've just dreamt about it...and so it feels very familiar." She also shares the making of a very special horse drum, drawing from her aunty's teaching and their strong family lineage to horses, Lori used tobacco to stain the drumskin. When it dried, she shares the result:

"when it dried out...it was like half and half, like darker and lighter, and so it was my horse drum...it's kind of like...the Métis'ness in me, the in-between'ness."

Similar to Lori, Charlotte celebrates all the different drums she's made over the years, many of which have been gifted to different people and organizations in honour of their good work:

"Nobody taught me. I just made [a] drum and I seen the write up on it, so I made a drum, and that drum today hangs in the Long House in BC Hydro building on the 13th floor. ...I was told the first of anything you make, you gift it. And I passed that teaching on to people. You know, when you make something, the first one, give it away, because I was told a long time ago...never to be possessed of these things. You know, they're only with us for a time, and then they have to travel with somebody else."

Charlotte shares about a drum she invited others to help her make:

"When I worked at Wahbung Abinoonjiiag, it's a domestic violence program for moms and children, they had a drum for the youth, but they didn't have one for the women. And I said, "Okay, we're going to make a big drum." So I got all these guys that made the hoops, and I says, "I need a hoop for a big drum." And then we bought the moose hide, and I got the women to help me make the drum."

She shares how they had an old man named Sweepy paint the grandmothers with sweetgrass braids around them on the skin of the drum. After the drum was made they decided to give the drum a name. Charlotte shares:

"And I says, "this drum carries the name, 'Iskwêwak Pimâtisiwin: Women who Give Life.'" My late wife's spirit name was Iskwêw Pimâtisiwin: Woman who Gives Life, when she brought the twins into the world. I says that's the name of this drum."

Similar to Charlotte speaking about giving drums names, at an Equinox big drum circle hosted in Tio'tiake in Autumn 2025, 2Spirit Oji-Cree Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby taught about the importance of giving your drum a name. We feasted the big drum and individual hand drums, and as we went around in a sharing circle, kin were invited to introduce their drums by name. It was a beautiful ceremonial portal to honour our drums as animate and valued members of the circle.

As 2Spirit folks, we are resilient and make the most of what we've got to make drums. Barbara shares how she used whatever tools necessary to make her first drum:

"You know, the first drum I made was buffalo skin. It was so hard. And for my first drum, I got a piece of cedar and put water in a frying pan and bent it slowly so it would become a full round for the hoop."

Barbara also reflects on the first time she made a 2Spirit big drum with other relatives:

"I know that our first 2Spirit big drum that we made was at Mae Louise Campbell's land near my community, and we were all 2Spirit. Jojo was there too. Albert Mcleod, Alex was there too. There was a group of us, and we loved it. That was the first 2Spirit drum that I had seen or been part of. The big drum. And we did sing at some different places with the drum."

## 6.2.2 Coming Home in Ceremony

Everyone shared the value of accessing ceremonies throughout their journeys. Some spoke deeply to the importance of land-based ceremony and the healing and knowledge transmission that came from participating in ceremony as a life-saving practice.

Charlotte shares how she came home in ceremony:

"I started working in social work, and different Elders [would say], "Come with us, we're going medicine picking this weekend." They start teaching me about the different medicines. "Come with us, we're going to a sweat lodge." So I went and learned about the sweat lodge. "Come with us, we're going to Sundance." And as soon as I got to the Sundance grounds, I knew I was home. Spirit was so powerful. I knew I was home."

At a gathering a year and a half later with some of these Elders, Charlotte stood up to ask why so many of them had taught her these things. She shares, "I didn't grow up with those things. I grew up in white homes, you know, Catholic schools, nuns and priests."

She continues:

"So I says, "Why have you been teaching me all this?" And then one Elder stood up, "We were told you were coming, and we had to prepare, you." Prepare me for what? Today I know what they were preparing me for, but back then, like...in my wildest dreams, I never thought, you know, this is who I would become."

After years of coming home to the Sundance, Charlotte was eventually guided by spirit to lead the Sundance with fellow Michif 2Spirit kohkom, Barbara. When Charlotte was initially told by a male Elder that she would one day lead the Sundance, she responded, "That's possible...but it's

not a decision I'm going to make. It's not a decision that a human will make. It's a decision they'll make."

Eventually in 2018, she received the message that it was time:

"And that's when I announced to the people, "some of you have known me for a number of years. You know that I'm a Sundancer, and I've been told that it's time." As soon as I said that, Barb's eyes got big, and a big smile on her face. I says, "It's time for me to lead you in Sundance."

Together, and with the help of Barbara's sister they were able to get land.

Similar to Charlotte, Benny also shares how ceremony saved their life:

"I think ceremony saved my life. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for people making space for me in their lodges and teaching me despite the stubborn nature that I have..."

Benny shares how they finally got up the courage to tell a ceremonial Elder that they could no longer wear a skirt after attending many of her lodges. Assuming that they would get kicked out of the lodge, instead the Elder responded,

"From here on, you're going to sit in the Eastern doorway. And the Eastern doorway is the midewiwin entrance to the lodge. And I asked her why that was and she said, because if these are women's sweats that I'm doing and men are Firekeepers, then you need to be the conduit between these two, you need to be in this position in-between so you'll welcome the ancestors when they come into the lodge. And so she was somebody that had never worked directly with a 2Spirit person before in a ceremonial context, and wasn't quite sure what my role should be, but she created one for me, and for 10 years that was my place in her Lodge."

Barbara recalls a moment when she brought her mother to a sweat lodge, and her mother chose to sit outside the lodge. After the first round, her mother offered a teaching:

"So we opened the door, the first door, and she said, "Now everybody, I have a teaching. So when you bring those rocks in, or the grandfather's we call them, one at a time, you drum." And I have shivers here. "Sound that it's coming in.""

Barbara also shares the depth in her connection to her mother, and how much her mother wanted to learn about ceremonies from Barbara. She remembers when she first came out to her family,

"[My Mother] was totally open. So when I came out to the family, well, I had no choice. She was accepting of me."

Throughout our kiyokêwin, Barbara shares multiple spirit visions she's had. One particular vision led her to ceremony:

"I had a very powerful vision dream. I'm sitting across the fire...and there's a lodge in front of me and the fire. And the door is opening and this woman came out and she had long white hair. She was wearing a long white sweat gown. So she smiled at me coming out. And she smiled at me standing. And then she turned around. And her hair, I looked

at her hair really closely, it was a braid of sweet grass from her head to the ground. And then I said, "it's time." So I came into myself in ceremonies. And that's when it started."

She further shares, how she continued to pursue the path of ceremony, and how it helped her gather strength to become who she is today:

"And so I came out, you know, and that was better for me to be out. But ceremony, drums, rattles, smudging,...I didn't get my pipe until later. You know, all of those things, Sundance, all of those things helped me to be the person I am today. You know, to be as strong as I am today. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

There is no set timeline for healing and finding our way into ceremonies. For Morning Star, she shares feeling like she's getting closer to attending a Sundance, but only when the time is right:

"I just feel that I choose wisely where I go, you know, like I was interested to learn and maybe come help at a Sundance sometime. And I was a bit like, the foot on the brake. But then I've heard people say that that's where they started their Sundance and that they had, you know, they brought their concern and their truth to, you know, to the people there, and they had good experience and so...sharing our truth in our moment with other 2Spirit people, that's where also, okay, I can go there..."

As a trans person, Melody shares their ongoing commitment to powwow dancing, and more specifically, grass dance. They share how this connection helps them create more opportunities for 2Spirit people to access ceremony:

"I'm really proud that I've put in that work to become a grass dancer. And like, it's not perfect, but I'm part of the 2Spirit Council for the Grand Council of Treaty 3. So we hosted a 2Spirit powwow on Couchiching First Nation two summers ago...A lot of queer community members came out, and like... I helped put on a giveaway ceremony to get more regalia items out into the community, with the hopes that like, more 2Spirit people would start to get that process going."

Melody relates powwow to being a form of ceremonial space:

"I mean when you hand tobacco to a jingle dress dancer and ask them for healing, that's something...it's a community function with ceremonial aspects and protocols involved. And I feel like sometimes we maybe just get a bit too hung up on "Is this 'big C' or 'little c' ceremony?"

Melody also shares how they see value of intimate ceremonies one engages in while harvesting and being on the land:

"But I think too of this ceremonial capacity, what is it when people are just out harvesting and alone, and they just put their tobacco out in the bush and that's just them by themselves with this moose, or whatever, picking medicines. So there's that individualized element too."

## 6.4. nitohtamowin: Listening to the Heart

When I first began learning nêhiyawêwin as a song-creation practice, nêhiyaw Elder and knowledge keeper Joseph Naytowhow proposed a process of layering and deepening within the learning journey. He links learning nêhiyawêwin to different levels of listening and taking care. He shares that one must first learn to pêhtamowin (hear) the language, then through acts of ‘returning to the language’ and showing up with four-bodied awareness, one eventually learns to nitohtamowin (listen) and slowly deepen our relationship until we find nisohtamowin (understanding). As this continues in practice over time and place, we eventually learn to take care of and sâkihiwê nêhiyawêwin (love the language) and through doing so, embody practices of kiskisiwin, remembering, and kitimakêyih towin, taking care of one another (Naytowhow, personal communication, 2013).

*Song catching* is a term I first heard from Veronica Johnny, a Cree-Métis musician, songwriter and 2Spirit relative who carries a drum in her performance and educational work (Johnny, 2017). She shared this concept while we co-facilitated a workshop for the Rainbow Coalition of Yellowknife in Northwest Territories. I had been song catching for awhile, but appreciated this term as a way to denote the “receiver” of the song as a sort of “midwife” to the spirit of songs that have existed for a long time, or are perhaps only now coming into being. In song catching, we become the “mid-people”, sort of like midwives, to these songs. Some of them come back through us in a moment while we are near a particular body of water, territory of land or forest, listening to the winds on the edge of a river, or visiting an ancestral site. Some of the songs come to us in dreams or visions, almost like apparitions of spirit wanting to be sounded and birthed on our tongues in a moment of creation. Songs come through us, they visit us, and sometimes they ask us to carry them forward in space and time. In a similar way that our healing can occur in non-linear and quantum ways, songs too, can travel back to the stars, trace their way through the cosmos and ancestral realms, and eventually return to earth, on the skin of a drum or the tip of the tongue.

In relation to listening and receiving it’s also important to acknowledge the sovereignty of songs within themselves, they don’t belong to us, but we are given access to carry them, sing them and transmit them, and in so doing, keep them safe for future generations. Similar to the term coined for Michif people by our nêhiyaw relatives, “otipimêyisiwak” which translates to “the free people, those who own themselves,” so too, songs own themselves in their own rightful way and spirit. nêhiyaw artist and scholar, Cheryl L’Hirondelle (2015) speaks to this term when she writes:

“Metis visionary Maria Campbell first taught me the term ‘ka-atapimisohcik’, or ‘they own themselves’... The terms refer to the fact that when the treaties were being signed, the Metis were not included—unlike their Indian relatives who were being sequestered on iskonikan askiy or leftover strips of land.” (2015, p1-2).

Therefore, songs “as their own bosses” suggests that they can come and go as they please, within the hearts, spirits, and voices of different people at different times in history, and it’s up to us, as humans, to give them breath when we receive them and take care of them so they may live on. We’ve been given the honour to carry them, accompany them, and support their journey in this resonant, vibrational Earth space.

To open each of the kiyokêwin, I shared a song and together we smudged, said some prayers, and aligned our intentions. As Senapan Thunder describes this act of prayer, “to warm our spirits up” (Thunder, Cree + Tea, 2023). To close off each kiyokêwin, I invited each collaborator

to share a song they had learned, received, or created themselves. Some of these songs had been received inside sweat lodges, at drum circles with 2Spirit and Indigenous women, within a space of harm reduction, and others received the songs in visions or dreams, while moving through challenges, or travelling the land. Most of them shared how the songs have assisted them in honouring their spirits and provided them with comfort so they can transform their pain into resonance. Some shared how the songs have helped them learn and retain language so they can better communicate and pray in ancestral tongues. As shared by nêhiyaw writer Neil McLeod, "Through prayer and songs, the old people maintained ties to eternity and the ancient memory of places" (McLeod, 2007, p32).

Benny shares a vision they received one night that came through in song:

"It was a particularly difficult night, and I was struggling and this vision came to me, and it was this song, and it was funny, because I started singing it, and I thought, "I don't know the song. What is the song?" And I went and I lit a smudge and it just kept coming to me, and I thought, "What is this?""

Benny continues,

"...And the whole song came to me while I was standing over my bundle, and I knew right away that it was a traveling, like a journeying song, but not a song that acknowledged the journey somebody was about to go on, but a song that acknowledged the journey of 2Spirit people to this point, if that makes sense. So when I stand in a circle and I share this song, I always say that it's an acknowledgement of the journey that we've all been on and what we've had to overcome to be here today, in this place together. That's what the song honors, it's that journey that it's acknowledging."

Benny speaks about the song and suggests it may have come through from a 'long-ago' time:

"...I don't believe that this is a new song. I believe that this is an old song. I believe that this is a really old song that was gifted and brought back into the physical, but that it existed in the physical before. I really believe that, and it wasn't meant to be my song. It was meant to be brought back for people."

Specifically, Benny shares how the song is for 2Spirit kin:

"It was intended for all of the people (2Spirit) that were asking for the song, that's their song...It belongs to them. They don't need to offer or give anything of themselves for that, because it is inherently theirs."

Charlotte shares her experience of hearing a song while at a camp, and notions of how songs have travelled generations to find us today. Songs can be like teleportation devices, arriving in dreams, ceremonies, or in in-between moments when we least expect. Charlotte shares:

"When we did our first fasting camp in Alberta, this old man came... and he sang a song. As soon as he finished singing the song, I went over to him. I says, "that's a really old song." He says, "yes, my grandfather passed it on to me." I says, "I heard that song, but not in this lifetime. When I was here before I heard that song." And there's been moments in my life where I've seen where I was before, you know, and to mix the two worlds. It's like some people might think that I'm Looney as a tune."

