

GYAAHLAANGEE DIINAA IIJANG

Here Is My Story

JASKWAAN*

In the Indigenous world, we find ourselves consistently reminded of the ever-present importance of *story*. Our laws, oral histories, and ways of being in the world all rely on our ability to tell, maintain, and give life to our Nation's stories. Indeed, when I think about the present state of the multitude of Indigenous languages in Canada, I envision hundreds of threads woven through our story of colonization, culminating in an intricate and significant present. To examine these elements of the Indigenous language story is to find a pathway for understanding, both for Indigenous people fighting to maintain and strengthen our languages, and for Canadians who have often received inadequate education about Indigenous issues in this country.

What is my language story? As a forty-year-old Haida woman, my first language is English. My second language is Spanish, thanks to a student exchange to Hermosillo, Mexico, at age eighteen. I began to seriously apply myself to learn my Indigenous language – *Xaad Kil*¹ *Haida language* – when I was twenty-four years old, pregnant with my first daughter, filled with hope that to learn *Xaad Kil* only required accessing Elders and learning resources. I thought that the lack of *Xaad Kil* in my life was perhaps because of my own inability to be a true Haida woman; with an adopted Waasdan Janaas² mother, maybe I lacked in my DNA the key to forming the words and describing my world the way my *kuuniisii ancestors* had. I thought this deficiency was a mark of my character, and that if I just applied myself properly, I would be living

* I was given the name Jaskwaan at birth by my grandmother Katie Adkins who said I am Jaskwaan's *Xants reincarnation*. My English name is Amanda Bedard, and my other Haida name is Kun Gwaanad, given to me by my auntie Daisy Parnell.

¹ *Xaad Kil* is the Gaw Tlagee *Old Massett* dialect of the Haida language, a combination of several dialects in the north end of Haida Gwaii. There is also *Xaayda Kil*, the Skidegate dialect, and *Xaat Kil*, spoken in our territory in southeast Alaska.

² Waasden Jaanas is the term for white women that means literally *Washington women*, carried over from the trade period in the eighteenth century. My mother Kathleen Bedard, a white Canadian, was adopted into the Tsiits Git'anee Eagle Clan before marrying my father, a Yahgu 'laanas Raven, so they could be properly married in the Haida way and all of her children (my brother and me) would have a clan to belong to.

up to my “Haida-ness,” my Indigeneity. I knew the songs, but not what they said. I mispronounced and glossed over words; I made the sounds but did not know their meaning.

After fifteen years embroiled in a journey learning *Xaad Kil*, I understand differently my limited access to and success learning my Indigenous language. Although my father was surrounded by the language until he was school aged, his generation spoke English almost exclusively as a first language. On the other hand, my grandparents’ generation almost all had *Xaad Kil* as a first language. They are no longer with us though: my *Tsinii grandfather* gone before my time, and my *Naanii grandmother* taken by cancer when I was just eight years old. When I think of my contemporaries, I understand that many of us do not have our grandparents with us, and those who did have grandparents as they grew up were very few. I also know that not one Haida in my generation has the Haida language as a first language.

I understand now that members of my grandparents’ generation were the ones born in the middle of the Potlatch ban³ and as Residential Schools were gaining momentum in the 1920s. They were the ones who experienced the harsh sting of signs at restaurants stating “No Indians Allowed”⁴ up until the 1960s. They grew up when the Canadian state’s hold on Indigenous lives was like a vise: Indian agents controlling reserve life and *Indian Act* laws confining food hunting and gathering, education, marriage, politics, songs, and place of residence. Every aspect of Indigenous peoples’ lives was documented and controlled by the mammoth that is the Department of Indian Affairs, the arm of government solely occupied with the lives of “Indians” in Canada. My grandparents’ generation, who were put through the Residential School system en masse, arrived with their first language of the land surrounding them like Eagle down, only to have it torn away with the thorns of English administered like a tortuous whip.

When I consider the number of children who died in those horrendous institutions,⁵ I understand that my grandparents’ friends and family were the ones who did not come back. Those from that generation who survived the “schools” decided to save their children from physical

³ The *Indian Act* ban of our political institution categorized in English as Potlatch that distributed wealth, passed on hereditary leadership, and affirmed our social structure and laws. The ban lasted from 1885 to 1951.

⁴ Prince Rupert, the nearest city centre directly across from Haida Gwaii on the mainland, is where certain restaurants would prevent Indians entry, as in other city centres across Canada at this time, roughly the 1920s to 1950s.

