



ELISA HARKINS

TEACH ME A SONG

Oct. 30 - Dec. 8, 2023

GALLERY GUIDE

with

exhibition essay by: Pablo de Ocampo
artist interview by: Dr. Tamara Smithers

AP | ART + DESIGN



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The New Gallery is pleased to present “**Teach Me a Song**,” an ongoing body of video, sculpture, and photography work from Tulsa-based artist Elisa Harkins.

In 2019 artist and composer Elisa Harkins (Cherokee/Muscogee) began her ongoing project *Teach Me a Song*. The project threads together nine inter-tribal song exchanges, traversing musical genres. Harkins introduces viewers to ceremonial, religious, country, rock & roll, and electronic songs imparted with personal and cultural significance. In conjunction with a video, Harkins has translated and transcribed each song into sheet music, as a mode of preserving the various Indigenous languages in which the songs are performed. Further, *Teach Me A Song* includes nine shawls designed to honor the songs and individuals featured in the project.

The use of shawls threads through the artist’s body of work, both within her sculptural and performance practices. Harkins states that shawls are traditionally considered protection for women and are often worn during ceremonies. The shawls range from traditional to contemporary; some would’ve been worn at Wounded Knee or Fancy Dance at a powwow, while others could seamlessly fit in at a fashion show. Channeling the song’s mood and capturing the singer’s spirit, Harkins took great care in creating the shawls. When viewing them, one can imagine the string fringes fluttering and swaying during dances, or the glitter and rhinestones reflecting under a spotlight or firelight. Referencing Native and Indigenous symbolism such as the medicine wheel and Seminole patchwork, as well as Nudie suits, kokum scarves, and jingle dancing, some shawls literally represent the music, including the song’s name in either English or indigenous language.

Extending from Harkins’ larger art practice which uses Cherokee and Mvskoke languages, electronic music, sculpture, and the body, *Teach Me a Song* reflects her long-time interest in translation, language preservation, and Indigenous musicology. Harkins is the first person to use Cherokee in a contemporary song. Her work is an act of reclamation. During her artist residency at Flagler College in the fall of 2020, Harkins visited Brighton Reservation, a Seminole Reservation near Lake Okeechobee. By integrating Indigenous language into her endeavors and lifting the voices of native collaborators, she helps decolonize Indigenous musical traditions. Her work seeks to alter the fate of endangered languages through active use, preservation on pressed vinyl, and radio play.

Songs featured in the exhibition include:

American Indian Movement (AIM) Song performed by Louis Gray (Osage)

Dakota Prayer Song performed by Eli Hirtle (Nêhiyah (Cree), British and German)

Thunderhawks Cry Too written by Cikwes & performed by Cheyenne Rain LeGrande (Nehiyah Isko)

Mekusape Fullana performed by Alice Sweat, Emma Fish, Vtvssv Lavatta, Jewel Lavatta, Reina Micco, and Rita Gopher (Seminole)

We Live in the Woods performed Agalisiga “Chuj” Mackey (Cherokee)

Spotted Bird performed by Kayln Fay (Cherokee)

Grandmother’s Song performed by The White Buffalo Singers (Blackfoot)

Hold Her Pillow Tight performed by Marilyn Contois (Anishinaabe)

Greasewood Song performed by Travis Mammedaty (Kiowa/Seneca-Cayuga)

The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and un-ceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we organize, exhibit, listen and learn.

Elisa Harkins: Teach Me a Song

by: Pablo de Ocampo

Over the last several years, Elisa Harkins' practice has been rooted in explorations of Indigenous language and song, the revitalization of native languages and circulation of Indigenous song traditions being gestures in Harkins' work that speak to notions of sovereignty and Indigenous futurisms. An early example of this is in the 2017 video *The Plains Indian Sign Language* (made with Nathan Young) which features Harkins in a performance for camera telling a story using a signing language that has its roots in early Indigenous Nations in North America. In her performances, *Wampum and Radio III*, Harkins sings in a combination of Cherokee, English and Muscogee (Creek) to her electronic dance music compositions, some inspired by sheet music of Indigenous music notated by musicologist Daniel Chazanoff in the 20th century. Another project, *Muscogee (Creek) Hymn*, focuses on a song sung on the Trail of Tears and continues to be sung in the Muscogee (Creek) language in Christian churches today.