Charlotte shares how her uncle taught her songs, but that they've slipped away from her:

"I'll be honest, I don't carry the gift of song. I sing with people, like I'm never a lead singer. Once I learn the song, though, I can sing with the people. Uncle gave me four songs, and I prayed and prayed to get those songs back. They're horse songs."

She further shares how some folks have the "gift of song," and that songs have also come back to her while in ceremony:

"And uncle, he had that gift of song like you do. And he would share songs with the people...in ceremony and that. And he understood that songs, they come to me, but they don't stay. Then when we're in the lodge singing them, they come back. And I've always brought people in the lodge with me that can sing, you know, like I'll sing too, but people that come in and sing the songs...are so powerful."

Lori shares how she was driving a tractor when she received an important 2Spirit song:

"I had this song come to me...and it was kind of also at a time where I was struggling with my adoptive family, and you know, my identity as a Two Spirit person, as a queer person, as an Indigenous person. All those things were challenging for them to be open to wanting to have a conversation about, and I was having this...sadness about it. The song started coming to me...relatively quickly over...a few days...I would just be humming this and whatever. And I was... humming the feeling of what was going on. But once I had the song, it was like...a 2Spirit song...It's about the suffering of 2Spirit and the loss and other things that go along with that...It's a good song, like it needs to be sung, but it's about recognizing...that erasure, and that pain that can come with that. I call it a 2Spirit healing song because it's about knowing that place of pain, you know, whether it's from the erasure from the denial...of our existence or pushing us out and it's a healing song in that way, kind of like a lullaby..."

Lori shares, in addition to the song being for and to be sung by 2Spirit people, it's also about educating and ensuring that allies who have power in spaces where 2Spirit people aren't uplifted uphold their responsibility to honour and make space for 2Spirit relatives:

"If you're not 2Spirit, and you're choosing to go into places where we aren't allowed or accepted, then I don't want you singing the song...I need you to just step back and give us space, so that we can gather for this song. Because I think that's also super important. Because if you're, you know, coming and celebrating 2Spirit people, but you're not 2Spirit, but then you're also going into places where they're, you know, skirt shaming us or body shaming us or whatever...and you're not opening your mouth, you can't double dip like that. Like, it's not okay..."

Barbara shares a different story of gathering at an Elders house, with a group of lesbian and gay (her terminology back then) friends and together they built a big drum. She clarifies that it wasn't a "pow wow" drum, but a "ceremonial" one, suggesting there is and was a difference in who could sit and play around it. She recalls carrying the drum on her back, when she was younger and had a stronger physical body:

"Yeah we just needed to learn more songs and sing more. But I never experienced that [being shamed or told not to drum]. Of course, it wasn't a powwow drum. It was a ceremonial drum. No, I've never experienced that. I mean, at the beginning of my

following this way, I think there was more resistance and more strict protocols, and you certainly wouldn't go with pants on if you were a woman or a girl, but now it's a bit different, because wherever Charlotte and I and Albert go, we welcome everybody. You can't really say anything...This is my bundle. It's part of my bundle. It's part of me. This is what I do."

Morning Star shares a deep connection she felt with song, as someone who works extensively in land protection, harm reduction, and advocating for the rights of sex workers, incarcerated relatives and homeless kin,

"And so I feel...I am the descendant of land protectors and I'm, you know, caring a lot for my sisters who are in jails and all the people who are in jails and communities that are surveilled a lot. And so for me, the Strong Women's Song is, you know, connecting a lot. I did learn a song, I always forget the name of that song, I think it's the White Bear [Song]. And I learned it here in the city."

Morning Star shares how the White Bear Song was first taught to her in a space dedicated to 2Spirit and Indigenous women, and how it impacted her sense of belonging:

"There was a drumming circle at a certain point. I think Dayna Danger was organizing and inviting other drummers and singers in so we could share. And they told me it was a 2Spirit song. And I liked it a lot. Especially because, at this time, and maybe still today, I thought and maybe still think that there are not a lot of 2Spirit songs... But it was the first time I was like, "oh, okay, so I've learned it." I'm still not so good to start it. I was thinking about that, [when being welcomed] to your place today, I was like, how does it start again?"

As someone trained in Western classical and contemporary music, Melody shares how they hear ceremonial Midewiwin songs and can differentiate different territories and styles of singing:

"One of our initiation songs that Ron Indian-Mandamin-Iban (rest in spirit: 1979-2024) sings...[is] a song about giving the miigis [a Mide shell], as a gift, to the new initiates...I really appreciate going through different cultural places and listening to more Treaty 3 vocabularies, like the big drum songs, the range sits a little bit lower, hearing how different communities approach their....because, suddenly we have accents that really land on particular syllables that are not where I would intuitively place one from my Western musical training and these really drawn out...big glissandos...those are the types of items that are just nuances that just don't sit well on that page. I kind of point towards my stack of sheet music in the corner. I think when you say "What songs do you carry?" Like, it's some of those...Mide (Midewiwin) initiating songs where you're putting like 10 people through in the lodge, and you might be singing this one song on loop for like, 40 minutes."

This capacity to collectively sing and carry a song for long durations is vital to ensure the ceremony, and all the rites of passage within it, are completed before the song finishes. I remember singing a moon song on loop for over an hour while feasting a 2Spirit ceremonial space at the Gathering of the Great Lakes on the edge of Lake Huron years ago. As a drummer and singer, I was required to keep singing throughout the entire ceremony, in order to maintain the flow and ongoing prayers, and in a way, ensure that the minds, hearts, and spirits of all present were held in resonance. Similarly in the Sundance ceremony, drummers are required to

sing for hours, often in the mid-day heat of the sun, while specific rituals and dances are practiced. In these ways, songs assist in amplifying states of consciousness and collective cohesion through the vibrations conjured in the many layers of melody, rhythm, and breath. Lakota artist and writer, Suzanne Kite shares:

“Songs are the action in a sweat lodge, doing the most vital and complex work. These songs involve many kinds of algorithms: the Lakota language and its complexities of purpose and meaning, the arrangement of the song’s poetry, the choice and order of song by the leaders, and the patterns of the air waves being formed and reformed by the melodies and harmonies of the participants’ voices” (Kite, 2020, p.80).

As an assistant professor in the Desautels Faculty of Music at the University of Manitoba, Melody also speaks about the complications of being asked to *indigenize* the music program, and share songs with students. They share feeling a sense of protection and hesitation around what songs and type of access to give non-Indigenous students or faculty:

“I’m often recalibrating, out of respect and protectiveness...[of] our “traditional musical practices,” and I’m not ready to share that with the masses. I was like, there’s...50,000 kids in care in Manitoba right now. Like our community doesn’t have access to it yet...our 2Spirit youth don’t have access to it yet. So I’m not giving it to all the piano majors...I talk publicly a lot more about Indigenous popular music, because they are made for a wider audience. So I’m always thinking [about] like, audience and who has access? Like, who should be *given* access? I also hear our Elders being like, “you don’t own these songs, like you can’t control these songs.” This protectiveness isn’t ours either.”

This complicated in-between space of wanting to teach others about Indigenous song practices, while also protecting them from settler-extractivism and ongoing colonial processes that steal, record, and try to sell us back our songs, is a real and ongoing problem. Since the closing of the Indian Act’s Potlatch Ban, less than 75 years ago, we’ve only recently been reclaiming our songs, our drum practices, and re-establishing our ceremonial practices. It is imperative, then, to safeguard our songs from the illegal and often detrimental documentation, recording, and appropriation from people who have little to no cultural knowledge of protocol and the ceremonial origins many of the songs contain. Melody’s concerns are so very real, and provoke the question: how can the 2Spirit songs created in this research creation project be documented and shared in ways that privilege and protect 2Spirit community access?

#### **6.4. tâpwêwin: Truth Telling**

“tâpwêwin” is a nêhiyaw concept meaning, “speaking the truth” or “speaking with precision and accuracy.” The transmission and enactment of tâpwêwin is inherently linked to oral expression, that which is given voice, and tâpwêwin is an obligation, especially “when dealt with through the spiritual traditions and ceremonies of the nation” (Cardinal & Hildebrand, 2000, p48). nêhiyaw, Michif, Irish tattoo practitioner, Dr. Mel Lefebvre continues this understanding, “...tâpwêwin or truth telling is a core methodology of Michif and Nêhiyaw life,” something that is enacted daily. She further centres the importance of being precise, “...when speaking on important issues and to bring forward challenging topics when necessary” (Lefebvre, 2024, p28). For 2Spirit relatives, truth-telling is a way of relating, of sharing our most honest and sometimes brutal selves, in all the depths and dirt of what we’ve lived and how it’s made us who we are. tâpwêwin is integral to the interconnectivity and wellness of our communities, offering a map for deeper understanding.

### 6.4.1. Warriors Reclaiming the Heart of Our Truth

Within tâpwêwin, I chose to highlight the concept and role of 'okihcitâw', which loosely translates to 'warrior.' It is a title given to members of a community when they have achieved a greater level of knowledge, understanding, and mastery of the teachings required to open their hearts and to support the wellbeing of their people. okihcitâw, as taught to me from Nêhinaw Elder Ron Cook:

“okihcitâw, when you pull apart the language, the words become 'kichi' meaning 'great', and 'itê' which comes from 'mitech', meaning 'heart'. So to be okihcitâw means to have a great heart. okihcitâwak (warriors, plural) show us the way of the heart” (Cook, personal communication, 2025).

He further shares teachings around okihcitâwak as the ones who serve the entire community with their gifts. I appreciate this term in language, as it is also gender non-binary, and thus, can signify any member of the community who has obtained a great heart. To connect okicitâw with tâpwêwin aligns with the resurgent practice of choosing our own names, voicing our truths, and in so-doing, supporting and uplifting other 2Spirit and community around us.

In many Indigenous communities, initiation rites have been censored or repressed, if not almost completely lost, especially for 2Spirit members. Some 2Spirit kin arrive into ceremonies and environments with Elders, and have the chance to learn as an oskâpêwis (Elders' helper, masculine gendered). After years of shadowing, assisting and doing the physical tasks the Elder may not be able to, oskâpêwis gain the knowledge to be able to undertake the ceremonies or guide aspects of ceremony, on their own. Both nêhiyaw Elders Senapan Thunder and Joseph Naytowhow speak to those who have obtained this level of knowledge and responsibility, as being okihcitâw.

Throughout many of the tastawayihk kiyokêwin, instead of speaking about being a survivor or victim, kin shared their experiences and the resulting healing they undertook which brought them to a place of obtaining a *great heart*. They share how they identify and what they want as okihcitâwak who are serving their communities.

As previously stated in the introductions, Charlotte Nolin locates herself as a warrior of all the experiences she's been through. She makes clear emphasis that she's not a survivor, or victim:

“I'm a warrior of the 60s scoop, I'm not a survivor, I'm not a victim. I lived with the Residential schools, the Indian Day Schools, and stayed in the child welfare system for 19 years. I was taken away at six months of age, and when I left the child welfare system, I had dropped out of school, and I found my family on the streets, other young people like myself, and we became family, and we did what we had to do to survive.”

Throughout all the violence Charlotte's lived through and made it out the other side, she has decades of resilience and healing within her, which guides her approach to community service. She also shares of a message she once received from a grandmother, about a vision that Charlotte had been a warrior in a past life:

“She said to me, "this is your third time here. The first time you came to us was as a grandmother, and you brought life into the world, and you nurtured the children." But then she says, "you left us. But you returned a second time, and you returned as a

warrior, and you fought and protected those that couldn't protect themselves." But she says, "you left us again, and she says, "this time, you've returned to us as a teacher.""

Charlotte struggled to identify as a teacher, but eventually found herself working in the University School of Social Work, teaching large groups of all ages, and guiding Sundances, among other ceremonies. In this life she most certainly exudes capacities as both an *okihcitāw* and teacher.

Morning Star Morning Star shares inspiring teachings she received about warriors at a workshop she attended:

"Our nations and how our community was made up and what was in the center, you know, the kids, and then around them there were the elders, and also the parents...the 2Spirit people were at the same place as the warriors, because they took care as much as the Warriors. And some of the 2Spirit could also be warriors... we were all taking care, making a safe circle around all our community" (Morning Star, 2024).

Morning Star shares these reflections with a glow in her eyes, as a community organizer and frontline worker, she knows this place of being a warrior who intimately weaves herself and all her contributions into the circle of care.

Benny highlights the value of honouring each person and how they decide to walk in the world:

"I always tell people that only *you* know how you're supposed to walk in creation. And I knew that I wasn't intended to be a woman and I wasn't intended to be a man, but I didn't know what that meant...I didn't really know what being queer was growing up... I thought there was something really wrong with me" (Michaud, 2024).

This notion of walking is central to living a good life, as we are two-legged relatives and thus, we are tasked to learn how to walk in creation. Taking care of trans and non-binary relatives is crucial in this process of walking in good relation. Addressing head-on current policies impacting trans and non-binary youth in Alberta; revoking their rights to decide how they want to identify, with what names and pronouns; removing access to gender affirming care for youth under 18 years old, Melody speaks to the need for more trans-centric recognition, inclusion, and awareness, in our community work and ceremonial contexts, Melody shares:

"I do want to see Two Spirit be a bit more trans-centric. Even if it's not inclusive of the sexuality spectrum, at least recognizing that we need to hold trans people, both with a level of safety and urgency, because Western society is really turning on us right now, and Indigenous people aren't immune from that either."

Barbara Bruce shares her experiences of speaking out, as her spirit name denotes, she is a *Truth Talker*, and as such, she shares what needs to be said, but often this can create a stir:

"You know I think it's a real blessing to have some 2Spirit leaders continue protocols but ease up to allow 2Spirit relatives to feel safe and comfortable when it comes to ceremony. But, you know, I still to this day, I speak out. I speak out to the straight elders, and say, "We are not part of the circle, unless you invite us to come in, but we have to wear what we want to wear...as long as it's respectful." You know, I've been saying that for the past 15 years. And I've been, what's the word—Blacklisted."

Barbara also shares the miracle that is her life:

“...I have a story, it's a big one, and it's a long one. And to survive all of the things that I've survived is a miracle in itself. And I'm using that word deliberately. Because it is.”