⁵ I have been told that upwards of forty thousand Indigenous children died while attending residential schools in the hundred-plus years of their existence.

and psychological abuse administered by the priests and nuns. And so they taught their children only English. They hid our language from their children. My father and his generation speak of it often, saying the Haida language was like a secret language. My father, third oldest of his siblings, was raised by his grandparents until he was school aged while his mother worked at the cannery. His grandparents, the late Chief Wiah *William Matthews* and Saandlaanee *Emma Matthews*, spoke mainly *Xaad Kil* in their home. My father understood *Xaad Kil* until he went to school, where he was allowed to speak only English. Many of my father's generation understand the language perfectly, as it surrounded them in their formative years. But almost none of them can speak it because they attended Day Schools or Residential Schools where they were forced to never speak the language.⁶ How can a generation of people who grew up surrounded by their language *not be able to speak it*? I have spent much of my adult life untangling this thread of our story and trying to gain understanding of how to heal the violent interruption of language transmission and to foster healthy and natural language speaking in our communities once again.

One of my earliest memories of my Naanii and Old Naanii was sitting in the living room of my great-grandparents' home in *Gaw Tlagee Old Massett*. I played on the living-room floor and heard the sounds of my grandmothers speaking to each other, the guttural sounds of *Xaad Kil* forming a low melody surrounding me, intermingled with smells of cedar, fresh bread, and *ts'ilt's dried salmon*. Their house was located on the site of a former longhouse named Nee 'Iiwaans, *Monster House*, an eight-beam-style longhouse said to be one of the largest ever built on Haida Gwaii. The house pit was significant and it is said it could fit hundreds of people. My great-grandfather Wiah was the successor to the Chief Wiah who built Nee 'Iiwaans. Hundreds of Haidas had visited, worked, and feasted on the location where I sat and played. The small wooden house of my great-grandparents sat on a fraction of the land where Nee 'Iiwaans once stood. Back during the heyday of Nee 'Iiwaans, most Haida were fluent in more than one dialect and many knew several languages: *Xaad Kil*, *Smalgyax Tsimshian*, English, Heiltsuk, Chinook,⁷ and English, to name but a few. The Haida language was spoken by every Haida on Haida Gwaii. Missionaries who came to live among our community learned the language to communicate with those here.

⁶ Community members who can understand the language but not speak it are known as Silent Speakers, and every Indigenous community has a portion of their population who are defined as such.

⁷ Chinook is a trade language that was spoken by all Nations along the Northwest Coast.



Figure 1. Gaw Tlagee *Old Massett*, 1979. Saandlaanee Emma Matthews and Jaskwaan. Photo by Ken and Kathy Bedard.



Figure 2. Primrose Adams and Jaskwaan Bedard, First Peoples' Cultural Council Mentor-Apprentice Training, Richmond, BC, 2014. Photo by Aliana Parker, FPCC.

Everywhere you went, Xaad Kil surrounded you. Even the Ravens could speak, according to Old Naanii. It would have been difficult for anyone at that time to believe that in a few generations only a handful of people alive would be fully fluent in our dialect, that learners would struggle to form even the most basic sentences.

I do understand that what my grandparents wanted most for their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren was to have a successful life, with comfort and peace. They lived through harsh and unforgiving racism, injustice, and oppression. The erroneous Canadian narrative was (is) that Indigenous peoples were less than and needed saving, that by the fate of evolution we found ourselves on reserves, a small fraction of what we once were, clinging to an ancient past that prevented us from success in the new world that colonialism bestowed upon us. This messaging to Canadians and Indigenous people survives to this day – that Indigenous peoples are somehow less capable than other Canadians of becoming educated and successful. I know now that the constant encouragement by my Naanalang to achieve a formal education was the result of that narrative.⁸ They wanted me to reach my potential to live a life that allowed me to rise above the racist sentiments directed towards our people.

I grew up in Prince Rupert, the mainland city close to our islands, and graduated from high school voted valedictorian. I achieved my B.A. from the University of Victoria with a major in history and minor in Indigenous studies, and then an MA in Indigenous governance a few years later. I have recently obtained my teaching degree from Simon Fraser University. Through every step of my educational journey, I am reminded by my father how proud my Naanalang and Old Tsinii would be. He said his Tsinii always emphasized the importance of education. My focus in my BA was the history of the Northwest Coast; my MA in Indigenous governance examined *Yahgudang respect* in relation to learning Xaad Kil. I sought my teaching degree so I could teach Xaad Kil in the public school system in my community. I have been made to feel my academic achievements honour my culture to my greatest ability. My great-grandparents were highly respected leaders in our village: Chief Wiah, a renowned hereditary chief of Gaw Tlagee *Old Massett*, and Saandlaanee, a storyteller and knowledge holder held in high esteem.

