Position Paper

**Engaging, Connecting, and Mobilizing
Indigenous Language Learning Leaders, Supporters,
and Researchers through an Online Sharing Space:
NILLA (NEȾOLṈEW̱ Indigenous Language Learning Atlas)**

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Executive summary

The NEȽOLṈEW̱ Indigenous Language Research Partnership (www.netolnew.ca) is a national collaboration of Indigenous scholars, Indigenous community leaders, and allies involved in Indigenous language revitalization (ILR). ILR is one of the top societal challenges in Canada today. In June 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report included nine recommendations related to ILR. Our network aims to contribute to the realization of these goals. Among other efforts, we are developing NILLA (NEȽOLṈEW̱ Indigenous Language Learning Atlas), an online sharing space for Indigenous communities to share their own and learn about others' successful language learning strategies within Canada.

The Government of Canada through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Connection Grant (Project 612-2018-0149) supported our work to engage with Indigenous participants towards the development of NILLA at two national events. In November 2018, the NILLA research team travelled to the *First Nations Language Keepers Gathering* in Saskatoon, SK. In January 2019, the team hosted an Indigenous Languages Forum in Victoria, BC that brought together Indigenous community leaders, Elders, scholars, activists, and allies from across the country to discuss how NILLA can best support ILR in Canada. Through these engagements with Indigenous partners and allies, we gained important insights into the development of NILLA, reflecting more broadly our position on strengthening research *by* and *with* Indigenous people.

In this paper, we take the following positions that Indigenous research is strengthened when it is guided by the following principles to:

1. Ensure all Indigenous focused research is Indigenous led
2. Ensure Indigenous control of data and results
3. Create opportunities for knowledge-sharing within and between communities
4. Develop innovative solutions to meet current community needs

Specific recommendations based on these principles are provided as they relate to each of the four main themes identified for the SSHRC Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Connection Grants: (1) Supporting Indigenous Talent and Research Careers, (2) Engaging Indigenous Knowledge, (3) Mobilize Knowledge and Partnerships for Reconciliation, and (4) Foster Mutually Respectful Relationships.

POSITION

Indigenous research must be led by Indigenous people. Indigenous academics, community leaders, teachers, Elders, youth, and allies are working on important projects to further Indigenous community goals. These endeavours are best supported by listening to, and learning from, what Indigenous researchers are already doing, and working alongside Indigenous communities to find creative solutions to curiosities and concern they have identified. Indigenous community-led research is not just consultation with Indigenous communities about the topic under consideration. Rather, it is research that is initiated by Indigenous people to meet their needs as identified by them, and that takes a collaborative approach to all aspects of the inquiry. Research by and for Indigenous people is strengthened when it is guided by the following principles:

1. **Ensure Indigenous leadership of Indigenous research:** Indigenous communities are to determine research goals, inform the protocols and principles that guide research work, lead or collaborate on all aspects of the project, and determine the outcomes that have the most meaningful impact for their communities.
2. **Ensure Indigenous control of data and results:** Indigenous people must have full control over their information, including determining what and how to share, retaining full access to any research results and the ability to determine how those results are shared beyond the community.
3. **Create opportunities for knowledge-sharing within and between communities**: Indigenous research is designed to facilitate collaboration and partnership-building among Indigenous people, communities, and organizations to maximize knowledge-sharing and mutual learning.
4. **Develop innovative solutions to meet current community needs**: Research with Indigenous communities should result in meaningful outcomes that creatively respond to the goals and needs identified by the community.

Context

1. Indigenous Language Revitalization

Before colonization, there were an estimated 450 languages spoken by the Indigenous peoples of what is now Canada (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992). Today, only 60 of these languages are still spoken, and most are severely endangered (Statistics Canada, 2017). The state of these languages can be attributed to harmful assimilationist efforts by churches and governments that actively sought to eliminate Indigenous languages and cultures and the inherent racism that ultimately founds all colonization efforts. Today, Indigenous communities and organizations are working diligently to recover and strengthen their languages, using a multitude of strategies including language documentation, curriculum development, language classes, immersion programs, mentor-apprentice programs, policy development, and advocacy (McIvor & Anisman, 2018).