#### 6.4.2. Giving Ourselves Names

tastawayihk-iyiniwak as a term for 2Spirit people is both locational and relational. It situates who, where and how we are, active, moving between, and consistently located in the centre, as beings or people. When 2Spirit people are centred in our own worlds, work, lives and communities, there's less chance for us to get lost in the margins. tastawayihk-iyiniwak means someone who is an *in-between being or person*, and it's an orientation premised on moving and providing for the community and in-between worlds. If we break down the word, we begin with the spirit marker, or syllabic: 'ta' which, as described by nēhiyaw knowledge keeper Leo Yahyahkeekoot in his spirit markers teachings, relates to the “questioning of something,” thus animating an-ever evolving action and placement. 'Ta' is also the root of tapwêwin, which is truth, and is not a fixed concept (Yahyahkeekoot, personal communication, 2022).

Similar to tastawayihk-iyiniwak, the term “si kom diloo” in Michif language, means “to be like water.” I first learned this term from Michif Ojibwe author, Kai Pyle in an online workshop (Pyle, 2021, online), and was further re-iterated by 2Spirit Michif burlesque performer Jacqueline Pelland and 2Spirit Michif visual artist LL Lafontaine. In Pelland and Pyle's words:

“...we take sikom diloo as a reference to the fluidity of time as we understand it in language revitalization, land defense, and Two-Spirit activism. Michif Two-Spirit resistance involves revitalizing practice from the past while also allowing them to transform in the future” (Pelland, Pyle, 2021, NAISA).

sikom diloo is such a dynamic phrase as it clearly expresses gender fluidity, and uplifts the intimate connection 2Spirit kin have to the transformational and non-binary existence of water. Water is life, so are 2Spirit expressions of body sovereignty and self-determination. Lafontaine shares: “Water is fluid. We are fluid as 2S+ people...Water is medicine. We are medicine” (Lafontaine, 2024, pp. 14-15). I am reminded of a water gathering I attended years ago at the edge of Lake Huron, hosted by Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch through the Onaman Collective. We were there to pray for the healing and cleansing of the waters, to bring awareness to the mistreatment of the great lakes by industry. During the gathering, 2Spirit Michif relative, Erin Konsmo led the charge to create a 2Spirit ceremony and feast a place for all our 2Spirit relatives within the circle. For this, Erin silkscreened on cloth flags, “*gender is fluid, like nibi (water)*.” We stitched those words to our denim jackets, on the doorways of our tents, and Erin made sure everyone at the gathering took home one of those flags.

With each of the 2Spirit collaborators, I wanted to tend to these layers of language. As 2Spirit Red River Michif scholar and ceremonialist Chantal Fiola (2020) envisions 2Spirit or “naawenangweyaabeg traplines [as a means to] decolonize ourselves, help keep our communities together, and prevent members from wandering off” (p. 137). These traplines are set by 2S Elders and knowledge keepers, as safety nets to support emerging generations of 2Spirit relatives to locate themselves, affirm their roles, relationships, and recognize themselves as dynamic contributors to community. To be able to set these traplines in languages specific to our nations, brings further connection and clarity. (Fiola, 2020).

From nêhiyaw iskwêwak, Kathy Walker and Senapan Thunder, I am inspired by both their conceptualizations of the significance of a 'bundle' within nêhiyaw knowledge and language systems. As Kathy Walker shares, "In effect, okâwîmâwaskiy is helping to clear a resurgent path for the wholistic return of our grandmothers, mothers, sisters and two-spirit people in the ongoing names and narratives of who we are as Cree peoples." (Walker, 2023, 171). Naming ourselves and having a space within which to identify and assert our sovereignty as 2Spirit people is vital in the resurgent practice of cultural continuity. In discussion with each of the participants, I asked them how they identify, and how and when these names came into being for them, how it helps them affirm who they are in the world, from a culturally inclusive perspective.

To begin, Charlotte shares, "some of the messages that you're going to be given are gonna come from there (points upwards)...and your role is to pass it on to those who are in this physical world."

Elder Barbara Bruce shares how powerful words are as a way of locating ourselves as 2Spirit people in the circle:

"Words are really important, we've got to change our words. You know, when somebody tells me it's male and female, that doesn't represent me, you know, I'm in between or all over the place, you know? Well, I am!...And that's what I said at the TRC thing there, with those straight grandmothers and grandfathers, you have to let us in. And we were supposed to be gifted, and we still are. So where is our place in the circle?"

Melody appreciates both 2Spirit and indigiqueer as names, for different reasons:

"I like 2Spirit, because I think that history attached to 2Spirit is important for, as I was saying, respecting where Elders have come from and why they coined that term specifically. I'm not bothered by indigiqueer, but I see indigiqueer as kind of like this pivot and maybe push away from 2Spirit...I see both of them as fairly pan indigenous urban terms that are open to interpretation."

Melody also shares teachings about Nation-specific names from their Elder Ron Indian-Mandamin-Iban (rest in spirit: 1979-2024):

"So a lot of my language and teachings are direct lineage from Ron Indian-Mandamin-Iban from Shoal Lake 39. So from him, I've learned the phrase, 'naawenaangweyaabe,' which he usually describes as, "people at the center of the snare, or the rainbow."

Anishinaabe ceremonial leader Ron Indian-Mandamin-Iban shares in "A Piece of Ceremony" on the In-Between-People Podcast:

"So Naangweyaab is that snare, but also we refer to that as the rainbow, the rainbow around the sun. there's a story you'll hear about the way we were able to harness light, was through that snare... It doesn't really mean rainbow, but it's talking about that rainbow around the sun, so actually a snare. So naangweyaab is a snare, and that's what I refer to myself, naawenangweyaabe, that person inside the snare. We were referred to as educators, we were trusted to be the healers, educators, the herbalists. For a long time we were revered, for thousands of years, the 2Spirited people were revered to be holy, to be given a special opportunity to know both worlds, both sexes. A special opportunity to be connected more with our environment, because we have a

better understanding of those things. Not everybody, but most of us. So that's where that teachings comes from, I remember hearing it growing up...was that 2Spirit people were the caretakers of ceremony at the time." (Mandamin, 2021).

Charlotte remembers the moment when she first heard the term 2Spirit:

"It was announced here in 1990 that the term Two Spirit came out. I was in the sweat lodge in BC, at UBC. Jackie (Charlotte's late wife) was in the sweat lodge, and I announced to the people, "They just told me, This is who I am." [I felt] beautiful, because then I knew I was who I was, and Jackie supported me, you know, all the way through. She supported me."

She also reflects on learning the term *tastaway-iyiniwak* for the first time:

"When I went to that 2Spirit youth gathering up in Northern Saskatchewan, Nape is his name, a Cree Elder, and that's when he told me, he says, "we don't refer to you as 2Spirit, [but as] *tastaway-iyiniwak*. You know 'those who walk in between the two worlds.'"

Lori shares how she embodies the terms 2Spirit and *indigiqueer* differently:

"When I think of 2Spirit, it's like, it's like you feel your body go down through the earth. And yeah, just connect in a different way. When I'm saying *Indigiqueer*, I think about, like, dancing around to like, bar music or something...2Spirit feels like when I say that, that I'm acknowledging that I have responsibility, that it is important to me to, to recognize, and like to walk a certain way, but when I just say *Indigiqueer* it's just like, it's like a parade."

Lori also shares how it took her time to get a place of feeling secure calling herself 2Spirit:

"I think I probably wasn't sure about calling myself (2Spirit) because, you know, coming back into my indigeneity and connection and cultural connection, you know, was a very long process..."

## **6.5. *kitimâkêyihtowin*: Taking Care of One Another (and Our Drums)**

As described by 2Spirit Michif ancestral skin marker Dr. Mel Lefebvre (2024), cites Baker-Grenier (2021) when she shares:

"*Kitimahkinawow* in *Nêhiyawêwin* (Plains Cree language) means to 'take pity on someone' and as relational methodology, *kitimahkinawow* is kindness and compassion towards others" (p. 26).

2Spirit Oji-Cree Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby furthers this understanding during a drum feast ceremony she guided online:

"We should always work with love. Love is the only way that we can conquer things. It's a long journey but love can do it. Love is a lot of strength. And when I say this, I am saying it from my heart...You are all in my heart and I can put you in my pocket and carry you forever. I will be stronger because of you, and you guys are going to continue my job when I leave this place." (personal communication, 2020).

This love can be understood as an aspect of kitimâkêyih towin, empathy, which is how we serve and provide care for community members who are more vulnerable; the elderly, poor, homeless, sick, incarcerated, and those with visible or invisible disabilities, all who are no less valuable. As highlighted by nêhiyaw Elder Senapan Thunder, when we take care of one another, we lessen the suffering one has to experience.

As tastawayihk-iyiniwak, I want to believe that even though we may never carry a child in our own bodies or become a parent who takes care of a human child within our families, we can learn to carry our drum as we would a child, a pipe, or elderly person. And as we carry our drum, we can learn to speak to, pray with, hold, smudge, wrap gently in fabric, and feast it as we would a relative we love (Chacaby, personal communication, 2021). Taking care of the drum in these ways slows down the colonial practice of rushing, helping to align us with the type of care we require, as a mirror to the spirit world. Within these sacred practices, we reinforce values of kitimâkêyih towin, taking care of one another (Naytowhow, 2023, Thunder, 2025), and miyo-wicêhtowin, being in good relations. (Cardinal & Hildebrand, 2000).

Morning Star shares how taking care of the drum is a gift, similar to the importance of taking care of our Elders:

“But to really like, see the whole, yeah, the wholeness of the drum; the spirit, the animal...where it comes from, and how like that gifts is...so important, and that we have to be in reciprocity...the sound and vibration of the drum...brings so much healing and connection for me and so I just feel that you have to also take care of it. It's the same about taking care and visiting our Elders, you know, like, the same thinking for me about being there.”

Barbara Bruce shares how she's part of the old school relationship to drum:

“What's interesting for me today is that I don't think many young people have the relationship that I may have with a drum. Because I come from the old school, you know, I think they're more *laissez faire*, which is my own observation and my own feeling. And I'm not saying they are, but it feels like that. Yeah, you know, at one time you, you treated the drum like a baby, and you fed it bear grease, or, a little bit of water and you didn't hang it up, you always wrapped it, and I'll come and see you later.”

Further to this way of relating to our drums, taking care of one another, and of ourselves, also requires naming and moving through the grief, harms, and impacts experienced from the colonial violence, forced displacement and attempted erasure of our sovereignty as 2Spirit people. These acts of refusal can take the form of collective care, mutual aid, ceremonial healing, and having empathy for one another to reduce the harms that threaten our livelihoods.

As Benny shares about their experience:

“You have to acknowledge and make room for people's pain. That's the first thing that I try and do when I work with young people, because once there's an acknowledgement that we've all suffered to some extent, then you can actually begin the work.”

Benny also shares:

“...when you are working towards something for the benefit of your relations, you're not thinking about yourself anymore. You're thinking about how you fit into that greater... that's why community is so important.”

Attempting to fit into a community where most big drummers are cis-hetero men can be alienating. It is rare to see women or 2Spirit relatives sitting around a big drum and singing together at a public gathering, pow wow, or other ceremonial space. Melody shares how they never fully felt at ease in women only drum gatherings, but when they attempted to sit at a big drum in their home community they were kicked out:

“I felt like an awkward fit going to all these Indigenous women's kind of urban spaces, and it was more accessible for me to get into dancing powwow style. I've spent less time at the big drum. Once in Sioux Lookout I was sitting and singing at...the friendship center's big drum on a social night, which was supposed to be “come one come all.” But the drum carrier ended up kicking me out.”

In addition to the gender biases for 2Spirit kin to sit at the big drum, there can be physical limitations that prevent 2Spirit kin from singing. Melody speaks about their vocal range, as not quite fitting in with the women singers, but also not being in the men's range as Melody shares when they sing in a “stratospheric, high soprano, dog whistle level” pow wow style:

“I know that I feel that pull to wanting to be a big drum singer, wanting to have more confidence in both ceremony song and round dance vocabulary. And as much as I say, don't expect the worst from our people, sometimes I feel that distance or just self-sensor...”

Lori shares how she approached other women and 2Spirit kin at a gathering where there were only men with drums, and she asked them where the women's drums were. Plainly, the response was “women don't drum around here.” She shook this notion off and instead, chose to reaffirm that women have been drum carriers for a long time. When she did, their reactions were visible. She shares:

“...you just saw their faces light up...I was teaching them songs and like, you just should have seen their hearts light up and their voices...and it was like the most natural thing...”

Lori furthers this idea in relationship to 2Spirit roles and the possibility that some drums might be for 2Spirit kin and women:

“Maybe 2Spirit role is making space (and)... bridging as in-between people...at that big drum and at the one that I have just spent the last few years making...they're not for...cis-het men. I just know this, like they're for women and 2spirit people to be at and drum...”

Charlotte also shares how she is starting to see more women and 2Spirit folks drumming, and how there is potential for this to continue to shift:

“As time evolves, people are starting to realize that maybe women do belong on the big drum, and we see it at powwows, women at the big drum, and they're made welcome now, you know, and time is moving forward. And with the movement forward... people are learning that women, 2Spirit, you know, can sit at the big drum and sing, that it's not just the men that can do that.”

Charlotte continues, sharing teachings she received about the drum as a tool for peacekeeping and working through emotions such as anger. She shares the teaching from a gendered perspective, but in her words, she is applying the teaching to all kin:

“You know, I remember the grandmothers sharing with me that when a young man was angry, was upset about something, they would tell him to pick up his drum or his rattle, go sit by the river or by the lake, sing, let that anger out, and sometimes, as they were singing that anger out, songs would come.”

Melody shares how it's important for ceremonial leaders to take on the role of ensuring inclusivity in drumming spaces, and more specifically, wherever possible, 2Spirit creation stories are shared:

“...but where I will sing with the men on the drum, where sometimes there will be a bit more of a communal 'everyone drumming together', taking turns, is because Ron Indian-Mandamin-iban, was one of our Mide [Midewiwin] leaders, and he is known for being someone who's a bit more of a boundary pusher. ...He's made a practice of always telling a 2Spirit specific creation story in non Mide settings, because he saw so many queer youth in the Kenora area taking their lives.”