Growing out of these contexts, Elisa Harkins' exhibition *Teach Me a Song* (2019-ongoing) is a project that critically points to the history of ethnomusicology and, more broadly, how Indigenous culture and knowledge are learned and shared. As a specific area of study under the broader field of anthropology, ethnomusicology—its methods, frameworks, and philosophies—has primarily been developed from a colonial position. Though it broadly aims to cultivate and build knowledge around cultural practices, musical form, and theory, its methods are often oriented in an acquisitive way, where an individual from a settler colonial position is recording, transcribing, or otherwise collecting the music of another culture.

With video, photographs, notated sheet music, and handmade textiles, *Teach Me a Song* documents an ongoing series of encounters in which Harkins asks a counterpart to teach her a song. Where ethnomusicology often centers a settler position, Harkins' approach in this project centers relationships between Indigenous peoples. Harkins' work here is more comprehensive than a simple critique, instead standing as an example of "doing sovereignty," a proposal for new and different ways to be in relation.

The first segment in the video is also the starting point for the project and came when Harkins met Osage elder Louis Gray. Gray, along with his sister, the artist Gina Gray, hitchhiked from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1973 to join the occupation of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, where he connected with members of the American Indian Movement (AIM). Here, Gray learned "The AIM Song," an intertribal song adopted as the anthem for the movement. As Gray introduces the song, he notes the different variations he's heard and says, "I couldn't tell you which one is the correct way. I just know how I learned it."

Here, the practice of learning in Harkins' work stands apart from more authoritative methodologies that might characterize other forms of musicological study. *Teach Me a Song* is based on a peer-to-peer exchange, echoing the same spirit of nation-to-nation sharing and exchange through which the AIM song was developed and disseminated. In this scenario, the impulses of collecting or acquiring are eschewed in favor of reciprocal relationships and dialogue.

From here, Harkins' video continues to develop, with this iteration including nine segments. Harkins' project does not gravitate towards impulses for taxonomic classification; Harkins isn't setting out to document song tradition from a specific Nation or style. Instead, she is assembling sessions with performers from different locales, whose songs they perform are as diverse as the filming locations, representing several Indigenous Nations and singing songs from traditional to contemporary.

In the segments shot in Vancouver and Lethbridge, Harkins develops recording sessions that extend from her exhibitions in those cities. Harkins works outside her home territory in these locales, tapping into networks of Indigenous colleagues. In Vancouver, both collaborators were guests in that land, artists Eli Hirtle and Cheyenne Rain LeGrande, both Cree, who share songs passed to them from close relationships. In Hirtle's case, he shares a piece learned from a Dakota friend, one he's heard in ceremony before and one he is still in the process of knowing. Hirtle's gesture here is definitively non-expert, instead demonstrating an informal and casual transmission of knowledge and highlighting learning as a process. Contrasting this is LeGrande's segment, in which she shares "Thunderhawks Cry Too," written by her mother, Connie LeGrande (Cikwes), an accomplished and award-winning musician. With LeGrande, the line from her to the song is much more direct and personal. On one layer, singing this song is a way to help her on her journey to learning the Cree language. At a deeper level, the song is intensely emotional, which evokes the pain and trauma that her family has endured while also acting as a salve to heal those wounds.

As in the example of "Thunderhawks Cry Too" by LeGrande, song preservation and Indigenous language learning and revitalization run in tandem throughout this project. Harkins worked with her Muscogee (Creek) language teacher, Don Tiger, in one of the earlier produced segments not included in this exhibition. Through her relationship with Tiger, Harkins was connected to traditions of Muscogee and Seminole hymns sung in churches across Oklahoma and Florida. These connections led her to Jewel Lavatta on the Brighton Seminole Indian Reservation in Florida. At Lavatta's church, though many Elders had passed, the congregation keeps this song tradition alive, which we see in their performance of "Mekusape Fullana."

