

Collaboration for Conciliation: Developing Non-Colonial Programs for Raven Chacon's "Place Where the Waters Crossed"

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Abstract: This critical reflection examines the series of educational and public programs that were developed for *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, a solo exhibition by Diné artist Raven Chacon that was presented at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery (Montréal, Canada) in the context of the 19th MOMENTA Biennale. Drawing from the field of Indigenous studies, we explore how bringing a cultural mediation approach to Indigenous art exhibitions can foster non-colonial spaces of conciliation, in which members from different Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous communities can experience and respond to each other's practices and experiences.

Keywords: Cultural Mediation; Museum Education; Art Education; Decolonization; Indigenous Studies; Contemporary Art

As cultural workers, collaboration is central to how we develop robust public programs. Collaborations between artists, communities, and institutions become even more important when it comes to scaling the impact of exhibitions' public and education programs. Notably, when working with Indigenous artists or communities, collaboration must take centre stage (Goff et al., 2019; Onciul, 2018; Robinson, 2017; Swan & Jordan, 2015). Historically, Indigenous art, cultures, and histories, have been erased, rendered invisible, fetishized, tokenized, or otherwise misrepresented when exhibited in colonial spaces such as "a non-Native museum, university, library or historical society" (Senier, 2014, p. 400). When these colonial spaces, equipped with their resources (financial, staffing, equipment, exhibition spaces, etc.), engage in collaborations with the goal of promoting Indigenous self-determination, practices of *conciliation* can emerge (Garneau, 2016; Louie, 2021; MacDonald, 2019; Onciul, 2018).

We are two museum educators who partnered on an institutional collaboration to produce the educational and public programs for *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, a solo exhibition of Diné artist Raven Chacon held in 2025 at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery as part of the MOMENTA Biennale of contemporary art. This article examines the role our collaboration across institutions and Indigenous/settler lines had towards efforts of what David Garneau (2016) calls "conciliation". Breaking down the programs we produced in collaboration, (including guided tours, exhibition guide, creative workshop, artist talk, and closing performance) we explore the following questions: 1) could these programs be considered as sites for conciliation; 2) when mediating artworks attending to Indigenous cosmologies and sacred-site specificities different from our own, how do we reject colonial readings of the works by honouring both their semiotic and symbolic aspects; 3) how did this collaboration work upon us and inform future work with Indigenous artists?

Statement of Positionalities

Working towards anti-colonial aims, it becomes important for us to situate ourselves, in terms of identities and perspectives, as a means to be transparent and accountable to our goals of creating conciliatory spaces within the museum. Nametags are used when we are speaking to our individual experiences.

Prakash: I am a Tamizh-Canadian settler from Malaysia born in Tkaronto (Toronto) and raised in Dish With One Spoon territory, the traditional territory of Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee. For the past decade, I have been grateful to live and work in Tiohtià:ke (Montréal), unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory and where other First Nations communities including the Anishinaabeg, the W8banakiak, and the Wendat have long held close relationships.

Prior to *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, I worked on public programs for many exhibitions featuring Indigenous artists including Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq), New Red Order (Adam Khalil, Ojibway; Zack Khalil, Ojibway; Kite, Oglála Lakhçóta, Jackson Polys, Tlingit), Jessica Winters (Inuk), Tsēmā Igharas (Tahltan), Émilie Monnet (Anishinaabe), Nico Williams (Anishinaabe), and Skawennati (Kanien'kehá:ka).

Katsitsanoron: I am an Onkwehonwe/French-Canadian artist, curator, and educator from Oshahrhè:’on (Châteauguay), Québec. I previously worked in music education in my community; Kahnawà:ke as well as in the Cree community of Eastmain and in Nunavik as a classroom teacher. I honed my research and practice around Indigenous arts and curation at starting with volunteer work at daphne arts centre; followed by residencies at Artexte and the Banff Centre. I also previously worked as a cultural mediator at the Montréal Museum of Contemporary Art for the solo exhibition of Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), *The Children Have to Hear Another Story* and sit on the board of the Indigenous People’s Arts and Culture Collective, IPACC.

Problematizing Notions of “Reconciliation”

In a Canadian context, “reconciliation” is often used in reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) which produced a list of 94 Calls to Action aiming to “redress the legacy of Canadian residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (p. 223). Garneau (2016) criticizes this framing of reconciliation as fundamentally flawed as *re-conciliation* suggests a “repair of a previously existing harmonious relationship... impos[ing] the fiction that equanimity was the status quo between Indigenous people and Canada” (p. 30). Jeff Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T’lakwadzi (2009) also underscore how not only is reconciliation not an Indigenous concept (p. 145), but that state-led processes of reconciliation “do little to reunify and regenerate families and communities dispersed and dislocated by the trauma of residential schools” (p. 140). They further advise that reconciliation must go beyond monetary support for individuals (e.g. Common Experience Payments) and be applied at the community level to provide spiritual support (p. 143).