Charlotte continues about the value of the drum to bring people together:

“The drum is a universal tool that almost every nation in the world uses, you know? And why do we use the drum? We all have that understanding of that beat, the heartbeat, Mother Earth. And that's not just the Indigenous people here on Turtle Island. That's all over the world. Yeah, so the drum has brought people together.”

## **6.6. pawâtamowin: Dreaming as Trans\*Dimensional Kinship**

We find and make our presence known in the sounding, speaking and singing of our dreams, as relational and living statements of futurity. pawâtamowin, dreaming, isn't just a place one journeys to in sleep. When we enliven our minds with the memories of what we've experienced, we become aware of the present vibratory signatures as they move through our blood, and we awaken our spirits to signal and speak our dreams into being. In so doing, we begin to open portals of possibility for ourselves and future generations of 2Spirit kin to live more daring, integrated, resurgent lives.

pawâtamowin presents an incredible opportunity for traveling across timelines and dimensions, and can be understood as a means of repairing, forming, and reinforcing kinship ties. 2S Métis, Nishnaabe writer Kai Pyle conceptualizes kinship across timelines of 2Spirit and trans ancestors, as trans\*temporal kinship. Pyle (2018) states:

“I have developed the term trans\*temporal kinship to refer to the ability of transgender and Two-Spirit Indigenous people to establish kin relations across time, with both ancestors and descendants. This trans\*temporal kinship, determined not by non-Indigenous scholars but by the language usage of Indigenous people themselves, is deeply rooted in Ojibwe and Cree worldviews” (p. 575).

Drawing from this concept of trans\*temporal kinship, as well as the practice of acknowledging seven generations of ancestors with whom we hold both responsibilities to, and inheritances from, I invited 2Spirit participants to voice their dreams. In giving voice to their wildest, most radical “Indigiqueer” dreams, they animated, transmitted and awakened healing and creative continuums for future worlds. Transmission is not a linear process. Another term that references this notion of trans\*temporal kinship through a lens of Indigenous temporal sovereignty is ‘câpân’ or the longer version of ‘âniskotâpân’ (Vowel, 2019, Pyle, 2018). âniskotâpân is a nêhiyawêwin term which refers to both great-grandparent and great-grandchild, and as Pyle asserts, “...with seven generations represented between the two” (Pyle, 2018, p.576).

nêhinaw knowledge keeper and star teachings visionary Wilfred Buck, speaks to this concept in his closing words in the documentary about his life:

“My people have a name for that, they call those *câpân*, “*the ones that tie together.*” What you’re speaking now you’re going to give to your children and your children are going to give your great-grandchildren, and then your great-grandchildren are going to take those stories, those understandings, those perspectives into the future. So if you want those people in the future to be strong, to be understanding, to be proud, to be kind, then that’s the story you have to give these ones in front of you, so the *câpân* can take them forward” (Buck, 2024, 1:25:06).

*câpân* is a concept I consider when envisioning the sharing of dreams. Not only will the dreams that participants share be received in the present moment of sharing, but the vibratory resonance and messages they carry will travel between multiple generations through blood memory and imagination to underscore the “...constant experience of Indigenous time travel: living in the past, future, and present simultaneously” (Cornum, n.d., online). In their sharing, they provide life affirming teachings to be carried forward by those yet to arrive.

### 6.6.1. Opening Up Dream Portals

Lori shares a vision she received in a dream, linking the wholeness of ceremony with the full inclusion 2Spirit relatives:

“I dreamt that, all across the land everybody was getting ready to start their ceremony and all were gathered and sitting and ready...when all of a sudden, it was like, “Wait, not everybody’s here yet. We don’t have any, you know, we don’t have the 2Spirit people. And we can’t go ahead.” And there’s all this bustle, and we can’t go there. The 2Spirit people aren’t here, and we need to make sure that we have 2Spirits here. And everything just stopped...it was like everybody recognized...in the community, that we weren’t whole until...everybody was there. And so I see that, and I think that’s a beautiful thing...Because I see the little two year old 2Spirits who get to grow up in a space like that.”

This site of safety and inclusion for 2Spirit ceremony that Lori speaks of, came about through the dreaming and daring of two 2Spirit kohkoms, grandmothers, Barbara Bruce and Charlotte Nolin.

As co-chief of the first ever 2Spirit Sundance in North America (and likely the world) kohkohm Barbara has inspired many with her visions and active contributions in ensuring a more inclusive future for 2Spirit kin. She shares a vision of a ceremonial dance that came to her before the first

year of Sundance, a dance that would welcome all 2Spirit relatives further into the circle, and build upon notions of interdependence, belonging, and resurgence:

“And I was laying down, I had my eyes closed, because I see a lot of things with my eyes closed, and I could see it, you know, I could see Victoria helping me. “Okay, show us how to do this,” and I saw it, and then I said, “Okay, this is a new dance we’re doing.” And going to that [sacred Sundance] tree to get all those prayers that you want, to touch that tree to get that connection with spirit.”

Barbara shares this sacred dance as an act of reclamation and connection between all participants in the dance, as well as those witnessing. When she asked spirit for the name:

“And they said, “No One Left Behind.” That’s how it came to me. And I felt so compelled to say to the people, “we have to do this dance”...”

She taught the dance to the lead dancer, Lori, who assisted in ensuring all the 2Spirit dancers were able to follow along and also act as guides between themselves. Together they began performing the “No One Left Behind” 2Spirit dance that year of sundance.

Barbara continues in sharing her very practical dream for the future:

“Well, spiritually and ceremonially, I’m hoping that in the future, they [2Spirit] will be accepted for the people that they are, and they can dress the way they want to dress in a circle, in a Sundance or in a sweat...that they’d be acknowledged and accepted for the gift that they are, their uniqueness, and all those gifts that 2Spirit people carry, and come back to those traditions and be honoured for that. That’s what I envision. I think it’s coming, but it’s not there yet.”

She shares how much courage and energy it took her and Elder Charlotte Nolin to get a piece of land outside of Winnipeg, near Portage la Prairie in the Red River homelands in Manitoba. Acknowledging their deep kinship with mahikan, wolf relatives, they named the site *Wolf Medicine Healing Place* and in collaboration with 2Spirit Manitoba, they host ceremonies and gatherings for 2Spirit people on the land. Barbara shares:

“I think the more we do these ceremonies at the land, the more people will come, either they come because they’re curious or they think we’re gonna do mistakes, or, you know, they’ll go back and judge, but at least they’re coming and they’re really watching, and hopefully they’re praying and they’re learning something... Like who are we? We’re people.”

Charlotte shares her vision about the roles and responsibilities of 2Spirit relatives as revered teachers and guides for humans to move forward in right relation with the Earth:

“So once we understand our place here on Earth and how everything in the universe is connected, we begin to understand life and as 2Spirit people, we have that gift, that understanding of life. It would be nice if everybody had that understanding, and they would stop raping the earth...my understanding of that is Creator didn’t make us all that way, because if we were all that way, what would we learn? We don’t know it all, and so we wouldn’t learn nothing. So some of us are gifted to live this life, and others aren’t, and our role is to try and educate them somehow, that you know, they become a little bit more knowledgeable and maybe won’t destroy the Earth.”

Lori also speaks to 2Spirit kin and 2Spirit identifying women, as taking up the role of leadership in their communities:

“And...we obviously work in this other world and in the mainstream world, and I see...when I look at 2Spirit, women in particular, people who identify as 2Spirit women, is the leadership...there's this disproportionately high level of leadership coming from 2Spirit women across the land...I do think that there's something to 2Spirit people and 2Spirit women in particular that, like, this is our role. And I've just...come to accept it.

Lori shares how valuable it is to see oneself in this position of learning and leadership, and to honour and acknowledge all others with whom these important spaces are created and shared:

“And when you're, you know, a leader, which feels silly and weird calling yourself that, and it's not like really what I call myself but it's, I look at like the spaces and places that I have accessed...and all the people you know, from my auntie to you, to kohkom Charlotte and kohkom Barbara and...all those people who have...been teaching and whatever, and all of that is taken in by me, and all of your teachers are taken in by you and to not, you can't *unknow* what you now know.”

Morning Star shares her dream for more 2Spirit specific dances at powwows and social gatherings:

“But I think like for like, future...I would love that in powwow or social gathering, that, yes we do have fun, we do have a lot of fun, but that the *switch dance* is not just funny stuff anymore, but is a place for 2Spirit to show off, you know, who they are. Because I have a friend who, in a powwow, they've been...there was a switch dance...and so my friend, who is 2Spirit, with another of their friends (not 2Spirit), they exchanged their regalia. And for my 2Spirit friend, it was something spiritual, it was something meaningful...[In] the future and today or whatever, [I wish] to have more space for that, and that people stop thinking that it's a disrespect for whatever stuff...that we just take space and exist because our spirits, you know, thrive in those ceremonial and social moments. Nobody wants to be laughed at, it's just we exist like that.”

When asked what their dream for the future is, Melody McKiver states very bluntly, “...free Palestine and land back!”

We laugh, seriously though, and then they continue:

“...one of my understandings that comes from Ron Indian-Mandamin-Iban too is when he goes to do these creation stories where he integrates queerness as a part of it throughout...but he always says...there's no such thing as a 2Spirit ceremony. I feel like there's been this pull (that) we need our own 2Spirit space, and then we need to make it this 2Spirit ceremony. And I'm like, yes and no, where I think 2Spirit social spaces are super important...I think what Ron is getting at when he says “there's no such thing as 2Spirit ceremony” is that 2Spirit people are just there. So what I want is an integrationist element, not an assimilationist, but integration where we maintain our cultural practices and continue to generate them, like new songs...if this non-binary person is feeling jingle or maybe both...I want that self-determination and agency within our cultural spaces, to be able to learn how to sing this song, to have mentors that can teach you...”

Recentering 2Spirit and specifically trans voices, Benny shares their dream for the future:

“For us [2Spirit] to be able to bring our authentic selves anywhere in creation without the fear of hurt and harm coming to us. That's it. That's bold. I think at this point in time, that's bold, and I wouldn't ask for anything more than that. The rest we have, but that we don't have, the rest we can do on our own, with each other, but we need other people for that dream to be realized.”

For these teachings to be embedded into songs is important for Benny as well:

“It would be incredible to have a song with the word *tastaway-iyiniwak* you know...something that actually speaks to that gift that we have of bringing balance to different situations, and as truth speakers and as people who bring a particular kind of medicine. Naming and claiming those things is important I think. Just even saying them, you sing into creation what you'd like to see...I mean, in my life, I've always talked about things as though they're already happening and then they ultimately come to be. That's singing things into creation...You know those songs, we need them because they offer another way for us to understand and see ourselves and our role within creation, and they act as a mirror to us, and they keep us accountable, keep us asking ourselves if we're living our lives in a way that nurtures and supports and is kind and gentle to all those beings around us.”

## **6.7. wîyâtkwêwin: Transmissions of Joy**

Elder Joseph Naytowhow was the first person to share *ospwâkan* (pipe) directions with me. It was a quiet afternoon just outside Saskatoon, and the sun was about to set. We sat for two hours and slowly, deliberately, he showed me how to pray with my pipe. Later on, I was so caught up in trying to remember all the teachings, that the first time I lifted my pipe on my own, I forgot one of the directions he taught me, *wîyâtkwêwin*, joy. I choose to close with joy as the seventh and final principle highlighted in these *kiyokêwin*, to ensure we don't forget to include joy in our practices of community care, knowledge transmission and cultural continuity as 2Spirit kin.

As *kohkom* Barbara Bruce shared in a conversation on the land, “I think right now in my life, there's more joy than ever before, and I think it's because of the 2Spirit community.” As we steady ourselves to step back from the fire, and open the door to listen to the song synthesis, I want to acknowledge the good words that tether this collective drum, the interlacing of 2Spirit teachings. Inviting space for *wîyâtkwêwin* is also one of the most radical forms of resurgence, if we can centre joy in our cultural transmissions and healing practices, we can imagine thriving 2Spirit futures. As Elder Charlotte Nolin shared that we can't have joy if we don't acknowledge pain, “it's understanding the trauma that our people have been living with all their lives, and by coming together, we're able to bring joy into their lives.”

After recovering from my forgetfulness, I later asked Joseph to help me understand why joy exists as one of the pipe directions and how we tap into joy in our lives. Joseph shares:

“I find different degrees of joy, and I think it's an ongoing concept. It's all...to me when dad was applying *wîyâtkwêwin* he practiced it within the context of all the places that he would work; with alcoholics, drug addicts, just in general, with families...I think, in his own heart and his own mind, he didn't want people to go through what he went through

as the chronic alcoholic, and that included his friendships and also his family life, right?" (Naytowhow, 2025, personal communication).

Joseph shares that he learned joy as a sacred teaching, almost like a rite-of-passage, a form of intergenerational transmission to give back to others the possibility of experiencing joy, something that often wasn't available while growing up. He shares:

"So that's what [dad] gave back to the community, right? It was more on a community level, and also an individual...it was the biggest gift he could give me before he passed away, for me, it made sense. And I found that very helpful in my life because of how seriously genocide, you know, residential school really picked the joy out of [my] life. Basically [I] just became, almost annihilated. And so you're, you're coming back from that horrendous experience to try and feel what that's like. You know, what is joy?" (Naytowhow, 2025, personal communication).

We all come into joy through different practices and relationships. Joseph shares some of the different experiences that helped him slowly regain access to joy,

"It took several methods to even just get to a genuine joy. It took several methods. It took dreams, sweat lodges. It took Buddhism, training, meditation, running, I had to do physically, the athletic part of me, *waskawiwini* you know, *movement* was so important." (Naytowhow, 2025, personal communication).

wiyatikwewin is a practice. Joy as an intergenerational and embodied continuum can help alleviate some of the harmful impacts of heteronormative, colonial, and patriarchal supremacy. The practice of carrying joy forward, sharing it as if a gift, giving back and inspiring others in finding their own joy, can result in laughter and playfulness, as well as feelings of belonging. Inspired by Joseph's teachings of how joy was integrated and transmitted from his father, and continues to inform Joseph in his work with younger ones and community, I asked 2Spirit participants to share their messages of encouragement with their younger selves. We might offer our younger self a sacred wish or prayer: to voice from the wholeness of all we've learned, transformed, and healed in our "grown-up" selves, and offer our younger self the messages we most needed to hear when we were little. I ask what these messages are and were, and how they'd be transmitted today.