Filmed in Tulsa, Harkins engages two young Cherokee musicians, Agalisiga Mackey and Kayln Fay, who perform original songs they wrote. Though not drawn from traditional music, both pieces are in Cherokee. With a modest introduction, Mackey places his song "We Live in the Woods" in a specific musical lineage, "I make country western songs, and you know, I think they come out pretty decent, and I hope y'all think so too." In his songwriting, Mackey hopes to show Indigenous folks what he does and inspire others to make art that centers and holds their customs. Kalyn Fay's "Spotted Bird," a slower folk song, concerns the relationship to owls in Cherokee stories and beliefs. Though Fay originally wrote the song in English, she performs a version on which she worked with a

Cherokee language translator. Fay's performance here echoes this gesture of language learning through song.

In one of the most recent segments, The White Buffalo Singers in Lethbridge perform "Grandmother's Song." They sing to elders in it, "Teach us our ways so we can carry them on." Gathered around a microphone wearing intricately adorned ribbon skirts as they beat out the rhythm for the song in unison on their hand drums, it's clear that this cycle of intergenerational transmission lives on for these youth.

For each of these filmed segments, the songs have a corresponding grouping of objects in the gallery: a notation of the score, a photograph from the recording session, and a custom-made shawl reflecting themes and ideas from the song and the performer. Inspired by Harkins' collaborations, they are a material translation of various elements of the songs. At the core of Elisa Harkins' exhibition, *Teach Me a Song*, is a proposition for a different kind of ethnomusicology. Together, all these components offer a type of study kit for learning these songs: the recording of the performance, the sheet music notation, and the shawl as a visual reference for the spirit of the music.

Across these encounters, the contexts and connections don't subscribe to a more conventional research methodology. Harkins gathers these exchanges across different locations, filming people on their home territory and away from their home territory, sharing both new and traditional songs. It is a different approach from ethnomusicology, with other goals. In many of these instances, the teaching gesture facilitated by Harkins is mirroring and repeating a continuous cycle of knowledge transmission. In that sense, *Teach Me a Song* is a prompt and an invitation for a form of continual study, one where the problematic structures of power and hierarchy that are at the foundation of ethnomusicology are recalibrated, making space for intergenerational and intertribal dialogue and collaboration to lead the work.



Pablo de Ocampo is Director and Curator of Moving Image at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. From 2014 to 2020, de Ocampo was Exhibitions Curator at the artist-run center Western Front in Vancouver, Canada. His previous positions include Artistic Director of Toronto's Images Festival from 2006 to 2014, co-founder/collective member of Cinema Project in Portland, Oregon, and in 2013, programmer of the 59th Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, *History is What's Happening* and is currently the President of the Board of Trustees for the Flaherty Seminar.

His writing has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *BlackFlash*, and in the catalogues *Wendelin van Oldenborgh: unset on-set* (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo), *Dissident Lines: Lis Rhodes* (Nottingham Contemporary), and *Low Relief: Lucy Raven* (EMPAC, Mousse, and Portikus).

Interview of Elisa Harkins by Tamara Smithers on 10-24-23

Gallery Guide Addendum, New Gallery, Austin Peay State University
Elisa Harkins, "Teach Me a Song" October 13–December 8, 2023
Wampum/DSW JSJJ, November 15, 6pm Trahern Black Box Theater

Tamara Smithers (TS): *Thank you for meeting with me on Zoom today. Did you grow up on the Muskogee Reservation in Tulsa, Oklahoma?*

Elisa Harkins (ES): No, I grew up around 70 miles north of here on the Miami Reservation in Miami, Oklahoma. It's the headquarters for 9 different tribes. It's the Seneca Cayuga, Miami, Shawnee—I'm trying to think of all the other ones.... Peoria is a really small town, super small. There's maybe 12,000 people there. My grandma lived here in Tulsa and my dad grew up here. Growing up, I didn't know the boundaries of the Muskogee Reservation. That wasn't until more recently, after the McGirt Decision when we were granted tribal sovereignty, that I really understood the boundaries of the Reservation, and that it spans from Tulsa all the way to Okmulgee.