For Osoyoos Indian Band Chief Clarence Louie (2021), reconciliation efforts must look at injustices that precede residential schools and seek to repair the ongoing harm caused by land, resource, and economic theft. For there to be a nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples, according to Louie, it must begin with “a reconciliation of land and money” whereby “the Native balance sheet matches the Canadian balance sheet” (p. 188). This means economic justice, a return of land, a reconciliation of the Specific Claims and comprehensive land claims currently backlogged in the Canadian courts (pp. 193–194). Louie offers concrete suggestions of what a beginning to reconciliation could look like, such as recognizing hunting and fishing rights (p. 205) and he commends efforts such as the Treaty Land Entitlement process

as an example of a successful reconciliation project (pp. 206-207).

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) also criticizes the idea of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state, stating that reconciliation should not be serving Canadian interests but should instead be founded on Indigenous resurgence via language, culture and spiritual tradition revitalization (p. 22). She continues, noting, “I see no evidence whatsoever that there exists a political will on the part of the state to do anything other than neutralize Indigenous resistance, so as to not impinge upon the convenience of the settler-Canadians. The only way to not be co-opted is to use our own legal and political processes to bring about justice” (p. 24). The means for decolonizing, for Simpson (2016), is Indigenous resurgence founded in nation building in the context of grounded normativity, citing Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard, that is “fundamentally nonhierarchical, nonexploitative, nonextractivist, and nonauthoritarian” (pp. 22–23).

Rather than seeking reconciliation, the framing of *conciliation*, denotes the need to actively form this harmonious relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada. For Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle, conciliation requires reciprocity and an agreement of sharing space among both parties (Lyons, 2021). Further, she sites suspicions around the rhetoric of reconciliation given that the Stó:lō, “have not experienced a conciliatory relationship with either the British or Canada” (Lyons, 2021, para. 23). An important distinction between reconciliation and conciliation is their temporal quality. Reconciliation assumes a fixed destination in which reconciliation can be and is achieved. Conciliation, on the other hand, must be processual and is work that is based in relationship building that must be continued perpetually.

Centring Indigenous Knowledges and Practices in the Museum

We problematize the framing of reconciliation and introduce the concept of conciliation to establish a framework for the non-colonial museum programs we developed for *Place Where the Waters Crossed*. As educators with anti-colonialism aims working within the museum ecosystem, we recognize the ways in which these institutions are often embedded in colonial politics and risk reproducing coloniality and harm through collecting practices, various barriers to entry (including physical, geographic and financial) as well as through educational programs that may uncritically reinscribe facets of colonial history and ideology. While as individual workers, our power to enact change at the institutional level is limited, our education and public programming interventions, we argue, can create sites of conciliation. For Garneau (2016) “[a] goal of non-colonial curatorial and art practices is to make room for the production and reception of Indigenous experience and expression apart from the dominant discourse” (p. 24). This shared goal, for us, was at the heart of our interventions.

We consider a program to be a site of conciliation when it (1) builds meaningful relationships and prioritizes the wellbeing of Indigenous participants, artists, and collaborators; (2) decentres colonial perspectives on shared histories; (3) creates conditions for visitors to challenge dominant discourses; (4) models kindness, respect, honesty, and curiosity as reciprocal practices. We developed the exhibition’s public programs with goals aligned with Garneau’s framing of “non colonial practices” whereby we sought to foster resistances and counternarratives to colonial ideologies and behaviours. These acts of resistance and refusal of colonial logics were embedded throughout our programs which included dialogue-based tours, workshops, written guides, and public events.

These programs were developed in dialogue with Chacon, by using his own writings and interviews as a basis for the educational activities as well as receiving his consent and guidance

for the development of his artist talk and the closing performance. Dumoulin-Bush also mobilized their own knowledge and experience to develop culturally appropriate educational programs. There was also a desire to pursue a collaboration with teachers in Kahnawà:ke which was unfortunately not possible due to timing constraints related to the exhibition schedule.

Integrating Haudenosaunee Teachings

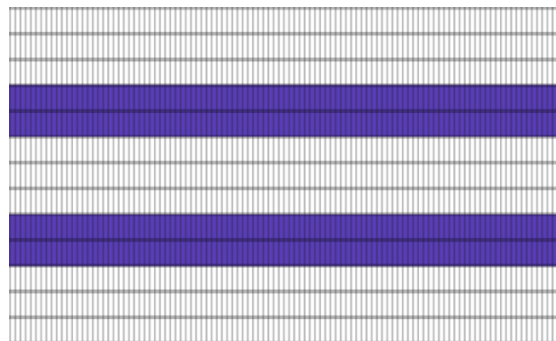
As with the Stò:lō, the Kanien'kehá:ka in Québec never ceded their lands to Canada and thus, are not covered under any treaty agreement with the Crown. Living and working on ancestral and unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory, we find it imperative to incorporate teachings from Kanien'kehá:ka and broader Haudenosaunee cosmologies into our pedagogical practices. We use the term cosmologies here to reference the breadth of knowledge systems, practices, responsibilities, and relationships (with the lands, waters, past, present and future generations of humans and nonhumans) that are embedded and interconnected within Indigenous ways of being (Hotte & Jérôme, 2021, p. 224). For Sylvie Poirier (2008) an Indigenous cosmopolitics imbues the nonhuman with agency thereby disavowing “an ontological divide between nature and culture” and instead “including non-humans in their sociality” (p. 76).