Outsiders have, at times, questioned the possibility and utility of language revitalization. For Indigenous people, language is intimately connected with identity, and is the carrier of invaluable cultural information, as well as historical and scientific knowledge. It is also linked to individual and community well-being (Jenni, Anisman, McIvor, & Jacobs, 2017), including reported lower rates of suicide in communities when the language is still used in the community (Hallet, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007). Furthermore, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) identifies language continuation as a right, and, in June 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) report included nine recommendations directly related to Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR). Three of those most relevant to the position outlined here are:

> (i) the restoration of Indigenous languages as a "fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society" (TRC, 2015, 14.i);
> (ii) acknowledgement that language revitalization work is "best managed by Aboriginal people and communities" (14.iv); and
> (iii) the call upon post-secondary institutions to create and offer Indigenous language programs (16).

Recent research shows that new learners are being created at a faster rate than we are losing our first language speakers (Dunlop, Gessner, Herbert, & Parker, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2017). This means that children, young people, and adults are interested in learning our languages, and that some of the methods being used hold great promise and should be shared. Historically the ILR movement was borne of individual community efforts to travel and learn from one another. In more recent times, language gatherings and conferences have leveraged the field to expand and accelerate the shared learning between communities and researchers. Maintaining

these connections beyond these "conferences" is a bigger challenge, as is supporting the linking of communities who may not attend such gatherings.

2. About NEȻOLṈEW̱ and NILLA

NEȻOLṈEW̱ means "one mind, one people" or "doing things as one" in the SENĆOŦEN language spoken on southern Vancouver Island. This was the name lent to our national research partnership led by Indigenous scholars and community leaders, and supported by non-Indigenous collaborators involved in ILR. NEȻOLṈEW̱ focuses on language learning efforts for adult learners and explores the contributions of adult learners to ILR in Canada. Specifically, the project has five focus areas: (1) NILLA (online sharing portal built with community input) , (2) language-learning assessment strategies, (3) sites of adult Indigenous language learning and teaching, (4) sites of adult learner contributions, and (5) the links between language, health and well-being. NEȻOLṈEW̱ is guided by Indigenous approaches to research, emphasizing Indigenous leadership and collaboration with Indigenous peoples in all aspects of the research design and implementation (e.g. Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008)

Our current SSHRC Partnership Grant included the creation of NILLA (NEȻOLṈEW̱ Indigenous Language Learning Atlas). The NILLA portal transfers the ILR spirit of connecting, exchanging, and engaging to the virtual realm, rather than relying solely on conference and language gathering opportunities, for communities to connect without the time cost or expense of travel. NILLA provides a space for Indigenous communities, advocates, researchers, and allies to engage and exchange knowledge about ILR in Canada through a virtual, interactive interface. Through NILLA, Indigenous communities can share and find information both privately and publicly, supporting each other to reach their ILR goals. The NILLA project tackles two practical circumstances of Indigenous languages in Canada: an exceptionally rich linguistic diversity and the vast geographic span of these languages. This virtual space aims to close these gaps and foster connection across distant communities.

NILLA is Indigenous-led and governed with an online public interface. It offers a new way for Indigenous communities to connect with each other and a broader research community interested in Indigenous languages. All Canadians will benefit from the continuation of Indigenous languages and the strength that Indigenous communities bring through their language and culture to our country. Language revitalization led by Indigenous people with the support of allies is powerful and effective Reconciliation work.