TS: *You moved around a lot for your education; you were in New York, Chicago, and LA. What out of all those experiences and all those places most impacted your education and your creative output, and how?*

EH: Growing up in Miami, I studied dance. I also took voice lessons. As a youngster, I would travel around a lot and go to different different dance conferences and workshops and camps. I went to New York to study with Alvin Ailey and I didn't like it, and I quit and then I moved to Chicago and worked in advertising for a really long time. Chicago has such a vibrant art scene that I started curating, and then I had a really terrible bike accident, and I started making art and music after that. The bike accident had such an impact on my brain I had a brain bleed, 7 fractures in my face, my mouth was wired shut, and I lost a lot of memory. I was having problems holding down a 9 to 5 and going to work. I lost a lot of my skills from that brain injury, and I didn't know what to do. I moved to LA because my friends were all in LA. I was trying to work, I didn't have a car, and it was really difficult. I ended up applying to grad school, and I got into CALARTS. I would say that had the biggest impact on me. I think that out of all of my education that was the best school I've ever been to. They were really into performance and performance art, and they had an electronic music school within the Herb Albert School of Music. I had a lot of people encouraging me to do exactly what I wanted to do.

TS: *Can you tell me more about when you returned to Oklahoma, and why you decided to live on the Muskogee Reservation? And how does the community there impact your work?*

EH: I was adopted and on my adoption papers, I'm Japanese, Cherokee, and Muskogee, and so I wasn't enrolled. I had a closed adoption and it wasn't until I went to grad school, and my professors were saying you really need to be enrolled. You could get taken out of Indigenous art shows. People could contest that you're not indigenous and shut down your shows. cause. There's a law from the 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act. It was passed while Bush was president and Jimmy Durham, who is not enrolled Cherokee, had a show in San Francisco, a solo show, and it was taken down because of this act. He would be in a group show, and he'd be taken out of it. The Cherokee Nation is really serious about it, and you

can go to prison for saying you're indigenous, and making indigenous art [if you're not].

My teachers told me about this, and I told my parents; my parents never really wanted me to be enrolled, and they really felt like well, you're our daughter, and that's how we see the situation. We had to go through this really long process of getting a lawyer and opening up the documents and trying to find my natural parents and it took a really long time. We kept asking the Cherokee Nation, where's the enrollment? And they're like, no. Finally, we talked to the Muskogee Nation. And they were like, there she is. For years and years this went on, and I just was like, oh, this is never going to happen. We started this process while I was living in LA, and then nothing happened. A friend of mine passed and I made an art piece about it. She passed in a way that was very traumatic for me and my friends. I ended up working for the NFL doing graphic design and I don't even know anything about football. I was really unhappy, so I ended up moving back home and trying to figure out what I was gonna [sic] do. I got a fellowship here in Tulsa, so I ended up moving to Tulsa for like 3 and a half years when I was in this fellowship.

When I was in grad school, I had this life-changing studio visit with Wendy Red Star, whose Crow. She was like, okay, how do you make your work more tribally specific to to who you are? And so I was like, oh, well, the Cherokee Nation is very serious about language revitalization, and we have our own alphabet [syllabary]. That was created post-colonization by Sequoia [during the early 19th century], which then, we had, I think, the first newspaper, and so I was like, okay, our language is what makes us unique. Then I started teaching myself Cherokee on my own while I was in LA, and then, coming back to Oklahoma, I started taking online Cherokee lessons and in-person Muskogee lessons. That's how I reconnected with my tribe, and being invited to ceremonies and different things. I sing, so the first Muskogee language class that I went to, my teacher, Don Tiger, who passed during the pandemic, said, "Oh, hey, Hoktie, go learn this song "Hesaketv Meset Likes" and and come back next week and sing it for class. And so I went online and I learned it. Then came back to class and sang it. I know different hymns, so I sing those. People ask me to come to things and sing sometimes.

TS: You mentioned earlier about the granting back of the land? Can you talk more about that?