⁸ My maternal grandfather, the late Dr. Edward Hyde, had also given me constant encouragement to attend post-secondary school and I know he is smiling down from above.

Yet from early on in my Western educational journey until my MA program in Indigenous governance, I encountered the view that Indigenous ways of knowing are less valuable and less reliable than European ways of knowing. Throughout my history degree, I faced racism through academic text, lecture, discussion, and evaluation. As the institution I attended repeatedly eviscerated the dignity of my people, I felt a range of emotions that often settled on anger. Canadian historical texts proclaimed our decimation delivered by smallpox, firearms, alcohol, and sexually transmitted disease; if we happened to survive all that, then we would be susceptible to higher rates of cancer, diabetes, suicide, heart disease, HIV, arthritis, and indigestion. And *then*, if we miraculously survived genocide and disease, according to the colonial narrative, we would be more likely to suffer from poverty, joblessness, low graduation rates, alcoholism, addiction, rape, child apprehension, and murder. I often sat in a room full of non-Indigenous students and wondered if I deserved accolades simply for being alive. Considering my middle-class upbringing in a rather typical Canadian city much akin to many around the room, such thoughts were ridiculous, but their existence speaks to the pervasive nature of statistics and post-colonial narratives of erasure.

As I journey through the maze of academia where the way of life of my grandparents who wanted me to attend is often treated with a lack of Yahgudang, I continue to find ways to cope with the disregard for that which deserves the utmost honourable treatment. My MA in Indigenous governance gave me opportunity to counter the harmful narrative about Indigenous ways of knowing, as the stringent academic expectations set our program apart in extensive validation of Indigenous epistemology. Throughout my master's program, I was reminded of a teaching from my Naanalang that it is entirely possible to fulfill my role as a Haida woman by honouring my clan, family, and community in the Haida way *and also* to contribute in significant ways to Canadian society. Saandlaanee, my Old Naanii, collaborated on a number of academic texts: *The Curtain Within: Haida Social and Mythical Discourse* (Boelscher);⁹ *Queen Charlotte Islands Vol. 2: Of Places and Names* (Dalzell);¹⁰ and *Plants of Haida Gwaii* (Turner),¹¹ to name a few. Skil Jaadee *Phyllis Bedard*, my grandmother, was an activist, creating social change along the Northwest Coast via the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union, pres-

⁹ Marianne Boelscher, *The Curtain Within: Haida Social and Mythical Discourse* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Kathleen E. Dalzell, *The Queen Charlotte Islands Vol. 2: Of Places and Names* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1989).

¹¹ Nancy J. Turner, *Plants of Haida Gwaii* (Winlaw, BC: Sono Nis Press, 2004).

surging for Indigenous workers' rights soon after the time that "Indians" gained the federal vote (1960). It was the Haida value of Yahgudang that motivated my Naanalang to make such an impact; they were successful *because* of their Indigeneity, not *despite* it. This truth about their story directly contradicts colonial narratives that Indigeneity impedes full potential, success, or even survival. I have carried this understanding from my grandmothers' teachings throughout my journey, and I know it is my responsibility to honour my Indigeneity and thereby honour those who came before me.

My life journey has brought me to a place where I understand that our story and truth can only be told fully in our language. English lacks the capacity to describe our world and our experience. Throughout my bachelor's, master's, and teaching degrees and even now as I contemplate pursuing my doctorate, I have held fast to the understanding that the greatest learning I can achieve is fluency in my language. Over the past decade and a half, I have endeavoured to learn and strengthen *Xaad Kil* in a multitude of ways. I have attended with my children and worked as resource developer and coordinator at the *Xaad Kil Gwaaygange Haida language nest* where babies to four year olds learn from the Elder speakers; I have coordinated community programs for *Xaad Kihlga Hl Suu.u Everyone Speak Haida Society*; I have attended and taught community language courses via Simon Fraser University's First Nations Language Program; I have co-written a book and co-curated an accompanying exhibition (2011–2012) honouring our Elder Haida language speakers called *That Which Makes Us Haida: The Haida Language* (Haida Gwaii Museum Press, 2011); I have worked as a transcriber and translator for the Council of the Haida Nation's Aboriginal title case since 2009, building an oral history collection with hundreds of recordings of our *kuniisii* translated and transcribed; I have written an integrated resource package for Haida language grades 5 to 12 for School District 50 Haida Gwaii, approved by the Ministry of Education in 2017, allowing the Haida language to be recognized formally as a second language; I have taught grades 8 to 12 Haida language in the high school in Massett; I have spearheaded the name change of said high school to *Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay Strong Minded House* from the previous colonial name George M. Dawson High School (2016); I helped implement language curriculum in all the schools in the Haida Gwaii school district as the Haida language and culture curriculum implementation teacher; I have transcribed and translated for all organizations and publications on Haida

Gwaii; and I currently teach Xaad Kil in the elementary school from kindergarten to grade 7.