Benny shares:

"When they meet you, they'll love you, believe it."

They continue by sharing how much they hid when they were younger:

"I suppose I spent so long hiding, and I was so scared that if people knew who I really was, it'd be done. I have more love in my life now than I've ever had. Because I'm me and I'm comfortable in my own skin."

When considering what messages younger people might need, Benny shares:

"I don't ever assume that it's easier for the next generation. I think things have changed, right? But I'm not one to say that it's any easier."

They continue:

"...And also, keep fighting. Keep going! Because I was one of those people... I would say "I wonder if I'm allowed in there. If I'm not, they'll tell me", and I'd go. And a lot of

people told me I didn't belong here, and I didn't belong there. But I kept going and putting myself in those situations where there was an opportunity, a potential opportunity there for me to learn, and not everybody's built for that...So you don't have to give or contribute in the same way as everybody else, but you sure as hell have to contribute.”

Charlotte shares an important message to her younger self, of how her Elders were always watching:

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you. But they were looking after you: kohkominaw, mosôminaw, they looked after you. They brought you forward in time.”

When considering seven generations into the future, Charlotte shares:

“Listen to the children. They have teachings that, well, when they arrive here, they have all the teachings, and it's only because of society and schools...you know, that we lose that.”

Similar to Charlotte, Benny also shares:

“Conduct yourself in a way that allows for children to be a witness to how you're acting. And I think that's really important, because so many of our young people end up taking their...you know, they leave the physical too soon, because they don't understand what their purpose is and that they're needed.”

Lori shares about the importance of trust, even when it doesn't always feel safe to be seen: “Just

be me and know that in time you will come to know things differently, and it's going to be okay. And I think that's probably, you know, just trust. What does it mean to be seen? And how scary can that appear as a child when being seen is not a good thing?”

Furthering this message, Lori celebrates the 2Spirit Sundance lodge, and all the ways it is safe for the little ones to be seen, and to share and guide one another along, with the teachings they are witnessing and receiving from within a 2Spirit ceremonial space:

“And you know, at our [Sundance] lodge...one of the things that sticks with me, about, you know, the younger me, is when I see like there were a couple young children there. And like [wearing] young moccasins, like, three inches long...seeing them being their unapologetic selves. And, you know, the older one, they're showing the younger one about smudging their feet when they're coming into the space.”

Lori shares this story with reverence and joy, that within these ceremonial spaces held by and for our 2Spirit community, those acts of care, unfragmented intergenerational transmission, and peer learning are commonplace for young ones who are being brought to, and brought up in, ceremony.

Melody speaks about resisting the system, by trusting instinct and having community:

“Your people are out there and hold your ground. Listen to your instinct and figure out what's right for you. You might have to kick at it a bit, but you'll figure out your place.”

Morning Star shares about the magic 2Spirit people possess:

“But the first thing that comes to me is 2Spirit as medicine, you know...we're full of medicine. And I don't know, like...I know, people don't like magic. But we do bring magic, a lot.”

Barbara reconnects back to spirit and Creator:

“I found out...that spirit is everywhere. You know, Creator...will understand many languages, and they can connect with you. So please stop believing somebody that says, "You can't connect to Creator or spirit if you don't know your language.””

Barbara reiterates for us all, how we are enough, just through being ourselves. She shares how valuable practices of drum and song are, as extensions of our sacred relationships to our guides, with spirit, and Creator. When asked if there were specific words she'd like to hear being sung, she shares:

“I would love it if you knew your language. The more you sing, the more you know those words, the more you can pray in those words. You can grab words from the songs and do a prayer because they're right there. So using that, or drumming, the drum is powerful to me. It wakes up everybody, everything and everybody you know, and my relationship with the drum has always been in a sacred way.”

To close and complete the tethering of this collective drum skin, I chose to give nêhiyaw indigiqueer writer, Joshua Whitehead (2022) the last word:

“I would argue that words, orality, sound itself are kin to us since we not only breathe animation into language, but we also enliven stories through the deployment of our voices, senses, bodies. The act of speaking summons words into being through an entanglement of experience, memory, and recognition. And stories become communal through a schematic of ethics that holds us accountable to our relations; here, our words themselves become these animate kin. In this way, stories play a key role in the development, empowerment, and futurity of Indigenous peoplehoods. wâhkôhtowin is enacted again precisely because storying is directly aimed at community development and health—something, I would argue, that differentiates Indigenous stories from European literatures, which are so often consumed in a solitary fashion” (p. 90-91).

## Chapter 7 Outcomes / nikamowina: Generating a Song Bundle

In total I would like to share 13 songs that I have created, and offer them together as a song bundle for past, present, and future generations of 2Spirit kin and for the communities assisting 2Spirit kin in returning home. I've chosen the term "bundle" as a way of signifying the living nature of these songs, that they come to life and help maintain the life-force and creative energy of our kinship relations through the voicing, embodying and resonance felt each time they are sung. Inspired by nêhiyaw Treaty Commissioner Kathy Walker's teachings about the power inherent in bundles, and more specifically the reclamatory and "timeless" process of bringing meaning together through language bundles. Walker (2021) shares how, "bundles facilitate these processes of creative continuance" (p. 179). Citing Youngblood-Henderson (2000) in her writing, Walker continues to speak about how bundles carry,

"knowledge of impermanence and inherent change and the need to continuously "create temporary harmonies through alliances and relationships among all forms and forces" to maintain creation *and* the creative agency of all life" (Walker, 2021, p.178-179).

These songs, in their creation and performance, become a bundle that "weaves together restorative meanings" of 2Spirit knowledge, resurgence and remembrance in an act of embodied wholism to restore and transmit miyo-pimâtisiwin for future generations (Walker, 2021).

In a conversation with Senapan Thunder about my proposed notion of a song bundle, she reiterates her relationship to the bundle, speaking about bundles as a symbol of our commitment to being in service. They serve as mnemonic devices, helping us remember why, how and who we serve with our gifts. She shares, "I also call your singing, it's like a service, definitely, because we serve the Creator, we serve the land. We serve the people" (Thunder, personal communication, 2025).

Thunder finds ways to gently incorporate my journey and the process of assembling songs as they relate to taking care of a bundle. She shares:

"While that bundle is in my care, I treat it so gently. I treat it with lots of care. So now what I'm saying is that even the language can be your bundle.

- 1: you're trying to speak nêhiyawêwin;
- 2: you're writing songs in nêhiyawêwin;
- 3: you're relating in nêhiyawêwin.

So when I say you're relating to the language...that's when you start using that language in prayer. So you're praying to the Creator in the language, praying to the Old Women in language. You're praying to the day in the language. You're here. You're being grateful for that language. You're being grateful for that opportunity to exist within the language" (Thunder, personal communication, 2025).

These songs, most of which are created in nêhiyawêwin, are written from a place of gratitude, for the opportunity to sing, embody, and relate in nêhiyawêwin; to carry the language and the spirit of the language forward for our 2Spirit relatives and for all of creation. The songs were created in collaboration with Elders, creative artists, spirit helpers, and kikâwinaw askiy (Mother Earth). Wherever possible, I name the collaborators and offer a poetic intervention into the process of creating and performing the songs in the culminating showing, titled *tastawayihk dreaming*, for the local community in Tio'tiake.

kinanâskomitinâwaw to nêhiyaw knowledge keepers and Elders Joseph Naytowhow, Senapan Thunder, Charlotte Ross, and Leo Yahyahkeekoot, as well as 2S Michif Elders Charlotte Nolin and Barbara Bruce. These songs draw inspiration from my process as a devoted language learner. Eight of the songs are directly inspired by each of the kiyokêwin I had with fellow 2S drum carriers. The attached video and sound links are also included wherever possible. I invite you to relight your smudge before entering into the listening space.

When I asked how I might say, “happy listening?” Senapan Thunder reminds me that to truly listen and begin to know is to understand. Understanding helps us move within our space in a good way. She shares, “*takâhkîhtamok êkwa miyô otinamâsok instôhtamôwin! Happy listening to you all & take good understandings for yourselves!*” (Thunder, personal communication, 2025).

## 7.1 itaskonikêwin: Calling In All Directions of the Star Chart

Link to excerpt of performance: <https://youtu.be/wjdJ3ZO6Oz4>

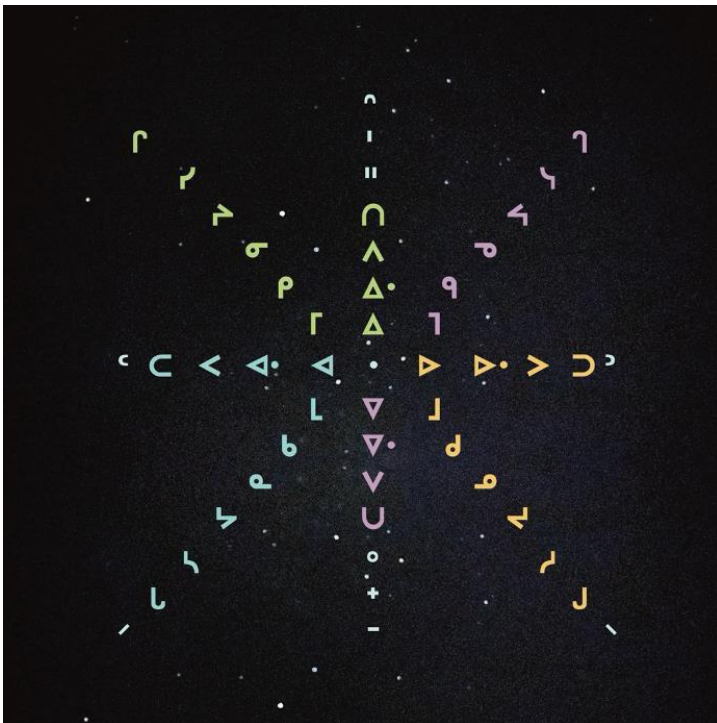


Figure 7.0: Star Chart, redesigned by Moe Clark, original chart design shared by Leo Yahyahkeekoot, 2022.

The opening song was inspired by a series of zoom “teach-ins” I undertook with nêhiyaw Elder and knowledge keeper, Leo Yahyahkeekoot, over the pandemic. This is a colourful version of the star chart and spirit markers teachings he shared with me. I offered *cistêmaw* (tobacco), *wêpinasowina* (broad cloth), and *sônîyaw* (money) for his generosity, time, and immaculate knowledge of the origins of nêhiyawêwin through the lens of sound and hushed utterances. I move between a poetic synthesis (italicized sections) of the movements, intentions, and creative underpinnings that flowed throughout this song, and offer knowledge synthesis (non-italicized) throughout.

*Calling in all sounds of creation, mirroring voices, as below, so above. From the depths of the deep below to the great above. Spirit markers as a way of coming into the directions, landing into sound, examining all seven directions, orientation, ensuring that we are locating ourselves; our four bodies: mental, spiritual, physical and emotional bodies. Calling in, calling on the sounds of creation. Doing this through a land-based map, one that reaches out from a central point, a central X, acknowledging, first and foremost, upon whose land, which land we begin this process of unraveling, of unfolding and enfolding into and from our many phases, voices, modes of being and becoming: cycles of thought, of embodiment, of heart field, and depth of field.*

*We begin outside the map. We begin both in the highest atmospheric Cosmos, up in Star World, acâhk sipiy, the Milky Way, and from the deepest depths of the great, great waters beneath. We locate ourselves as intimate, animate and integral beings in our always alive Creation Story. We start from the beginning again and again, we sing and sound our way backwards into the future, unfolding new pathways forward for 2Spirit, Indigiqueer brilliance and resistance.*

We are sounding out wâhkôhtowin, kinship. From the root of wâhkôhtowin, 'wa', we call on enlightenment, light on the horizon, that white light that marks the beginning, the opening to a new day. When we sound this seed spirit marker, we acknowledge the opening of new temporalities, new timelines, spatial understandings, we locate ourselves as part of the bringing of the light. 'wasê,' this threshold is fluid, glowing, luminous beings, the orbs inside of us, in our voices, in our hearts, our spirits, minds, bodies coming into form, taking shape in the deep depths and the highest beyond. (Yahyahkeekoot, 2022).

*We sound, "E, I, O, A," and watch as light takes form on the floor in front of us, and slowly we emerge from the dark, from the black, from the darkest form of night, of shadow. We re-member ourselves within this unfolding, always being born creation story, and we do so through the sound of our voices, resounding in space and time, across generations, across maps, integrating, recreating holistically, acknowledging that we are fluid and whole in our ever shapeshifting, transforming existence.*

*Slowly, we enter the light of 'wa.' We enter into movement across the horizon. Slowly we begin to rotate. We are planets, inter-planetary Cosmos spinning on a central axis, first in tune with the sun, then in tune with the Moon. We journey in many directions. Planar existence is an illusion. Flatness is an illusion. Linearity is an illusion. We attempt to create systems of spherical, 'always in orbit,' existence. We ground into kikâwînow askiy, Earth body, Earth Mother, we map and we question this form of gendering Mother Earth, while also acknowledging and valuing the significance and the importance of our foremothers, of our great great grandmothers. âniskotâpân: we are both the ancestors and the descendants, great grandparents and great grandchildren. This language is fluid, is transdimensional, trans\*temporal.*

As Leanne Simpson shares that a collection of stars "work together to create doorways...into other worlds." She further shares that there is a transtemporal space-time continuum that gets opened, "...so when we look up to the stars, we are actually looking from the present back into time and space" (Simpson, 2017, p212).