Seeking to apply a Haudenosaunee lens to Garneau's call for crafting non-colonial practices, we turn to the work of Onondaga scholar David Newhouse (2025) who proposes an ethical space of engagement based on the three principles of kindness, respect, and honesty. This space he named *Guswenta space* in reference to the Onondaga word Gaswéñdah/Guswenta for the Two Row Wampum (Teiohate Kaswenta in Kanien'kéha).

Made by the Haudenosaunee, the Two Row Wampum is a wampum belt that embodies the treaty agreement between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and representatives of the Dutch government who had arrived and began to settle on the territory in 1613 (Deyhowähda·dih, 2014). Depicted in the Two Row Wampum belt are two parallel rows of purple beads interspaced between three bands of white beads. Each purple band represents a boat (canoe/ship) containing each group's languages, cultural practices, systems of governance, and ways of celebrating their Creator. Both bands are of equal size and weight, and they travel in parallel along the river of life, neither interfering with the other.

Figure 1

Digital Representation of the Two Row Wampum



Note. Shearwater, S.(2026). From Two Row Wampum [Digital Image]. Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Two_Row_Wampum_vector.svg). CC0 1.0 Universal.

While these terms of equality and non-interference are usually the subjects of emphasis in

discussions of the Two Row Wampum, the white bands are of equal importance. They represent the three principles required for the treaty to endure: friendship, peace, and forever (Deyhowähda·dih, 2014). These spaces between the two purple rows are Newhouse's (2025) "Guswenta space" (p. 117). Expanding from this original treaty, Newhouse argues that "the Two Row Wampum embodies Haudenosaunee ideals... [it] is an ethical statement that is intended to serve as a guide for our actions in a shared world" (p. 117) and can be applicable in contemporary contexts in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians come together, for example, in the classroom, to foster a dialogic environment based on principles of kindness, respect, and honesty (pp. 118-119). As such, in our work to craft educational and public programs around Indigenous artworks as sites of conciliation, we adopt and apply Newhouse's principles of kindness, respect, and honesty within the frame of Guswenta spaces to foster open and dialogic engagement with the exhibition.

In the following sections, we break down these activities exploring how our collaboration facilitated meaningful engagements with contemporary Indigenous art. We begin by foregrounding the conditions of the exhibition's presentation, the approaches to cultural mediation via guided tours and public programs and end with a reflection on how relationality grounded our collaboration both during the run of the exhibition and how it informs our work going forward.

Cultural Mediation as a Non-Colonial Approach to Museum Education

Raven Chacon's solo exhibition *Place Where the Waters Crossed* was made possible through the collaboration of the not-for-profit contemporary art biennial MOMENTA and the exhibiting partner, the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery. Curated by Marie-Ann Yemsi, MOMENTA's 19th biennial took place across eleven museums, galleries, and artist-run centres with five of the twenty-two participating artists being Indigenous from North America (including Chacon). As part of the biennial's programming, MOMENTA offers guided tours, educational workshops and activities as well as artist talks, performances, and other events (*MOMENTA Creative*, n.d.).

The Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery is a public gallery located in Concordia University. It has been a collaborator on several of MOMENTA's past editions. The gallery's primary mandate is the presentation of contemporary art grounded in critical curatorial practices to engage the university's various publics in ongoing debates on art and culture. As part of its programming, the gallery provides guided, dialogue-based tours, an educational exhibition guide, and event-based, interpretive programs such as artist talks, workshops, screenings, and performances (*Public Programs*, n.d.).

At the time of the exhibition, we were relatively new employees of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery and of MOMENTA, respectively. We arrived, however, with many years' experience working with Indigenous artists and communities and we worked closely together to develop the exhibition's public and educational programs while maintaining the integrity of Chacon's artworks, rooted in Diné epistemologies and sacred-site specificities while making their themes and creative processes available to local Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.

One of the shared activities offered by both institutions are dialogue-based exhibition tours. While the exhibitions are open to all, MOMENTA's educational public trends toward primary schools and families. In contrast, the Ellen Art Gallery serves a largely adult and university-student public. Given this range and the desire to provide competent and accurate education around Indigenous art, culture, and history, we drew our pedagogical strategies from the framework of Differentiated Instruction (DI) (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de

l'Éducation, 2021).

As reported by the Ministry of Education of Québec (2021), DI involved “adjusting teaching to the diverse abilities, needs and interests of students of different ages, backgrounds, aptitudes and skills, thus enabling them to make optimal progress in developing the competencies targeted by the program” (p. 2). Although DI is mainly used in classrooms, it can also apply to informal learning environments, namely museums. In Québec primary schools, visual art, music, and Indigenous history are already being taught. This provided us with existing terrain that we used to address the exhibitions’ specificities, namely the differences between music and sound art as well as Haudenosaunee and Diné land, history, and culture. We applied principles of DI namely through building upon our existing knowledge of Quebec’s curricula and Concordia’s course offerings to use the language and skills the students already possessed to create a complementary learning activity to their classroom education.