3. About SICC and the NILLA Forum

While NILLA will eventually act as an inter-connecting space for ILR communities, researchers, and advocates to engage in an online setting, ILR work is grounded and rooted within local Indigenous communities. To facilitate the introduction of an online portal to communities, often working in isolation across Canada, we engaged with individuals and organizations in person during a key national ILR event: the Saskatchewan Indigenous Cultural Centre (SICC) *First Nations Language Keepers Gathering* in Saskatoon, SK (November 21-22, 2018). Taking place centrally located in the Prairies, this annual conference is devoted to preserving, promoting, and protecting First Nations languages and cultures, bringing together academics, Elders, knowledge-keepers, speakers, educators, community leaders, and students from across Canada.

A guiding principle in the development of NILLA is the emphasis on creating an Indigenous-led and administered means to support communities in their ILR efforts, the input of our Indigenous people and communities – even beyond the NEȻOLₙEW̱ core Partnership – is therefore vital in every aspect of its development. For that reason, we hosted a national Indigenous Languages Forum on January 28-29, 2019, on the unceded territories of the W̱SÁNEĆ and Lekwungen Peoples at the University of Victoria. A cross-section of Indigenous ILR scholars and activists, Indigenous community representatives, Elders and knowledge-keepers were invited to attend the forum with the NEȻOLₙEW̱ research team to discuss the development of NILLA. Specifically, participants discussed the following four topics:

1. What features should NILLA have?
2. How can participation be encouraged?
3. How do we protect privacy and ownership while sharing information online?
4. How do we encourage communities and others to join NILLA?

Insights from both of these events has informed the NILLA development process and also increased our understanding of how best to do research by and with Indigenous communities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT SICC AND NILLA FORUM

Onowa McIvor and Pierre Iachetti (NILLA Coordinator) engaging with guests at the NILLA booth at SICC November 21-22, 2018, Saskatoon, S:
Sharon Shadow (l), Flora Smigel (m), Romeo Saganash (r)

Invited guests and NILLA Forum hosts at the Indigenous Language Forum, January 28-29, 2019,
First Peoples' House, University of Victoria, unceded territories of the W̱SÁNEĆ and Lekwungen Peoples

RATIONALE FOR POSITION

The position presented in this paper is informed by previous research and experience and continues to be deepened by feedback gathered from communities, including at the SICC conference and the NILLA forum supported by this Grant. At these events, we engaged in direct consultation with ILR scholars, activists, language learners and teachers, and community members. The immediate interest in NILLA we received at SICC has encouraged our work. At the NILLA forum, ILR workers and supporters from across the country gathered, representing communities from seven provinces and two territories as well as eight language families. Facilitated by members of our research team, forum participants engaged in focus group discussions around the four main topics presented in the previous section.

Through these direct engagements with Indigenous stakeholders, we deepened our understanding of how to do our research in a good way. From SICC attendees we learned that there is a need for individual ILR warriors to be able connect with and support each other. At the NILLA forum, we heard about the importance of ensuring continued Indigenous leadership in the development and operation of the project; developing NILLA in a way that promotes Indigeneity and addresses a variety of goals, needs, and backgrounds; inspiring confidence in the quality, integrity, and intentions of NILLA; and striking the right balance between Indigenous knowledge rights and Intellectual Property rights. We also heard calls for NILLA to support ILR through increasing communication and access to resources between educators, while at the same time raising awareness among the broader public.

The insights gained through these consultation processes inform the ongoing development of the NILLA project and have important implications for Indigenous research more generally. These insights are supported by our previous research and align with established Indigenous scholarship. From these sources we have identified the four guiding principles outlined in our position. The rationale for each is described in more detail below.

1. Ensuring Indigenous leadership of Indigenous research

NEȾOLṈEW̱ is led by Indigenous peoples and operates on the basis of continued collaboration with community Partners who determine their research priorities, protocols, and processes. As Indigenous scholars, this approach aligns with our own values and beliefs about ethical research and is also widely supported by the literature on Indigenous research. For example, leading scholar in decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that promoting Indigenous self-determination must be both a guiding principle in research practice and a goal for research outcomes. Snow et al. (2016) in their analysis of principles for Indigenous research highlight the importance of participation, "empowering individuals and communities to engage in all aspects of the research process" (p. 366) and accountability, "[the]

researchers' duty to justify actions and consider implications of design and interpretation decisions" (p. 367). This is best achieved when Indigenous peoples lead and collaborate throughout the research process.