*Those spirit markers in the ever-transforming stargate, are maps of light, bygone luminous ghosts still visible, reaching us from light years away. We tether to them, feel*

*the lightness extend down our spines, all the way through our bodies into roots beneath us, and beneath them, underground rivers and mineral bodies. We stand on an island. This island, surrounded by great waters. This island, a meeting place for 1000s of years of Indigenous peoples. Tio'tia:ke, Mooniyang, now Montreal, unceded territory, unceded lands. We use our voices to ask for permission.*

*We continue as the star chart starts to dance, shimmer, and transform. And so too, we circle, spiral, and align our voices in a dance, tracing out the complex animations of the star chart projected in the space between us. When we reach 'ta,' "tāpwéwin, tastawayihk-iyiniwak" we reach the oscillating presence that questions, seeks truth and takes flight in the in-between. We stand in the center and watch as 'ta' is ever-changing, non linear. Our voices come together, then oscillate up and down in pitch and tone. We glide between dimensions sonically, and while doing so, we return back to a center place. We breathe deeply in between each voiced sound, each spirit marker, filling our bodies with the vibrations of life.*

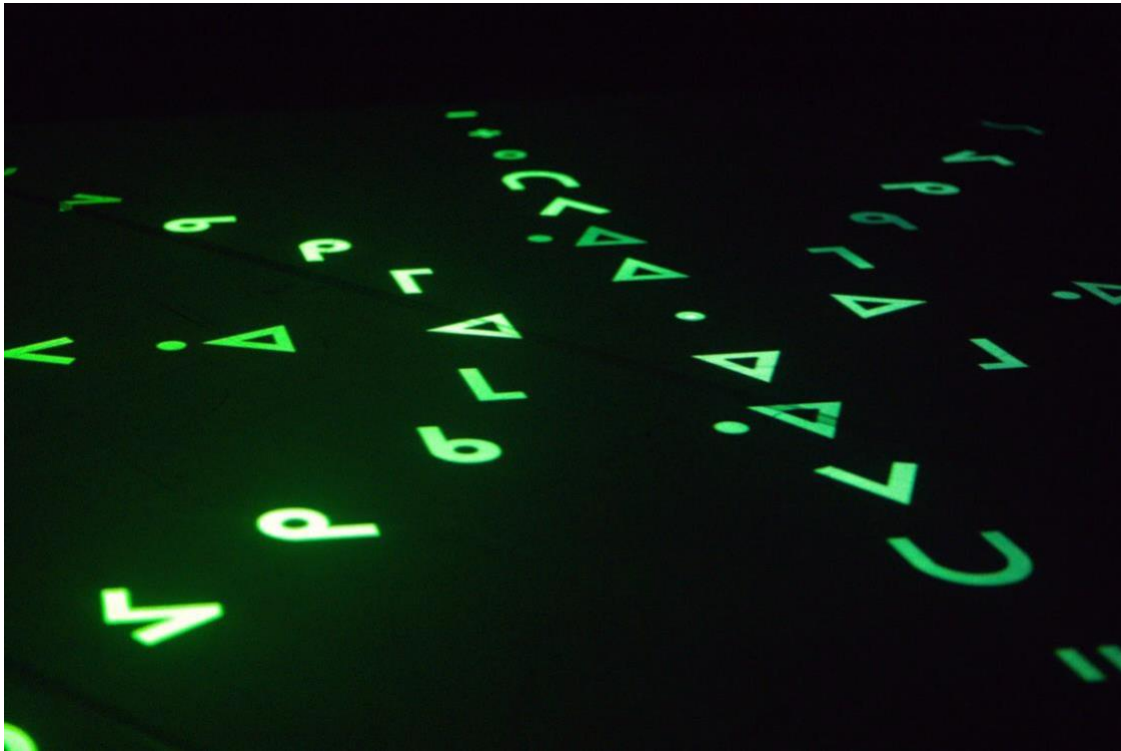


Figure 7.1: Spirit Markers projection in tastawayihk dreaming, Cory Hunlin, 2024.

## **7.½ (in-between intervention) si kom diloo: To Be Like Water**

Link to original song recorded + filmed at Lac Marois: <https://youtu.be/J762mxNJDvg>

*I step out of the projected light into a new dimension, and acknowledge nipîy, water. I acknowledge Michif (Métis language) in this space. "Si kom diloo" the Michif term relating to the fluidity of both water and gender, and the genderlessness of water. We are made of water. We are "like water." From this place I ask, how could we ever be*

*seen as static, unchangeable, binary? How could we ever not belong? We are aqueous bodies, transforming, growing, shapeshifting, like water. We are a living archive of all that was and is yet to become. "Si kom diloo." I map these words and embody their meaning, as I look into the reflecting and refracting light on the surface of water. Sunset from inside a canoe in the centre of a lake.*

## lyrics

si kom diloo  
    kom diloo, diloo  
gently flowing between  
the reflection  
of the nighttime slowly  
entering  
and beside me and within  
a whirlpool forming  
with each stride  
with each stroke  
si kom di loo  
    kom di loo, di loo  
        de l'eau, l'eau, loo  
lay my burdens down  
in the cool water  
watch the many faces  
    looking back  
    and looking in  
    and beyond again  
oh the old ones know  
    si kom diloo  
        nipîy âwa

## 7.2 mistikwaskihk: 28+1 Activating the Drum

link to excerpt of performance: <https://youtu.be/tD7sRYT8yx4>



Figure 7.2: 2Spirit big drum in performance space after feasting, Cory Hunlin, 2024.

Figure 7.3: 28+1 performance in tastawayihk dreaming, Cory Hunlin, 2024.

Our voices become the conduit between worlds: honouring the healing spirit of the drum and

wâpanachâhkos, Morning Star. Through sounding and beating the drum intentionally, we

acknowledge our original arrival from starworld through Pakone Kisik (the Hole in the Sky), (Pleaidēs), on the luminous thread of “Kokominakasis (Grandmother Spider), who sits on Achak Sipi (River of Spirits or the Milky Way) and is the doorkeeper to this reality” (Buck, 2018, p. 14).

This song is a welcoming in of the ancestors into the lodge, or circle, and an activation of mistikwaskihk, the big drum. In this realm, we honour the teachings of Nêhinaw Elder and star knowledge keeper, Wilfred Buck, who tells us of our original descent from starworld, as well as sweat lodge teachings shared by Barbara Bruce in her kiyokêwin. With respect to some of the sacred nature of what she shared, I will merely say that we drew inspiration from the teachings of 28+1 stones that were brought into the matotisân, sweat lodge, as she was taught. Barbara shares that when she invited her mother to a sweat lodge, her mother chose to sit outside, close to the drum. When they opened the door after the first round, her mother shared:

“Now everybody, I have a teaching: so when you bring those rocks in one, or the grandfather's we call them, one at a time, you drum.”

Barbara continues:

“And I have shivers here...“sound that it's coming in.””

The teaching to beat the drum and sound out the arrival for each of the stone ancestors reminds us that every being has spirit and is sacred. Reiterating Barbara Bruce's sharing of the number of stones that get used for sweatlodge, “you always chose a healing stone”, which becomes the +1. This is precisely what we did, we acknowledged 28+1 as the spirits and energies present and being called into the performance space. We also slowed down the pace of this section as a way to ensure we were aligning our four bodies; emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual, for the continuation of the “ceremony” or “performance.”

*Throughout the 28+1 beats, we build resonance together, attune our voices and make sure to keep count, while also calling in spirit, in a hushed voice at first, gentle, approaching, and becoming more vibrant and harmonious, as many voices connect and the drum awakens with us.*

The number 28 carries many meanings, namely the number of days within a lunar cycle. 2Spirit kin are transformational beings, who are able to shapeshift through different roles, and as such we acknowledge the many faces and phases of the moon as mirrored reflections of 2Spirit gender fluidity and expression, who echo multiple worlds, and often come face to face with the dark.

*We begin by calling out “acâhk,” for spirit, and resounding mistikwaskihk 28 times. For the final +1 drum beat, we call in acâhkos, for star, acknowledging our original arrival point onto earth from starworld, on the golden thread of kokominakasis, grandmother spider, our star relative.*

### **28 acâhk: spirit**

*28 drum beats + “acâhk” voiced (inhale ‘ah,’ exhale ‘câhk’) to honour spirit. First drummer counts 7 beats solo, then next drummer joins in following 7 beats, third drummer following 7 beats, and then culminatory 7 beats altogether. Catalyzing each beat, is “acâhk” voiced, acknowledging “spirit.”*

### **+1 acâhkos: star**

*The final beat is the healing beat and as such, it lands later, after a slowly emerging voicing of “acâhkos” to call in “star.” Specifically, we honour our wâpanacâhkos, Morning Star, who is the first light to appear on the Eastern horizon at dawn. When the mallet hits in the middle of the drum, we acknowledge the steady descent we took on the thread of Kokominakasis, Grandmother Spider from pakone kisik, hole in the sky. (Buck, 2018).*

### 7.2.1 Hole in the Sonic\*Spirit Thread

When I tried to record a trial experiment of this concept at home, the recording blipped right as these spirit beats were happening, and the recording began working right after the beats were done, giving me the impression that spirits had made their way into the system, and this section couldn't be recorded. When we tried to record the public presentation, there was a glitch in the sound of this section as well. This further provokes the question of what can and can't be recorded in these ceremonial components of performance?

### 7.3 ontôpâyiw: Walking with Spirit

Link to excerpt of performance: <https://youtu.be/tRpxzHkxTxE>



*Figure 7.4: ontôpâyiw performance in tastawayihk dreaming, Cory Hunlin, 2024.*

This song marks the doorway of nôtikwêw âtayohkanak, Old Womens' direction, who are the keepers of the doorway of life and death, and who sit, watching over us and helping us heal, repair our relationships, and walk in a good way (Senapan, 2024).

Working intimately in kiyokêwin with Senapan Thunder on a phone call, we spoke for close to two hours one afternoon, to discuss the implications of communicating themes of walking with

spirit and the strength of survival. Driven by my desire to uplift the conversations and sharings from our 2Spirit kin who shared about their experiences as okihcitâwak, warriors. We honour all of our people who did and didn't make it home from Indian Residential Schools, the 60's Scoop, HIV AIDS crisis, transphobia, homophobia, and other colonial struggles. We honour them as okihcitâwak, and not merely survivors. Returning the strength and power back to the ones who continue to walk the path of healing, to inspire future generations with their resilience, courage, and ongoing tâpwêwin, truth-telling of their experiences.

As shared by Senapan Thunder, ontôpâyiw is a significant and powerful helper spirit who accompanies us as we walk through our healing journey, supporting both the reconnection to the past and things we were never taught or weren't allowed to know, and strengthening the connection to present and future growth (Thunder, 2024). The final line of the song gives love for our children; past, present and future, those who are yet to arrive, those still here, and those who went on too soon. When we transmit love to our inner children as well, we are more able to hold love for those beyond ourselves.

*This song is performed in three voices, with three part harmony. We move slowly, animating a grief space, a lamentation, with wind currents gathering and passing between us, clearing the space and inviting in strength. As the drum gets taken over by a digital drum track and synthesized sounds, two voices continue to sing the lyrics, and one voice moves beyond the structure into a spirit call. The voices overlap and intersect, amplifying resilience and resonance in the collective sphere.*

#### lyrics:

ontôpâyiw niwicêwânân	we are walking with spirit
nisôhkapawinân	we stand strong
nisôhkêyihênân	we hold strong
kâkikê ki ka iyikin, kâkikê	this will always be nikitamâ-
kêyimânânak nicawâsimsinânak	we love our children

### 7.4 kiskwêhikan: Crazy Head

As transmitted by Senapan Thunder, notikwêw âtayohkanak, the old ones take a gentle hold of our jawlines, adjusting our position to shift perspective so we can see in the direction that will take us where we need to be. When no one is there to “hold our jawline” and assist us in repositioning our focus to re-establish connection and direction in life, we can go “out of our minds,” and we can “lose our heads” (Thunder, personal communication, 2024). These qualities of alienation, disconnection, dispossession, fragmentation are all kiskwêhikan, the anti-gravity, spinning top, known as “Crazy Head.” More specifically, when we are lacking intergenerational transmission, connection, and belonging from other 2Spirit relatives, role models, Elders or mentors, we become lost. In the absence of these relationships and connections, we turn towards self-sabotaging beliefs, substance abuse, and even thoughts of taking our own lives. tâpwêwin, truth, feels out of reach, and hyper performativity: masking, pushing things down, and overcompensation, takes over. We need to call in kitimâkêyihetowin, empathy.

During the kiyokêwin with 2Spirit drum carriers, many shared their stories of confronting suicide and death, of nearing the edge and feeling hopeless. 2S people have been particularly harmed by colonial and gender-based violence, resulting in higher rates of suicide and loss of cultural identity (Wilson & Laing, 2018). As shared by Elder Barbara Bruce, in her early years she

neared the edge of life, and during a significantly difficult time, her “slipping towards the edge” actually brought her closer to spirit. She shares:

“And what happened during that day, is I’m on the deck...and I was calling birds. There was a friend there sitting with me. And I said, “Come on”, and they landed on my shoulders and everything. And she said...like “what?!” And I said, “it’s okay. I’m just close to spirit, right?” Yeah. I said, “I don’t want to stay here. I’m close to them.” Yeah. So they called the doctor who gave me some pills to sleep to get myself back together.”

She continues, affirming the value of both Western and Indigenous ceremony and medicines that helped her heal:

“It was not easy. But I did it. I went, I got through. The only way I got through were the ceremonies and contemporary settler therapy. And then I left the therapy and focused on the ceremony.”

Inspired by many of the 2Spirit relatives sharing their challenges and torments holding on to life, and this bringing them into deeper connection to spirit, kiskwêhikan was born.



Figure 7.5: kiskwêhikan performance in *tastawayihk dreaming*, Cory Hunlin, 2024.