In our approach, we combine DI with those of cultural mediation (Mörsch, 2012b). As new turns in cultural mediation recognize audiences as already knowledgeable and integral to institutional development (Mörsch, 2012a), we argue that cultural mediation practices that centre Indigenous perspectives and self-determination can lead to acts of conciliation within the museum education context. Curator Maria Lind (2013) notes how mediation “appears to provide room for less didacticism, less schooling and persuasion, and more active engagement that does not have to be self-expressive or compensatory” (pp. 103–104). Moving away from what Lind terms “constructivist spectatorship” (p. 102), mediation takes on a more investigative role, seeking to “contextualize artistic practice and to study and question current phenomena and inherited norms and procedures. In other words, to decode and recode artifacts and activities that pertain to contemporary life” (p. 103). This is a key point for us when it comes to mediating Indigenous contemporary art. We developed strategies to question and critique colonial and settler histories and politics, using Chacon’s works as a foundation through which we recentre Indigenous cultures, knowledges, and histories. These strategies, however, are not universal and must be tailored to serve different demographics of visitors.

We therefore argue that DI is essential when mediating Indigenous cultural content; as the public’s understandings, attitudes, and familiarity with Indigenous peoples and their histories and practices can vary widely depending on their experience with and exposure to these topics. Differentiation is also necessary in the wider context of sound and contemporary art practices which often demand multilayered understandings from viewers. These adaptations can be as straightforward as using clear language or simplifying certain contexts to facilitate understanding an artwork’s social, educational, and spiritual value.

Incorporating DI into the cultural mediation of Indigenous artworks thereby becomes a gesture towards conciliation, ensuring that despite varying levels of preexisting knowledge of Indigenous art, cultures, and practices, efforts are made to form a bridge between the public and the artworks. These approaches build upon the public’s own curiosities, interests, and situated knowledges to engage with the cultural, historical, and political specificities of the exhibited works.

Working within a contemporary art context and exhibiting the works of living and active artists, our practices of mediation seek to reject colonial-centric readings of Indigenous artworks that risk historicizing and fetishizing the works by separating them from living traditions, practices, and peoples. Instead, by drawing from contemporary Indigenous scholarship and collaborating with Indigenous artists, the museum can be a site for conciliation.

Centering Subjective Experiences in *Place Where the Waters Crossed*

To contextualize our approaches to mediating the artworks, we provide here brief descriptions of three of the six works included in *Place Where the Waters Crossed* alongside our guided-tour strategies.

Entering the exhibition, visitors first experienced the installation *Still Life No. 3* (2015) in which sixteen speakers were suspended from the ceiling, playing a non-linear retelling of the Diné Bahane' (creation story) in Diné bizaad by linguistics scholar Melvatha R. Chee. Chee's voice played in multiples, was delayed, and echoed in the space. There was no clear start or finish to the story, overlapping the past, present and future and filling the gallery with Diné language, presence, and history.

Figure 2

Installation View of "Still Life No. 3"



Note. Chacon, R. (2015). From *Still Life No. 3*. [24 Glass Panels Engraved With Text, Aluminum Mount Spacers, 16 Speakers, Stereo Amplifiers, Stereo Delay Unit, Audio Track, LED Arrays With Timed Colour Changes]. Photo credit: Michael Patten. Courtesy of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

Of the *Still Life* series (2011-2017), *Still Life No. 3*, is unique in that it is the only entry to incorporate speech. This text was transcribed in Diné bizaad and then translated to English. Both texts were engraved on glass panels affixed to the walls on either side of the speakers. An LED array surrounded the installation with programmed coloured lights that shifted with the time of day in reference to the colours mentioned in the Diné Bahane'.

When leading guided tours, we started our visit with an observation and listening exercise, allowing the sights and sounds of the installation to work upon the group. We then followed with

a collective discussion of our observations – notably how the work resists its own reading. Despite the presence of English text panels, the effect of the LED lights on the glass made reading challenging; often requiring a certain bodily choreography of leaning and crouching in an attempt to read the text somewhere in the space between the engravings and the shadows on the walls.

Central to our discussion, which framed the rest of the visit, was how, as non-Diné people, certain aspects of the work were not necessarily available for us to know without extraneous research. Nevertheless, we were able to have (and should have) subjective experiences with the artwork. Garneau (2016) writes how, often, material scholars will only recognize an object's semiotic value but disregard an experience of their sacred qualities since they don't position themselves as *believers* (p. 25). Referencing bell hooks' writing on Eurocentric incompetencies to read the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Garneau makes similar connections to the experience of Indigenous artworks by settlers as confessions of subjective experiences, which "lie outside of the objective discourse of these [social science and humanities] disciplined texts" (p. 25). By framing the visits around our subjective experiences, we encouraged visitors to allow the artworks, their messages, and their themes to work upon us. In doing so, we refused to adopt a colonial attitude that would delegitimize cosmologies different than its own.