Outside of being a mother to my three children, one of my greatest accomplishments is completion of the mentor-apprentice program with Elder Primrose Adams, the daughter of renowned Haida matriarch Florence Edenshaw-Davidson. Primrose is one of the few speakers remaining who has our dialect Xaad Kil as their first language. My Xaad Kil journey, outlined above with noted highlights, brought me to a specific time and place in 2013 where I was able to apply to a targeted Indigenous language-learning program offered through First Peoples' Cultural Council.¹² The program is based on a method developed in California and focuses on oral immersion of an Indigenous language learner with an Elder speaker.¹³ It removes spoken and written English from the learning process through a series of specific and proven methods; my years of academic training to write everything down studiously had to be trained out of me as we put the pen and paper away, only writing in our language for a short time at the end of each session. Over three years, I completed more than a thousand hours of one-on-one language learning with Primrose using the mentor-apprentice program method.

This accomplishment brings me great pride, as the barriers and difficulties I had to overcome were many and overwhelming. Several times over the years, I questioned my ability to learn Xaad Kil and complete the mentorship. What prevented me from giving up was my responsibility to honour my Naanalang, my Tsinii Wiah, and all of my kuniisii who came before me who honoured this place with the language of the land. Primrose is the age my Naanii Skil Jaadee would have been if she hadn't passed away before her time. Primrose and my Naanii were both Yahgu Jaanas *women of the Yahgu* 'laanas Raven clan. They had grown up together and spent time at K'iis Gwaay *Langara Island* when the entire village still moved there to fish for several months of every year. I thought of my Naanii often during my mentorship journey – of how strong like Primrose she was, and how she was talented at whatever she put her mind to, also like Primrose. I shared endless cups of coffee with Primrose, went on numerous errands, and travelled to various places as we reviewed methods inherent in the mentor-apprentice program. We overcame times of discomfort, stress, and frustration during the

¹² First Peoples' Cultural Council Mentor-Apprentice Program is a highly successful program of Indigenous language acquisition. More information can be found on their website at fpcc.ca.

¹³ Leanne Hinton et al., *How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning* (Berkeley: Heydey Books, 2002).

learning process; the times of laughter and victory made the hard times disappear and all seem worth it. Learning the language from Primrose is a gift I shall always treasure and am so honoured to receive. I also learned how to knit, how to bake Christmas cake, and absorbed advice on how to set boundaries and how to care for myself and my family – all things I know in my heart that I would have learned from my Naanii Skil Jaadee.

I have one particularly vivid memory from my apprenticeship experience, driving home one night from Primrose's home. It had been a particularly challenging evening during which a three-person panel had evaluated what I had learned in my previous hundred hours of apprenticeship. Suddenly, I had to pull over as I started to cry uncontrollably. A heavy pressure began in my chest, tears flowed over my face, and my cry turned into a wail. I sat in my car, a deep grief surrounding me, as I wailed and sobbed. The experience shook me to the core, as it felt like I could not stop the flow of grief. I have since learned the *Xaad Kil* word *sGaayhl t'axid* to wail in overwhelming grief. I understand now that that grief was not only mine. It is all of ours. Grief at the unnecessary historical circumstances that prevented natural language transmission in our homes, families, and communities.

I have heard from my Elder teachers, almost all of them now gone, that it is the young ones who will bring the language back. As someone in the trenches of language revitalization here in *Gaw Tlagee*, I understand that the language will return to us with hard work, support, effort, healing, and cooperation. Our Haida law of *Yahgudang* guides us and will bring us through the continued hardships of language learning. To this day, we feel the effects of government policies and practices that violently removed our mother tongue from our consciousness. Anger, grief, frustration, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, a need to strike out and blame those around you: all are ongoing, chronic symptoms of the Canadian policy of Indigenous language removal. There is little infrastructure for language programming in our community – a difficulty common in many Indigenous communities. We experience continuous barriers to long-term sustainable funding; and the sense of urgency as our mother-tongue speakers pass away fosters panic and sometimes irreparable infighting. I have faced barrier upon barrier to learning my language, and I carry with me a responsibility that has allowed me to overcome these barriers, but not without consequence. I often wonder – what if I had chosen a different path, a different story? What would