*Transformational and festering energies accumulate into a dynamic spinning top, we honour that which we can not see, but can feel, and move through death back towards life. kiskwêhikan begins in a turbulent and improvised expression of voice, movement, and altered language vocalized and layered into the looping pedal. Adding to the layers; tonal experimentation with synthesized sounds, radiating winds, and tumultuous effects. Sounds reverberate, spiral up and out of the core of my body and voice, guttural in a moment, then screeching and wispy the next. Overlapping voices create accumulation and emphasize a distorted sense of self, of place, of direction, creating confusion about what is real and imagined, what is being made by human and what is machine. These*

*variations of vocal dynamics overlap with expressive improvisations on an old 70's synth machine eventually arrive at a level of distortion that edges on aggressive. The overwhelming sonic field erupts into the sound of "electronic birds," a filtered bird song being processed through decay, delay and pitch-shifting filters. These electronic birds call my voice and body out into the space and, picking up beaver sticks wrapped in colourful ribbons, I begin to whirl, spinning like a top. The spinning continues while a rhythmic counterpoint picks up, adding earth and ground beneath the relentless circular motion. Eventually, the entire sequence culminates in stillness. The music slowly descends into silence. In my hand, I overlap the beaver sticks together in an 'X,' symbolic of so many layers of resistance and resurgence. 'X' for non-binary, 'X' for all our ancestors who didn't understand colonial languages and signed agreements that took away their land (namely treaty and scrip), 'X' for the pattern that divides the medicine wheel, the four directions, the four elements. I slowly pull the beaver sticks apart, and they become a tapping rhythm I play to accompany a new set of voices.*

In closing the kiskwêhikan section in the performance, I draw inspiration from Cree scholar and queering Indigenous land-based educator, Alex Wilson. Wilson's criteria for 2Spirit reconnection and belonging highlights the process of "coming in to the circle" instead of "coming out of the closet." I propose the possibility: what if the only way "out" of the mental unrest and inner turmoil, is to actually go deeper "in" (Wilson, 2015).

## 7.5 Reclaiming Our Names

*We open this section as we locate ourselves in shared breath, stillness, and connection. As three performers, we steady our movements, joining in a 'V' pattern, like a flock of geese, aligning with our ancestral continuums. Slowly, we walk towards mistikwaskihk (the big drum) together. Our voices resound in a 3-part naming ceremony, animating and singing Nation-specific terminology in overlapping languages. This three-part harmony feasts the spirits of past, present, and future 2Spirit relatives. The collective song rises and falls as we approach the drum, and slowly gather to sit around mistikwaskihk once more and lift the drum mallets.*

### Lyrics:

**naawe naangweyaabe**  
*at centre of snare/rainbow*

**si kom diloo**  
*we/they are like water*

**tastawayihk-iyiniwak**  
*in-between people*

## 7.6 pāmoyēs āpōh: Before You Arrived

Link to performance: <https://youtu.be/poPfQCavI6U>



*Figure 7.6: pamôyês apôh performance in tastawayihk dreaming, Cory Hunlin, 2024.*

In this culminating section of the performance we call again, from a place in spirit, to all those who are yet to arrive, those yet to be born. Inspired by the dream of a future imaginary where all 2Spirit, trans, and non-binary young ones arrive in this earth walk, fully honoured and uplifted, and with the embedded welcoming of miskâsowin, belonging. This song was the first song to be birthed on the big drum, and the message is one of belonging and welcoming. More specifically, the nôtikwêw âtayohkanak, the Old Grandmothers Spirits, return in the performance, and they are the ones calling to the spirits on the other side, in the wombs, in the stars, those waiting to come through. The nôtikwêw âtayohkanak are the old ones who can see us, feel us, and sense us before we arrive on this earth walk. Their song, their voices become a safety net, a spider's thread, cast out into the dark. The luminous and joy-filled resonance of their words help call the lost ones back into the circle of life. In our communities, we need to cast better safety nets to prevent the young ones from disappearing, from being drowned in the violence that incessantly targets them, and this needs to start when our 2Spirit kin are young.

As Kathy Absolon (2015) describes:

“The doorway to the inner space, where the ancestral knowledge sits, is through other realms via dreams, ceremonies, vision quests and rituals. The ancestors are there waiting to share their knowledge” (pp. 78-79).

In conversation with Senapan Thunder, we spoke about these spiritual midwives, these ancestor beings who sit at the doorway of life and death, and who are there to greet us when we first arrive. This song is a blessing from them, an acknowledgement that tastawayihk-iyiniwak are valued, we are meant to be here, in whatever way we come, and that our spirits were already warming this place up even before we arrived.

*We gather, as three around mistikwaskihk, in this closing song of the performance. A quiet settling, followed by an evocative and piercing calling out into the dark “kitôhcisâpimitin pâmayês âpôh... I saw you even before.” Layers of emotion rise as our hearts and drum beats connect in the depth and resonance of togetherness. Then our three voices join together to sing and call out “ka takôtēyan...you arrived...” We carry on, the drum resounding throughout the space, reclaiming space inside our bodies and spirits, and affirming the power and sovereignty of our position at the big drum. After the performance, a friend who is a ‘seer’ approached me to share that during this song she’d seen three little nôtikwêw âtayohkanak floating above the drum, kohkohm scarves gently wrapped around their heads. May it continue to be so.*

### lyrics: pâmayês âpôh

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| i. kitôhcisâpimitim pâmayês âpôh ka takôtēyan<br><vocables>              | I saw you before you arrived                     |
| ii. kimôsîhitin pâmayês âpôh ka takôtēyan<br><vocables>                  | I felt you before you arrived                    |
| iii. âsay ki pē kîsôwinân<br>pâmayês âpôh ka takôhtēyan<br><vocables> x2 | you already warmed us<br>before you even arrived |

The remaining six songs that were created during my master’s thesis weren’t presented in the work-in-progress performance to the public, but have been shared in various forms during the last four years. Specifically “piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin” was created as a multidimensional soundscape. Inspired by Anishinaabe writer and a scientist, Robin-Wall Kimmerer, and her teachings about braiding together knowledges similar to braiding sweetgrass, I experiment with braiding together three sonic strands in the song creation: cosmo-sonic, Indigi-sonic, and askiy-sonic. The resulting sound piece is an exploration of Indigiqueer futurity and 2Spirit Creation Stories. It was created for my Future Imaginary Class with Jason Lewis, and an excerpt of the accompanying research paper was published in Forge Online Journal. An extension of the sound piece is featured in Phi Centre’s Habitat Sonore. “No One Left Behind / nimîhitôtân” was written and composed during a winter sound residency at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts in Treaty 7, and was recorded in collaboration with Michif artists Mari-Jo Dandenau and Cynthia Hamar. The other four pieces were created, inspired by Cree and Tea language class, in the earlier part of my master’s. These pieces have been played within rehearsal and land-based contexts, but no recordings are included here.

## 7.7 piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin: Thunderbirds Kinship

Link to recording: <https://moelark.bandcamp.com/track/piy-siwak-wahkohtowin>

**lyrics:**

mah! kipehtawâwak-cî  
kihci-piyêsiwak matwê-mâtow  
kâ-kitamâkihitok  
matwê-ohpahoyiwa  
kimiyyikonawak kimiwanêyâpi-wâwi

listen, can you hear them?  
great thunderbirds start to cry loudly  
always have empathy for one another  
they start to fly up  
they gave us all a rainbow egg

mah! kinowâpahta  
ana âmow-piyêsîs  
ê-kaskiyitât  
ta-âsêhi-pimihât  
ta-kiskisîhitok  
wâhkôhtowin kihci ihtakwan

all of you look, look  
that hummingbird over there  
s/he is able  
to fly backwards  
to help us remember  
kinship is sacred

## 7.8 No One Left Behind / nimîhitotân

Link to recording: <https://moeclark.bandcamp.com/track/no-one-left-behind-nim-hitot-n>

come inside the circle  
there is space for you  
no one's left behind  
we have been waiting our whole lives for  
you

coming into view  
the courageous way you are  
it's written in the stars  
ancestor spirits watching over you

### **CHORUS**

nimîhitotân  
paskwaw'mostoswak wikiwêw  
ohpahow'tan  
kisê-kihêw sakihwêw

we are dancing  
with the bison we come home  
we are soaring  
with the eagles love to keep us whole

### **VERSE II**

Come inside the circle  
look towards the tree  
rainbow ribbon markers  
holding the edge peacefully

step by step will show you  
just how brave you are  
the gentleness of deer  
medicine calling you near

### **CHORUS**

### **VERSE I**

nimîhitotân  
paskwaw'mostoswak wikiwêw  
ohpahow'tan  
kisê-kihêw sakihwêw

we are dancing  
with the bison we come home  
we are soaring  
with the eagles love to keep us whole

### **BRIDGE**

it is time now  
that we all come together  
it is safe here  
for us all to be

feast the spirits of  
those who've come before us  
speak their names  
what they gave  
and sing their songs

### **CHORUS**

nimîhitotân  
paskwaw'mostoswak wikiwêw  
ohpahow'tan  
kisê-kihêw sakihwêw

we are dancing  
with the bison we come home  
we are soaring  
with the eagles love to keep us whole

### **OUTRO**

## 7.9 nêwo kakisimowina: 4 Prayers to Honour Wholism

### I. acâhk ~ spirit

kisê manito	gentle/kind creator
kihci okâwîmâw	great mother
nêwo atoskêyâkanak	four workers/helpers
kinanâskomitinâwaw	we give thanks to you all
pêyak kîsikaw	for one day
kâ-wâpâtamâk	that we get to see
ê-awihiyâk	that you have loaned to us

### II. nitêh ~ my heart

ninanâskomon nitêhik	I am grateful my heart
ê-sakaskinêyoht	is full inside
ninanâskomon nitêh ê-twêhot	I am grateful my heart is landing

### III. niyaw ~ my body

kâ-pêhtamân nêhiyawêwin	when I hear Cree language
nimiyomahcison êkwa nimiyoskâkon	I feel good, and I feel nurtured

### IV. mâmitonêyihcikan ~ imagination/mind

ê-waskawênamân nimâmitonêyicikan	I am animating knowledge, memory & imagination though movement
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## 8.0 Conclusion

When I began this master's research and creation over four years ago, I never thought I would arrive at where I am today. *ninanâskomon*, I am grateful. Throughout this time and myriad of experiences, I have had the chance to build connections that will last me a lifetime. I have received support from many relatives and organizations, and I have arrived into new roles and responsibilities as a result. From these experiences, I am excited to enter into the next phases of creation, engagement, and ceremony in support of 2Spirit *miskâsowin êkwa wâhkôhtowin*, belonging and kinship.

In the final year of completing this work I have published, presented keynotes and work in educational, ceremonial, and academic settings, and I have received awards from various academic and community organizations. Some of these include: 2024 article published in *Forge Online Magazine*, 2025 Featured performance at Waves International Indigenous Languages Gathering (OCIL: Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, ON), 2025 Keynote presentation at The Manitoba Collaborative Indigenous Education Blueprint (MCIEB, MB), 2024-2025 Social Justice Fellow Award (Concordia University, QC), 2025 Master's Graduate Student Excellence Award for Innovation in Indigenous Health Research (NGGS: National Gathering of Graduate Students, CIHR: Institute of Indigenous Peoples' Health, and NCC-NEIHR: Network Environments for Indigenous Health Research National Coordinating Centre), 2025 Trellis Micro Grant to host 2Spirit Drum Circles (ELAN: English Language Arts Network + Canadian Heritage, QC), 2024 Indigenous Arts Committee Individual Grant to create *tastawayihk dreaming* (CAM: Conseil des arts de Montréal, QC), and various community partnerships and collaborations with Indigenous and creative arts organizations. Throughout my master's work, I have also had the opportunity to build relationships with other 2Spirit kin across the Métis homelands, to support the growth and continuum of our 2Spirit Sundance, and more locally, to host and create safer spaces for 2Spirit resurgence through community and creative contexts highlighting drum and song practices. All of these initiatives and acknowledgements have been made possible through ongoing relationships and connections with 2Spirit kin, Elders, Michif and Indigenous relatives, academic and artistic community.

From winter 2024-late spring 2025, I was awarded a Social Justice Fellowship through the Social Justice Centre at Concordia. This meant presenting my master's project as a hybrid keynote, in-person and online, to local, national and international communities. Along with six other fellows, I shared my research and creation, and received input and feedback from 2Spirit kin and attendees. For this, I was encouraged to invite a "responder" to give specialized feedback connecting to my research and area of expertise, and 2Spirit Michif *kohkom* Barbara Bruce agreed. In her response she highlighted the importance of truth telling, of uplifting 2Spirit voices, and the value of the many helper roles I have taken on throughout this process, to build bridges between communities as a dedicated *oskapêwis*, ceremonial helper, and always speaking *tâpwêwin*, with an open heart and spirit. She shares:

"It touched my spirit so much. It's a message that everybody needs...Moe brings love...she brings those songs, those words, those languages that she speaks, into the sacred circle...And all of the words that Moe used here are to change peoples' mindsets and spirits so we can come together as one. *miywâsin*, so good, so touching, so vibrant what you've done...With the drum, and the *sisikwan*...I would like you to continue your story." (Bruce, personal communication, 2025).

It was an honour to share and locate my work within a framework of social justice, within a circle of kinship, and alongside other academics in fields of research.

In early 2025, I received a special invitation from 2Spirit Michif organizer and friend, Denise Tardiff, to share a keynote presentation for an in-person gathering in Treaty 1, Winnipeg, MB. Organized by Tardiff's team for The Manitoba Collaborative Indigenous Education Blueprint, the gathering brought together representatives, educators, Indigenous scholars, and Elders from post secondary colleges and universities across Manitoba to discuss best practices for Indigenous inclusion and collaboration in higher education contexts. For this, I shared "From Star Charts to Drum Songs: Singing Backwards into the Future of 2Spirit Indigenous Resurgence," a one-hour multi-disciplinary presentation, incorporating looping pedal, song, drum, and a powerpoint of my process and practice. Throughout the gathering, I was honoured to support the Elders circle, assisting them with song and ceremonial support during an opening pipe ceremony, smudging, and a family ceremony. I also gave a participatory and embodied workshop to support attendees in collectively "dreaming" their ideal education settings.

More recently, in late October 2025, at NGGS, the National Gathering of Graduate Students in Treaty 7, Banff, AB, I received an award of excellence for innovation in Indigenous health research. The award was presented by two Michif relatives, Dr. Chelsea Gabel and Dr. Robert Henry. Even though I have never identified as a "health" researcher, my work is integrative and centres wellness and healing approaches that are embodied and cultural, and as such, I was honoured to receive this acknowledgement. While at the gathering I presented my research and creation, and sang ontôpâyiw, one of the 2Spirit songs, to open up the final day.