We followed these themes into the next work: *For Four (Caldera)* (2024), a four-channel video installation featuring four singers positioned at the cardinal directions. Each singer, dressed in black, spins on their axis, reading the contours of the lands around them and interpreting the environment as a score for voice. The effect of the overlapping harmonies created a melodic lamentation for the land – the site of a volcanic hollow, the Valles Caldera. Dził Łizhíinii (the Jemez Mountains), where the piece was shot, is imbued with important histories that we discussed and reflected on. Importantly, the area is part of the Diné ancestral territory, Diné Bikéyah, although it is not part of the Navajo Nation reservation. It is also nearby Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor), one of the four sacred mountains referenced in *Still Life No. 3*. Also close to the site of filming is Los Alamos National Laboratory, which was established for the secret testing of nuclear weapons during the Second World War.

Figure 3

Installation View of "For Four (Caldera)"



Note. Chacon, R. (2024). From *For Four (Caldera)* [Four-Channel Video Installation, Colour, Sound, 6 min. 9 sec.]. Photo credit: Michael Patten. Courtesy of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

Picking up the thematic threads of the conversations generated from *Still Life No. 3*, we shared our collective subjective experience of the works: how the music, landscape, and histories worked upon us. A notable conversation that was often had among visiting groups was around histories of colonization and imperialism; how Indigenous peoples globally have been forcibly displaced from their lands which are then misused and subjected to resource extraction, often with the effect of ecological and humanitarian disaster. These themes were also present in the works *Storm Pattern* (2021) and *Maneuvering the Apostles* (2024), both exhibited in *Place Where the Waters Crossed*.

The next stop featured the only work in the exhibition without sound, *For Zitkála-Šá* (2017–2020). It featured a series of twelve framed lithographs, each a graphic score dedicated to a contemporary Indigenous woman artist and contained instructions for performance. In this room, we took time to read the scores, observing differences in their notation and instruction. We discussed Zitkála-Šá's legacy as a writer, activist, and musician as well as her contributions to Indigenous music via the writing of the libretto of *The Sun Dance Opera* (1913), the first American Indian opera. The series served as inspiration for the workshop *The Philharmonic Orchestra of Things* which we discuss in the next section.

Figure 4

Installation View of “For Zitkála-Šá” by Raven Chacon



Note. Chacon, R. (2017-2020). From *For Zitkála-Šá* [Lithographs]. *Photo credit by Michael Patten.* Courtesy of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

For these works, in addition to the remaining three in the exhibition (*Report* (2001, 2015), *Storm Pattern* (2021) and *Maneuvering the Apostles* (2024)), we adapted the ways in which we approached the subject matter in line with differentiated instruction. For example, with youth groups, instead of naming the atomic bomb when discussing *For Four* (Caldera), we framed the conversation around how past scientific experiments had harmed the environment. In this way, we maintained the important acknowledgement of the ways human interventions can have

negative consequences on others (including nonhumans), as well as how we should be living in good relations with the lands, plants, and animals around us, as has been done by Indigenous peoples for millennia. These are themes we continued to elaborate on using DI when discussing *Storm Pattern* and *Maneuvering the Apostles*, which are pieces responding to neocolonial energy projects (Dakota Access Pipeline and Nordlys Vind, respectively). In these discussions, we brought up issues of Indigenous self-determination and various on-going fights in Canada and elsewhere for environmental protections led by Indigenous peoples (e.g. Wet'suwet'en land defenders against Coastal Gaslink Pipeline, the Kanesatake Resistance, and Idle No More).

Public and Educational Programs as Dialogical Guswenta Spaces and Sites of Conciliation

Along with tours, we developed public programs as cultural mediation strategies to engage the public with the works and exhibition themes in different ways. We consider the collaborative efforts that created these programs as examples of practicing Newhouse's Guswenta spaces and Garneau's sites of perpetual conciliation. In this section, we explore four of these programs: the pedagogical guide *Ways of Thinking*, the creative workshop *The Philharmonic Orchestra of Things*, a public conversation between artists Raven Chacon and Martín Rodríguez, and *In the Wake of These Waves*, a performance by Cheryl L'Hirondelle.

Accessible Visitor Guides

Our first collaboration was the recurring, bilingual educational guide *Ways of Thinking* (*Pistes de réflexion* in French) produced by the Ellen Art Gallery for its exhibitions. It served as a tool for visitors to guide themselves through the exhibition, complete with information on the exhibition's themes, Chacon's biography, artwork descriptions, and reflection questions to invite analysis and introspection. An audio version was also recorded for increased accessibility and availability of the educational material.

For *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, we penned an introductory essay "Amplifying the Voiceless" written in plain language that provided an entry point into central themes of the exhibition – composition and performance – that complemented Yemsi's brief curatorial text. The essay explored Chacon's sound art composition as a relational practice that allows for the transmission of information and emotions via graphic scores.¹ Following the essay were the labels and descriptions of each work in the exhibition. Instead of writing new interpretive descriptions, which is the standard procedure, we decided to ask Chacon to use his own descriptions from his website. Given the historical and cultural specificity of many of the works, we decided it would be more appropriate, following a non-colonial approach, to keep and cite the original texts as opposed to printing and distributing a non-Diné interpretation in their place.