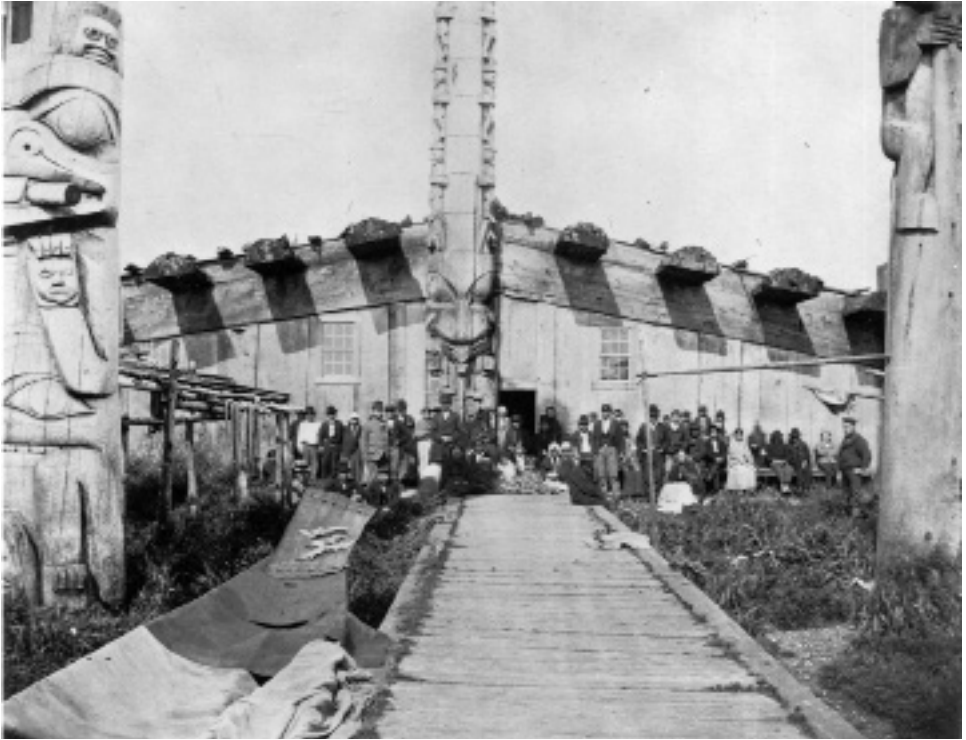


Figure 3. Nee 'Iiwaans Monster House Gaw Tlagee *Old Massett*, 1879. Photo by O.C. Hastings.
 Source: Image PN 10982 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

life be like without this heavy weight that can feel at times unbearable? I know in my heart, however, that this story chose me.

The rationale behind forcing Indigenous peoples to stop speaking their language was racist and based on erroneous suppositions. It was widely taught to Canadians and to Indigenous people that the deliberate attempt to erase our language was meant to enable us to gain access to an assimilated life in Canada, a “better” life than one rife with poverty and hardship. Never mind that poverty derived not from our language but from race-based economic oppression and restrictive policies that severed our ties to the land. This fantastical reasoning denied us access to the ways of thinking, knowing, and being that were (are) inherent in our sense of self and our relationship to the lands and waters around us. Today it is widely proclaimed that speaking more than one language provides an intellectual edge: it is healthy for your intelligence and promotes greater understanding of the world. I picture those venerated in

our Nation's history, among them Chief Wiah, Saandlaanee, Skil Jaadee, and Primrose, and I know that their ability to understand and converse in both worldviews enabled them to achieve greatness and respect. The attempted erasure by the Canadian state of our languages has placed in front of us yet another useless, nonsensical barrier. But it has not succeeded. Our stories tell us we will be here until the beginning of time visits us once again, when we will cycle through the Raven Travelling stories once more, as we learn the language of this place word by word as our Tl'adgwa Xaadee *long ago people* had done Awaahl agwiiiiiii *a long long time ago*. And that, dii tawlang *my friends*, brings us to the beginning of this story, as Haida people now have opportunity to rebirth ourselves into this world full of strength, pride, ability, purpose, and, above all, Yahgudang that will carry us forward surrounded once more by strength and beauty of Xaad Kil.

Haw'aa dalang 'waadluwaan ahl kil 'laagang¹⁴ *I respectfully thank you all.*

¹⁴ I respectfully thank Primrose Adams, Dr. Marianne Ignace (née Boelsher), Lawrence Bell, and my teachers no longer with us: the late June Russ, Stephen Brown, Emily Goertzon, Mary Swanson, Adelia Dix, Claude Jones, and Ethel Jones, who took the time and care to teach me and my family Xaad Kil *Haida language*. I hold you all in high esteem for what you have done.