EH: I think it was in 2020, July 2020, when there was a court case. A citizen of the Muskogee Nation had committed a crime, and his defending lawyer said, well, the State of Oklahoma doesn't have jurisdiction over this case, so he can't be imprisoned in an Oklahoma state jail. He said the reason is because of this treaty [signed in 1866]. We were removed from the Southeast, forcibly removed [during the 19th century]. Thousands of our population died, more than half of our population died during this forced removal. And we signed a treaty. So you're forcibly removed, you go to Indian Territory, you start your new life there, and you have sovereignty over your tribal lands. Anyway, the case goes to the Supreme Court [in 2020] and the Supreme Court says, yes, the treaty is still good. This set a precedent for all the other tribes in Oklahoma. The Cherokee Nation said, is our treaty still good? Yes, granted tribal sovereignty. The Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, is our treaty still good? Yes, and then on and on and on. Almost all the tribes in Oklahoma got tribal sovereignty back. That means a lot of things. The governor is fighting it still. The governor and the mayor of Tulsa are fighting [it]. They're trying to overturn the McGirt Decision because of money. Basically we are owed taxes. I think 200 years of back taxes. Being granted tribal sovereignty means that we have jurisdiction over our land. But they are cross deputizing with the city of Tulsa, so that Tulsa police can also police tribal citizens.

A lot of really big changes have been made, and a lot of money, is going into healthcare and healthcare for veterans and behavioral health, domestic abuse, and elder housing, and just so many really amazing things. During the Covid pandemic, the State of Oklahoma wasn't vaccinating everyone and the Muskogee Nation set up vaccination centers. Basically, anyone, any tribal citizen, any non tribal citizen, anyone who wanted to get vaccinated, they would vaccinate them. Just watching this happen is has just been really amazing

TS: Your interest in community and your interest in the preservation of histories and traditions, and also sharing those. A big part of your work is that teaching or sharing aspect. As an Indigenous artist and composer, what do you believe is the most important part about exhibiting and performing for non-Native artists? What do you want them to receive from your from your work?

EH: I mean, there's a lot of things. I think I want people to grapple with the fact that Native people aren't all the same, and that there's such a wide variety, that it's not a monolith. And that there's not one genre of music and that there's no universality about Indigenous culture. It's very tribally specific, and even within that, there's so much diversity. I think that there's so many stereotypes and so many cartoons and that sort of thing. Those things are slowly being challenged and broken down. I think that through sharing songs, it really shows that Native people are making electronic music—it's the future and the present and the past all together.

TS: You mentioned the future--your work is described as "Indigenous Futurism." What does that mean to you and how does your work fit into that genre?

EH: Well, I think Indigenous Futurism is sort of imagining what an Indigenous future looks like. Sometimes collectively. And for me, a lot of it is about language preservation. In the future, of course there's Indigenous languages are on the radio, or they're on the TV or there's a pop star who's Indigenous. The regalia in the future is made out of satin and rhinestones, and really sparkly synthetic materials and is designed from a dress that's from the 1800s. [It's] just just sort of speculative fiction about what an Indigenous future looks like.

TS: Your current exhibit "Teach Me a Song" has been traveling around the American South. It was at the Crisp-Ellert Art Museum at Flagler College in St. Augustine, FL. And then it's gonna [sic] be on view here at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN October 13 through December 8 [2023], and then in the spring [2024], it goes with the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Arts at College at Charleston in Charleston, SC April 5 through July 20. And you're also going to be performing at the Spoleto Festival there. What is that body of work about?

EH: My language, teacher, Don Tiger, who taught me the Muskogee hymns, said if you know one indigenous song you can go anywhere in the world, any indigenous community, and you will, you know, have something to share with that community. It's sort of a old tradition, this Indigenous song sharing and trading. That's really kind of what inspired the project. And Loius Gray. He's an Osage elder. His ancestors are depicted in the new movie *Killers of the Flower Moon*. He said he wanted to teach me the AIM Song, the American Indian Movement Song, so I shot some video of that. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and then I realized that I was just really interested in sharing Indigenous songs. And, preserving languages, just showing the unique, embodied sort of knowledge that Indigenous people have. I also wanted to show that we're living, breathing people because a lot of the times

artwork is shown like artifacts, or it feels like it's dead, or it's from people who have already passed, or it's sort of presented in a way where we don't exist in the present or the future. I just really wanted to present the work in a way where it was celebrating people who are alive now, and people of all ages. [It's] an investigation into Indigenous music and indigenous musicology.