Creative Workshops for All

For many of MOMENTA's exhibitions, creative workshops are developed and facilitated by its educational staff. These workshops are meant to be accessible and enjoyable for participants of different ages, abilities, and capacities. The workshop spearheaded by Dumoulin-Bush for *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, *The Philharmonic Orchestra of Things*, was preceded by a guided tour of the exhibition and had two goals. First, it provided a participatory learning activity into Chacon's sound art practice. Second, it made the gallery the site of experimental performances in which participants composed their own sounds and used unconventional materials as instruments thereby transforming the architecture of the gallery into a resonant chamber, amplifying the sounds.

By incorporating the gallery as the site for performance but also a nonhuman participant, we made connections both to the theme of relationality highlighted in *Ways of Thinking*, but also to Chacon's recent performances including the Pulitzer Prize-winning composition *Voiceless Mass* (2021) as well as *Tiguex* (2025).ⁱⁱ The Philharmonic Orchestra of Things was also used to build on exhibition themes including sustainability, the body in relation to sound, and different ways to represent sound and music.

The Philharmonic Orchestra of Things not only had participants make sounds but also develop their own graphic notation to express them visually. This notation exercise was inspired by *For Zitkála-Šá* (2017–2020) in which the scores “draw on a range of symbols, including Western music notation, tribal geometries, and numerology, among more ambiguous designs” (Chacon, 2020). These particularities in their style, shape, and arrangement can be used to interpret each score as a portrait of the Indigenous woman artist to whom its dedicated.

Returning to efforts of providing non-colonial spaces, the workshop encouraged a dissolving of hierarchies and standards of formal musical training, of Western music literacy, and of the disciplining properties or “bodily practices” (Leahy, 2012) of the museum— such as the silent contemplation expected of visitors. Through an exploration of Zitkála-Šá's life and legacy, the portraits of these twelve contemporary Indigenous women artists, and the participants' own improvised composition and performance, the workshop supported the development of a sense self-determination – a theme rife within Chacon's works – by naming and confronting the disciplined, Western, and hierarchal structure to which we have become accustomed.

Raven Chacon in Conversation with Martín Rodríguez

The next event we organized was a conversation between Raven Chacon and Martín Rodríguez as part of MOMENTA's Reflections on Artistic Research event. Rodríguez is a Xicanx transmission and sound artist who grew up along the Arizona-Mexico border and is now based in Montréal. Chacon and Rodríguez previously toured together during which Rodríguez performed the piece *For Zitkála-Šá (For Autumn Chacon)* (2019). The two also share in their sound-based practices and have deep familial relationships with Arizona.

Rodríguez led the conversation around three themes embodied within Chacon's practice: time, space, and agency/relationality. The conversation fostered an example of a Guswenta space that allowed for the artists, grounded in their existing relationship, to openly share in their practices of artmaking. The conversation was the first of the day and was opened with Ohèn:ton Karihwatékwen (The Words That Come Before All Else), a Kanien'kehá:ka protocol recited by artist and Concordia professor Hannah Claus (Kanien'kehá:ka/English).

Our goals with these programs are to foster spaces of dialogue and learning that, while performed within colonial institutions, have the possibility of forming sites of conciliation by foregrounding Guswenta spaces and principles of kindness, respect, and honesty. For Chacon (2025), conciliation or, in his words, “a need for unity” is needed between different groups of people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous and that “the arts can be and interesting site to talk about that as long as we're not just making works to talk about ourselves.” He continues, in his conversation with Rodríguez, that otherwise, there risks a siloing effect that ignores the shared histories between communities as well as the possibilities of what comes next (Chacon, 2025). This was perhaps most relevant while developing our final public program for the exhibition, a performance responding to *Place Where the Waters Crossed* that centered collaboration, trust, and reciprocity. It was also a performance that created dialogue between three Indigenous

languages and cultures and was performed to a mixed audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the public.

Response Performance by Cheryl L'Hirondelle

Alongside *Ways of Thinking*, another recurring public/education program produced for most major exhibitions at the Ellen Art Gallery is “Response” whereby an artist, cultural worker, or organization is invited to produce a “response” to the exhibition – the shape of which is adaptable to the practices and interests of the invitee. For *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, the invitation was extended to interdisciplinary artist and singer/songwriter Cheryl L'Hirondelle.

Based in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, L'Hirondelle is of Cree/Halfbreed; German/Polish descent and has familial roots in Papaschase First Nation/Amiskwaciy Wāskahikan (Edmonton) and Kikino Metis Settlement in Alberta.ⁱⁱⁱ Following the conversation between Chacon and Rodríguez, we wanted to continue working with Chacon's existing relationships to develop public programs that engaged with his works and practice.

L'Hirondelle and Chacon are long-time friends and was invited to perform at his wedding.^{iv} She recounted how the first time they met, during Chacon's participation in the collective Postcommodity (2009-2018), she was overcome with emotion and wept (L'Hirondelle & Dumoulin-Bush, 2025). One of earliest scores of the series *For Zitkála-Šá* (2017-2020), was written in 2018 for L'Hirondelle.

During the development of the Response performance, titled *In the Wake of These Waves*, we met with L'Hirondelle over the span of several months from May 2025 until the performance in October 2025. During these months, as we learned about each other, and about Chacon; his practices and the works that would be included in the exhibition, the ideas for the performance began taking shape until reaching its final form.