Participants at SICC and the NILLA forum reiterated the need for Indigenous leadership in the research design and throughout the development and implementation processes. The need for continued engagement and dialogue with partners as well as the utmost importance of follow-through on commitments by all parties was highlighted. Regarding the NILLA portal, they noted the need to ensure its relevance to Indigenous users, taking care to address the specific needs identified by forum participants. They also noted the importance of representation, ensuring that the portal accurately reflects Indigenous cultures and languages and the land on which the project is situated.

All information provided for sharing through NILLA comes directly from Indigenous communities who determine what and how best to share. This is an example of doing Indigenous research in a good way: it is led by Indigenous people, guided by their principles and priorities, and aims to achieve outcomes that are tangible and meaningful for the communities involved.

2. Ensuring Indigenous control of data and results

Colonial exploitation and appropriation of Indigenous-owned heritage and resources have resulted in much hesitancy within Indigenous communities to share their knowledge freely and openly. Smith (2012) argues that ethical research with Indigenous communities must ensure that Indigenous people serve as stewards of their own data and that researchers can only use and share this data with permission and guidance from Indigenous participants. The NILLA project therefore takes on a leadership role in developing reliable mechanisms to ensure community ownership over data and knowledge shared through the online portal: Indigenous communities will determine what information to share, and the site will contain both a public section for information to be shared widely and a private section where information is only shared directly between participating and contributing communities.

Through consultation at the NILLA forum, we gained further insights into how best to build a trustworthy site where Indigenous people would feel comfortable sharing their information. Participants reiterated the need to guarantee Indigenous agency and ensuring all resources and materials are Indigenous-led, operated, and managed. Forum attendees also requested that protocols be put in place, including developing a NILLA code of conduct for sharing and using materials, and putting in place a verification process for new users. They expressed support for having various levels of access to the site, including a public interface as well as areas to share information privately. Finally, they reiterated the importance of building trust among all users,

developing mechanisms to ensure mutual agreement on how data is used, as well as guaranteeing community autonomy over how access to information is provided or restricted. Emphasis on community control of data was expressed throughout the consultations in many ways and regarding all aspects of the research project. How data is provided, shared, and protected is a key consideration in Indigenous research.

3. Create opportunities for knowledge-sharing within and between communities

Many ILR movements are built from the efforts of a few dedicated individuals, without the support of academic or government institutions. These language leaders spend much of their time and personal resources on travelling to other communities or conferences to learn from best practices. Especially NILLA forum participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to come together and learn from others involved in ILR from across the country. They emphasized the need for ongoing opportunities for collaboration while working individually in their respective communities. Their wish for NILLA is that the portal facilitate communication and discussion with others in constructive and beneficial ways, and that NILLA should not simply be a repository of information but a tool for users to meaningfully engage with one another.

Facilitating knowledge sharing and capacity building are priorities for Indigenous people in Canada. Research organizations interested in supporting ILR and other pressing sociopolitical issues in Indigenous communities must find ways to increase access to relevant information and facilitate collaboration and partnership building within and between communities. This includes opportunities for inclusion of multiple voices: Elders, knowledge-keepers, teachers, activists, community-leaders, parents, youth, and others. NILLA aims to provide this space for ILR in Canada. Through this approach, NILLA will facilitate strengthening ILR practices among Indigenous communities in Canada, while also developing Indigenous capacity around knowledge ownership. NILLA will also invite the broader research community to engage with and access the publicly shared knowledge on the portal.