TS: The performance connected with this exhibition is called “Wampum.” For somebody who doesn't know the background, what is wampum? Why is it important to Native American cultures? And then maybe specifically, why is this performance called “Wampum”?

EH: In Cherokee culture, and actually other Indigenous cultures here in Oklahoma, and I think most notably, the Iroquois Confederacy, there are wampum belts for different peacekeeping agreements between tribes, but also treaties between non-Native people. The Iroquois Confederacy has a 2-row wampum [belt], which is white with 2 purple rows. The Dutch arrived on their lands, in a giant boat, and they said, well, we don't have a giant boat, we just have these little canoes. But we have this belt that looks like an equal sign: we're in one row and you're in the other row. Even though your boat is bigger than ours, they're still the same size and so we're going to kind of stay in our rows but still respect each other but not really interfere with each other, and live in peace this way. The Cherokees had a white wampum belt that was really huge. It was really long. And then after the peacekeeping ceremony, people would run across it. I was thinking about this, the wampum belts, and the metaphor for the performance, that it's a peacekeeping agreement with the members of the audience. While they're watching the performance, they're weaving this wampum belt together, a peacekeeping agreement to respect each other. The performance is really centered around language, revitalization, and language preservation of the Cherokee and Muskogee languages.

TS: I can't wait for the performance and the exhibition in November—thank you again for for being interviewed today.

EH: Thank you so much.



Tamara Smithers is Professor of Art History at Austin Peay State University where she was recently awarded the National Alumni Association Distinguished Professor Award. She received her PhD at Temple University in 2012 in Italian Renaissance art history. Select publications include a monograph book entitled *The Cults of Michelangelo and Raphael: Artistic Sainthood and Memorials as a Second Life* (Routledge Publishing, 2022), an edited volume called *Michelangelo in the New Millennium: Conversations about Artistic Practice, Patronage, and Christianity* (Brill Publishing, 2016), and essays on Michelangelo's Capitoline Hill in Rome, his working practices, and Raphael's style.

Smithers' research has been supported by Friends of Princeton University Library and the University of Tennessee Marco Institute grants, and the American Academy in Rome where she was a Visiting Scholar. She also teaches a Native American Visual Culture course and publishes on contemporary Native artists.

About the Artist:



Over the past several years, Harkins created an online Indigenous concert series called “**6 Moons**” and published a CD of Creek/ Seminole Hymns. She is the DJ of Mvhayv Radio, an Indigenous radio show on 91.1 FM in Tulsa, Okla. and 99.1 FM in Indianapolis, Ind. Radio III / **ᏚᏍᏍᏁᏍᏁ KT** is a dance performance in collaboration with dancer Hanako Hoshimi-Caines and artist Zoë Poluch featuring music and choreography by Harkins. With support from PICA and Western Front, songs from the performance have been collected into a limited edition double-LP which can be found on Harkins’ Bandcamp.

Harkins, who resides on the Muscogee (Creek) Reservation and is an enrolled member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, incorporates Indigenous language into each of her endeavors. She does this as an act of reclamation, a step towards decolonizing Indigenous musical traditions, and an attempt to alter the fate of these endangered languages. This mission is through active use, preservation on pressed vinyl, and radio play.

She received her bachelor’s degree from Columbia College, Chicago, and a Master of Fine Art from the California Institute of the Arts. She has since continued her education at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Harkins has exhibited her work at Crystal Bridges, documenta 14, The Hammer Museum, The Heard Museum, and Vancouver Art Gallery.

Associated Events:

Public Artist Lecture:

6 p.m. Nov. 14, AD120

Artist Performance:

Wampum / **DSW ᏍᏍᏁᏍᏁ**:

6 p.m. Nov. 15, Margaret Fort Trahern

Laboratory Theatre

A talk-back will follow performance

“**Teach Me a Song**” is organized in collaboration with The Crisp Ellert Museum at Flagler College (St. Augustine, FL) where the exhibition was on view from Sept. 7 through Oct. 18, 2023, and the Halsey Institute for Contemporary Art, College of Charleston (Charleston, S.C.) where the exhibition will run from April 5 through July, 2024.



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