This dialogic creation process between us echoed the process of Chacon's creation of *For Zitkála-Šá* which L'Hirondelle described as a “negotiation” (L'Hirondelle & Dumoulin-Bush, 2025). For us, providing the support structures and guidance L'Hirondelle needed to develop the performance was another attempt at crafting a space for conciliation. Garneau (2016) notes that through these kinds of conciliatory collaborations, “new works will also be produced: performances, texts, works of art that will all require decoding and resist decoding, and in future such readings will engender further personal transformations” (p. 39). It was our hope that working together with L'Hirondelle to produce this new performance would create such a work that engages in Indigenous art, language, and cosmologies on its own terms.

It was decided early in our collective brainstorming that a performance of *For Zitkála-Šá* (*For Cheryl L'Hirondelle*) (2018) would be included. It involved L'Hirondelle performing in the dark as an old woman giving advice. She followed this prompt by modulating different notes that come from four sound shapes from the Cree language nēhiyawēwin. She describes these four sound shapes as a “call to action” to come together and rise up (L'Hirondelle & Dumoulin-Bush, 2025).

Responding directly to the exhibition, L'Hirondelle also composed a new piece that, with Chacon's permission, incorporated sounds from the other women's voices that featured in *Place Where the Waters Crossed*; namely, those in *Still Life No. 3* (2015) and *For Four* (Caldera) (2024), the latter of which, Chacon had explicitly mentioned to L'Hirondelle (L'Hirondelle & Dumoulin-Bush, 2025).

According to L'Hirondelle, sound shapes come from land and are imbued with multiple histories and teachings and with this new piece, performed on a buffalo hide, she mixed these

sounds to invoke relations with the land and with transformation, as the buffalo symbolizes (L'Hirondelle & Dumoulin-Bush, 2025). The performance also referenced the four cardinal directions evoked in the works by Chacon. Following a Cree syllabic star chart, the four cardinal directions are referred to as "Grandfather directions" and the four diagonal directions as "Grandmother directions." As a self-proclaimed grandmother wanting to honour her own nêhiyaw cosmology, L'Hirondelle manipulated the position of the buffalo to point at the Grandmother directions and during the performance sounded out the shapes from those Grandmother directions (L'Hirondelle & Dumoulin-Bush, 2025).

Figure 5

Cheryl L'Hirondelle Performing "In the Wake of These Waves"



Note. L'Hirondelle, C.(2025). From *In the Wake of These Waves* [Performance]. Photo credit Marie Rousseau. Courtesy of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

When Chacon came to visit Montréal for the exhibition's opening reception, he was excited to learn about L'Hirondelle's upcoming performance and that she would reprise her score from *For Zitkála-Šá*. Chacon also suggested to Dumoulin-Bush to perform a score from the series, an idea that L'Hirondelle enthusiastically supported. For Chacon (2025), "when multiple of [the scores] are programmed... it's a nice way of bringing people together."

Thus, *In the Wake of These Waves* grew into a three-part performance beginning with L'Hirondelle's new piece, followed by Dumoulin-Bush's interpretation of *For Zitkála-Šá* (*For Olivia Shortt*) (2019), and concluding with *For Zitkála-Šá* (*For Cheryl L'Hirondelle*) (2018).

The performance imbued the gallery with sounds and movements that invoked elements from Diné, Cree, and Kanien'kehá:ka cosmologies and was followed by a question period between the two performers moderated by Prakash Krishnan.

Allowing the Programming to Work Upon Us

Following the performance which coincided with the last days of *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, we reflected on our experiences of collaborating on the various exhibition programs – both in terms of the kinds of work that went into producing them, as well as how we were critically adapting our strategies of cultural mediation for this context and how we will continue to in the future.

Katsitsanoron: As an Indigenous cultural mediator with a performance practice, I feel the spectrum of authenticity and performance in Indigenous art is under constant consideration and critique. I am interested in understanding how problematizing this notion of authenticity can influence a non-colonial learning environment, which exists simultaneously as a place of high professional rigor and deep personal significance. Cultural mediation is not simply a job. The work is rooted in community and the relations that already exist or have the potential to be fostered. This work is steeped in the cultural and social politics forced onto Indigenous peoples in colonial spaces, such as the museum, where they are often under resourced and overburdened.

Moreover, cultural mediation activities tend to encourage and rely on participants engaging in conversations and workshops that question their held perspectives and attitudes. These are not easy conversations. Fostering such moments of connection and spaces in which these perspectives and attitudes can be challenged, requires a sense of trust be built first; one that hinges on me as the mediator to be able to facilitate a space of kindness, respect, and honesty; regardless of personal feelings on these tense subjects.

This starts with the mediator themselves adopting a sense of humility and trust with the public. Chacon's prompts for *For Zitkála-Šá (For Olivia Shortt)* (2019) asks the performer to be encircled by an audience and to respond to their minute gestures or sounds with the chosen instrument. My instrument, a looper pedal, something I had never used and had little time to learn, was chosen intentionally to de-positioning myself as 'expert'. Having a performance rely on unknown participants, while performing on a new instrument under close audience observation was deeply destabilising in contrast to the 'expert' I am used to 'being' in these spaces. The score's invitation for audience involvement and freedom of instrumentation was a driving factor for my selection for *In the Wake of These Waves*. Olivia Shortt's micro-opera *The Museum of the Lost and Found; gaakaazootaadiwag* (2022), which also riffs on museum education and cultural mediation practices, was another influence.