4. Develop innovative solutions to meet current community needs

In community-based research, research outcomes should directly respond to the needs of the community (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009). NILLA aims to creatively respond to the needs identified by our ILR allies by providing a space for ongoing collaboration and mutual learning across languages and communities. SICC attendees and NILLA forum participants provided vital insights into how we can achieve this goal in a way that NILLA will be useful and used by Indigenous peoples: include functionalities that allow for easy access to diverse information, develop a user-friendly navigation, and ensure easy access to tangible resources, such as

guidelines for creating new programs, links to relevant websites, and language lessons. Importantly, we were reminded to consider ways for communities without a strong online presence to access and use NILLA as well.

While many of the above recommendations for NILLA had been considered before, others had not. Through ongoing dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous partners, we were able to be responsive to NILLA users' current or future needs as the portal is being developed. We continue to adjust our project to ensure that it best meets Indigenous community needs and responds to these needs in an accessible, reliable, useful, and meaningful way. Indigenous research is enhanced by this level of responsiveness, which is only achievable through ongoing engagement and an earnest commitment to collaboration.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION OR POLICY PROPOSALS

Research by and with Indigenous peoples is strengthened when the principles outlined in this position paper are respected and followed. In this section, specific recommendations are provided as they pertain to each of the four main themes identified for the SSHRC Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Connection Grant:

1. **Supporting Indigenous Talent and Research Careers**
   - Require Indigenous projects to be led or co-led by Indigenous people.
   - Promote research that is authentically led by Indigenous people, including respected Indigenous Elders, and Indigenous communities to support and build research capacity.
   - Provide targeted funding and support programs to recruit and retain the next generation of Indigenous scholars through scholarship programs, post-doctoral fellowships and research chairs – through specifically designated programs.
   - Acknowledge that Indigenous scholars are carrying an 'extra burden' in post-secondary as institutions work to rectify their past. This means more graduate students (who want Indigenous supervisors), more advisory committees and dialogue events, more program development (to address historical deficits), etc. Therefore, Indigenous scholars regularly and consistently do more than 20% service and since teaching loads are not reduced, this extra time comes directly from our research and scholarly time. This should be acknowledged in grant budgets allowing for course buy out for Indigenous led, Indigenous focused projects.

2. **Engaging Indigenous Knowledge**
   - Very few projects in Canada build and support the continuation of Indigenous languages; ours is amongst a select few. With the *Indigenous Languages Act* coming forward and in this TRC era with 9 articles pertaining to Indigenous languages, it is our belief that SSHRC should create a specific funding targeted for Indigenous language revitalization, maintenance and recovery, an emerging and time-sensitive scholarly field.
   - Language work is a powerful form of reconciliation. Engage projects that promote and continue Indigenous languages and lead all Canadians to understand they are their heritage too, and build their interest in joining the movement to ensure the languages survive and thrive again.

3. **Mobilize Knowledge and Partnerships for Reconciliation**
   - Provide opportunities for Indigenous people to share their research successes with each other and learn from best practices, this is an important form of capacity building work.
   - Support projects that invite and engage the wider public to participate in Reconciliation work.
   - Support hybrid engagement activities that provide opportunities for knowledge-sharing between Indigenous individuals, Elders, communities, and organizations in small and large gatherings, as well as virtual connections through the use of innovative technologies.
   - Encourage and all Indigenous communities to report and share knowledge in creative ways such as in their languages, through film, videos, podcasts and images.

4. **Foster Mutually Respectful Relationships**
   - Privilege projects that address Indigenous communities' curiosities and concerns, as established by Indigenous people and communities, and demonstrate meaningful impact to those communities.
   - Build trust with Indigenous communities by ensuring Indigenous ownership over research data, including control over what information is shared, as well as how it is shared, stored, and disseminated.
   - Do not require Indigenous communities to share or deposit information centrally or store raw data in open access, acknowledging how information was gathered and used unethically in the past.

EKOSI (THAT IS ALL)

Thank-you for the opportunity to participate in this funding program and contribute to the co-development of the SSHRC Strategic plan aimed at Strengthening Indigenous research capacity. We are excited and grateful to know this work is underway.

ay-hay (thank-you)

Appendix 1: References

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