The last presentation opportunity I want to share here, was the invitation to perform at the *Waves International Indigenous Languages Gathering* in August 2025, hosted by the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (Ottawa, ON). The intention of the gathering and the OCIL was to bring communities together to support "the efforts of Indigenous Peoples across Canada [and beyond] to reclaim, revitalize, maintain, and strengthen their languages" (OCIL website, 2025). Alongside two other musicians, Marino Vazquez and Anit Ghosh, we performed piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin and spirit markers redux, two songs created during my master's research and creation. We shared these pieces on "Technology and Language" Day 2 to an audience of over 1500 people. During the three-day gathering, I had the opportunity to learn, share, and connect with Indigenous language teachers, Elders, and knowledge keepers, and specifically, to visit with nêhiyawêwin and Michif language teachers. I was humbled to share my work and visit with one of my nêhiyawêwin teachers and founder of Cree and Tea weekly classes, Dr. Charlotte Ross.

In June 2025, I joined the first ever 2Spirit Métis Gathering in the Red River homelands, at Wolf Medicine Healing Place outside Winnipeg. I was invited to open the gathering with pâmoiyês apôh, one of my 2S songs, and to host a drum circle. This was truly a homecoming gathering for me. I was able to share teachings specific to 2Spirit drum practices, from a Michif perspective, in a Michif land-based site, to a group of twenty 2Spirit Michif kin. Throughout the circle, we all collectively animated space to deepen into the healing work made possible through collective song, prayer, and drumming. To be able to do this on the land, at the same site where we host our 2Spirit Sundance and sweatlodges, was transformational. I hope to write more about this experience and some of the deeply healing moments and learnings I took from it. Another moment of incredible joy was being able to sing and drum while our two kohkoms, Barbara Bruce and Charlotte Nolin, received their ancestral facial markings from Dr. Mel Lefebvre. For three days we were a group of over one hundred 2Spirit Michif relatives who gathered to share

our stories, our sorrows, our personal and collective dreams, and to actively engage in reclaiming 2Spirit Michif futurity.

Since the big drum was birthed in late 2024, in an effort to give back to the community and share some of the songs, teachings, and make connections with 2Spirit relatives here in Tiohtià:ke, I applied for funding to support drum circles. In early 2025, I received a Trellis Grant through the English Language Arts Network to host a series of 2Spirit big drum circles. In collaboration with other local organizations and kin, we hosted five circles, bringing together intergenerational 2Spirit relatives, local Mohawk Elders and invited guests. These circles have been a vital gathering place during challenging times.

For Summer Solstice (June 2025), just before National Indigenous Peoples' Day, we invited nêhiyaw Elders Joseph Naytowhow and Yvonne Chamekese to share songs and teachings. During the circle, participants were able to learn a drum creation story, two new big drum songs, and receive teachings for honouring the big drum. For Autumn Equinox (Sept 2025), we invited Ma-Nee Chacaby, a 2Spirit Oji-Cree Elder to come and share 2Spirit specific teachings and guide us in a drum feast. Local Kanien'keha:ka Elders Sedalia Kawennotas Fazio and Tealey Normandin opened these gatherings with a thanksgiving address and shared teachings throughout.

These drum circles were supported with generous contributions and collaboration from The Indigenous Healing Knowledges Research Chair (Métis therapist and educator, Dr. Catherine Richardson and 2Spirit Michif emerging artist Dani Sherwood), 2S Cree/Québécois community organizer Anna Aude from BIHRA (Black, Indigenous Harm Reduction Alliance), Midnight Kitchen (solidarity servings to provide feast food for two of the circles), 2Spirit Quechua artist + curator Hanss Lujan-Torres, and 2Spirit Michif artist Milo Puge from IFRC (Indigenous Futures Research Centre, Concordia) and the CSLP (the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance, Concordia). The circles have been hosted both in creative and healing community spaces, at Studio ED and MTL Healing Space, and the two larger circles were hosted at the Shift Centre for Social Transformation, Concordia. These circles have provided 2S kin and Indigenous community in Tiohtià:ke (and greater Kahnawake and Kahnésatà:ke) access to learning and singing drum songs with professional 2S artists and revered Elders, which also includes participation in talking circles, healing practices, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Finally, in collaboration with local 2Spirit relatives and kin, Dr. Mel Lefebvre and Anna Aude, we recently visited a potential site for more 2Spirit gatherings and ceremonies to happen, located outside Tiohtià:ke, in Abenaki territory. It is our dream and hope to be able to continue to host drum circles, sweat lodge ceremonies, and creative retreats, along with other 2Spirit knowledge keepers and artists, and to bring our 2Spirit kohkoms out to share and transmit important teachings with local community and young ones. Since we've all seen the incredible benefit these practices have played in our own lives, we want to be able to give back and bring more of these land-based and 2Spirit led creative and ceremonial practices closer to Tiohtià:ke.

There are so many more layers I could share and speak to, but I think I have shared enough for now. This work has been challenging and rewarding in some of the most transformational ways. Throughout it all, I have stayed steadfast in my commitment to continue creating, collaborating, and transmitting 2Spirit practices and knowledge through drum song creation and performance, land-based education and ceremony.

### **Highlighted Presentations and Awards:**

1. 2024 *tastwayihk dreaming*, Black Box Concordia Performance, QC. Funded by Indigenous Project Grant, Conseil des arts de Montréal, QC.
2. 2025 Waves International Indigenous Languages Gathering, Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, ON.
3. 2025 Excellence Award for Innovative Indigenous Health Research, National Gathering of Graduate Student, Banff Centre, AB.
4. 2025 *tastawayihk nikamowina: 2S drumming + song transmission*, *Mawiiyahk Nakatikashoo: No One Left Behind*, National Métis Two Spirit Gathering, Portage la Prairie & Medicine Wolf Healing Place, Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak, MB.
5. 2025 2Spirit Big Drum Circles (funded by Trellis Micro Grant, English Language Arts Network + Canadian Heritage) QC.
6. 2025 Social Justice Fellow, Concordia University, QC.
7. 2025 “From Star Charts to Drum Songs” Keynote presentation at The Manitoba Collaborative Indigenous Education Blueprint, Winnipeg, MB.
8. 2023-present “*piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin: thunderbirds kinship*” immersive sound piece, Habitat Sonore, PHI Centre, QC.
9. 2024 “*piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin: thunderbirds kinship*” article, Forge Online Journal, digital.

1. 2024 *tastwayihk dreaming*, Black Box Concordia Performance, QC.



Figure 8.0: *mistikwaskihk/ The Big Drum in tastawayihk dreaming*, Cory Hunlin, 2024.



Figure 8.1: *Feasting the drum by activating the first heart beat*, Kinga Michalska, 2024.

Figure 8.2: *Spirit markers projection in tastawayihk dreaming rehearsal*, Cory Hunlin, 2024.

**2. 2025 Waves International Indigenous Languages Gathering**  
<https://na.eventscloud.com/website/81167/home/#performances>



*Figure 8.3: piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin performance at Waves, Victoria Hunt, 2025.*



*Figure 8.4: Musician collaborators after performance at Waves, Moe Clark, 2025.*

*Figure 8.5: piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin performance at Waves, Joshua Morin, 2025.*

### 3. 2025 Excellence Award for Innovative Indigenous Health Research, NGGS.



*Figure 8.6: NGGS Award Recipients at Banff Centre, Treaty 7, Cory Baumgardner, 2025.*



*Figure 8.7: ontôpâiyw performance at NGGS Gathering, Treaty 7, Cory Baumgardner, 2025.*

**4. 2025 tastawayihk nikamowina: 2S drumming + song transmission, 2025.**



*Figures 8.8-8.9: 2Spirit Michif Drum Workshop, Treaty 1, Hayf Photography, 2025.*



*Figures 9.0-9.1: 2Spirit Michif Drum Workshop, Treaty 1, Hayf Photography, 2025.*

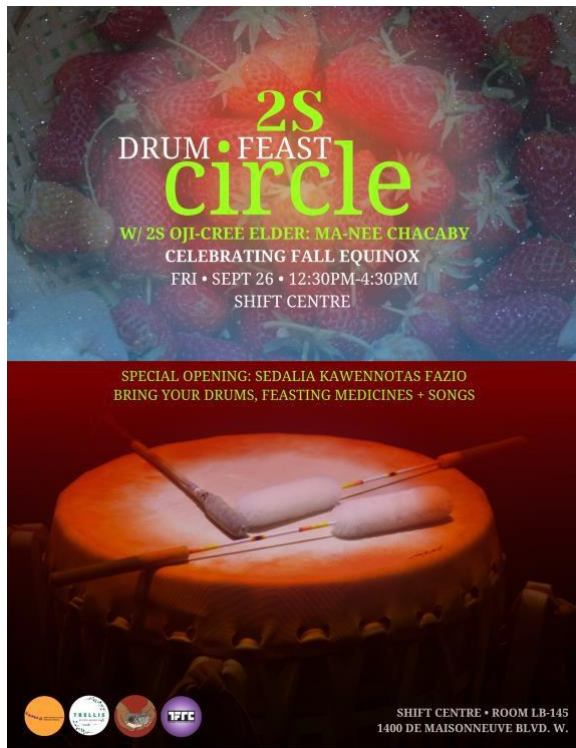
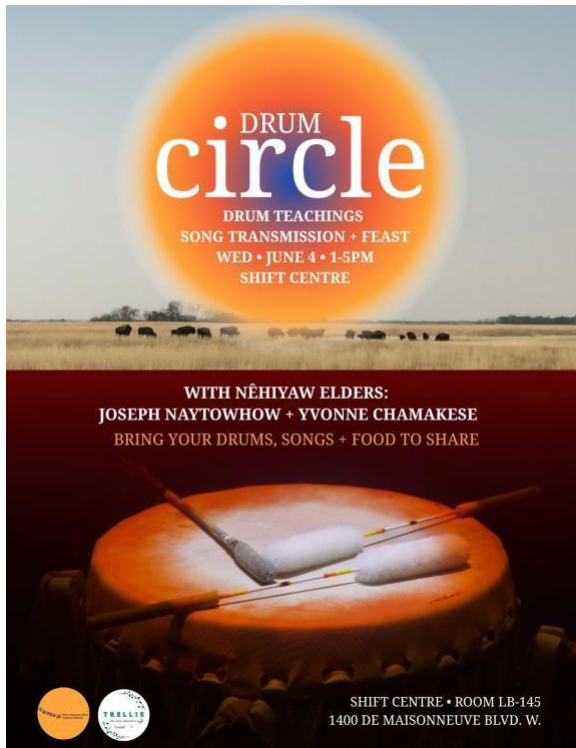


*Figure 9.2: 2S Drumming for ancestral skin markings, Treaty 1, Hayf Photography, 2025.*

**5. 2025 2Spirit Big Drum Circles (funded by Trellis Micro Grant, English Language Arts Network + Canadian Heritage) QC.**



*Figures 9.3-9.4: 2Spirit Big Drum Gathering at Shift Centre, Kinga Michalska, 2025.*



*Figures 9.5-9.6: 2Spirit Big Drum Gathering Posters, Moe Clark, 2025.*



Figures 9.7-10.0: 2Spirit Big Drum Gathering at Shift Centre, Hayf Photography, 2025.

6. 2025 Social Justice Fellow, Concordia University, QC.

Friday April 4, 2025 - 1:00 - 5:00 pm  
**SOCIAL JUSTICE GRADUATE FELLOW SEMINARS**

**MOE CLARK** 1:00 - 2:05 PM  
 tastawayihk dreaming \* 2Spirit drumming: resurgent practices of reclamation and cultural continuity  
 RESPONDENT: 2S MICHIF ELDER BARBARA BRUCE

**MARCUS-XAVIER GRANADA** 2:20 - 3:25 PM  
 (Un)touchability and Existential Conversion: Loosening the Grip of Racializing Habits of Perception  
 RESPONDENT: LISA GUENTHER, PROFESSOR (QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY)

**FRÉDÉRIC CÔTÉ-BOUDREAU** 3:40 - 4:45 PM  
 Should Animals Have Labour Rights?  
 RESPONDENT: PABLO GILBERT, PROFESSOR (CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY)

VEGAN FOOD AND REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SERVED  
 Join us in person (MB 14.250, John Molson Building 14th floor) or on zoom. Get the link: [concordia.ca/social-justice](https://concordia.ca/social-justice)

**SOCIAL JUSTICE CENTRE**  
 concordia.ca/socialjustice



Figures 10.1: Social Justice Fellowship poster, Social Justice Centre, 2025.

Figure 10.2: Moe Clark presenting Social Justice Talk, Moe Clark, 2025.

7. 2025 “From Star Charts to Drum Songs” Keynote presentation, MCIEB, Treaty 1, MB.



Figure 10.3: from star charts to drum songs keynote presentation, Moe Clark, 2025.

Figure 10.4: Moe Clark presenting at MCIEB, Mike Latchislaw, 2025.

8. PHI Centre: *piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin / thunderbirds kinship* by Moe Clark

<https://phi.ca/en/events/habitat-sonore-guides-sonores-2025/>

Old words create new worlds. *piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin* invites us inside the dream lodge to remember *piyêsiwak* (thunderbirds) great migration to skyworld. *piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin* is a prayer, singing open sovereign sites of futurity which animate the flux and fluidity of existence. Centring *nêhiyawêwin* (Plains Cree language) as a generative transmission for far into the future generations, this dream song crosses listening thresholds to highlight trans\*dimensional kinship relations with beyond human relatives. A mirror is sung between earth and sky, reflecting the gifts both *piyêsiwak* and 2Spirit kin embody as guardians between realms. We call on prophecy and the vital importance of *nipiy* (water) in this future realm, layering source recordings of *nipiy* with *têwêhikan* (drum), *sisikwan* (rattle), and voice.

9. Forge Article: <https://forgeproject.com/forging/piyeesiwak-wahkohtowin-thunderbird-s-kinship>



Figure 10.5: *piyêsiwak wâhkôhtowin* in syllabics, design Moe Clark, Forge Online Journal, 2024.

Figure 10.6: Moe Clark sitting in spirit markers projection, Cory Hunlin, 2024.

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