Figure 6

Katsitsanoron Dumoulin-Bush Performing “For Zitkála-Šá (For Olivia Shortt)”



Note. L’Hirondelle, C.(2025). From In the Wake of These Waves [Performance], by Cheryl L’Hirondelle, 2025. Photo credit: Marie Rousseau. Courtesy of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

Creating spaces of conciliation in *Place Where the Waters Crossed*

As a culmination of our collaboration, the public programs for *Place Where the Waters Crossed* exemplified our efforts to craft spaces of conciliation which brought together artists, cultural workers, and the public into a space centring indigeneity and relationality. This began with us forming a relationship of mutual understand and trust between ourselves and with Chacon and it continued through to our other program co-creators, namely Martín Rodríguez and Cheryl L’Hirondelle, both of whom, following *Place Where the Waters Crossed*, have since had other new programs scheduled at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

Creating opportunities for learning and analyzing artworks all while centring Indigenous perspectives was also at the core of our educational activities including workshops and tours. Following principles of cultural mediation, we didn’t establish ourselves as authorities on Chacon’s works. Instead, we provided contextualizing information about the artist and the works and facilitated dialogue between participants so that their own subjective experiences and interpretations could lead the resulting activity. This adaptability across different groups that varied in age, education, and experience also exemplified Differentiated Instruction as applied in the museum.

The other event-based programs, notably the artist talk and closing performance also aimed to promote indigeneity within the museum. Collaborating with those with close relationships to Chacon, using Indigenous languages (Diné, Kanien’kéha, nêhiyawêwin), and co-constructing the closing performance in dialogue with both L’Hirondelle and Chacon made it such that the voices, practices, and desires of Indigenous artists were always prioritized.

From Punctual to Perpetual Conciliation

Going forward, the question that remains is how to transform these sites of conciliation from ephemeral and project-based into sites of continuous, perpetual conciliation, as Garneau (2016) invokes. While the program attendance numbers were some of the highest ever at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, our concern is how to let this lighting-in-a-bottle moment

continue to shine throughout future programs, exhibitions, and biennials. Can we trust institutions to take these experiences and make good on promises of “decolonization” or must we continue to rely on individual actors to leverage their positions and personal relationships to make these spaces possible albeit temporary?

The end of *Place Where the Waters Crossed* also marked the end of Dumoulin-Bush’s contract with MOMENTA and the end of our programming collaboration. In year since the exhibition, however, we have continued to bring and apply the experiences gathered through this collaboration toward our new projects.

Prakash: I’ve continued to work with exhibiting artists’ personal relationships to build new public program collaborations such as the performances by Peter Morin (Tahltan/French-Canadian) and Moe Clark (Métis/mixed-settler) I programmed in response to the exhibition Hannah Claus: *tsi iotnekahtentíonhatie (Tiohtià:ke)* that followed *Place Where the Waters Crossed* at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery. As part of the gallery’s curatorial team, a goal of ours has been to ensure the continual presence of Indigenous art and artists in both public programs as well as exhibitions, some of which are being planned in collaboration with other institutions to gather resources to tour these exhibitions and produce publications to increase their visibility.

Katsitsanoron: My hope is that by transforming conciliation from programming theory to methodology and by sharing these experiences, others will take inspiration and follow suit. We have aimed to show that when it comes to contemporary Indigenous artwork and practices, embracing subjective experience – even if different from the artists’ – is something to lean into. We should allow the art to work upon us and let ourselves be challenged, swayed, or galvanized by practices coming from other cosmologies and be open to new ways of seeing, thinking, teaching, and being. This framework is something I’m carrying with me in my new curatorial role at La Guilde; whose delicate mission involves Inuit, First Nations, and Canadian art and handcraft and where there is a rich ground for honing these conciliatory methodologies.

This work of crafting spaces for conciliation cannot be alone. Collaboration and building meaningful relationships with fellow artists, educators, institutions, as well as local communities can be enriching and provide new perspectives, resources, and opportunities with lasting impact. If conciliation is to take place – collaboration will be where it starts.

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ⁱ As evidenced in the works *Storm Pattern* (2021), *Report* (2001, 2015), and *For Zitkála-Šá* (2017–2020).

ⁱⁱ Led by Chacon, *Voiceless Mass* (2021) and selections from *Tiguex* (2025) were performed during the run of *Place Where the Waters Crossed*. The concert-performance was presented by Quatuor Bozzini and Le Vivier in co-production with MOMENTA and the Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery and in collaboration with Québec musiques parallèles and the Flux Festival.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Cree/Halfbreed and German/Polish” is the exact terminology used by Cheryl L'Hirondelle in her official biography. It is repeated here with respect to her self-determination and we also acknowledge that “halfbreed” when referred to mixed-race people is often regarded as dehumanizing.

^{iv} Personal correspondence with the authors.