# SOVEREIGN GRAFFITI ON HAIDA GWAII

## *A Photo Essay*

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Figure 1. "Yakuudang." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

CONSIDER THE JUXTAPOSITION between these two images of graffiti (Figures 1 and 2), painted within two metres of each other on the ruins of what was once a Canadian Armed Forces base. In the first, the most prominent word is "*Yakuudang*," a word in the Haida language that translates, broadly speaking, to "respect."[1]

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Figure 2. "Hello, I'm glad you exist." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

Right underneath, in bright red, is written "Stop LNG!" in reference to a proposed Canadian project to refine and transport liquified natural gas from the coast of British Columbia overseas for sale. It would not be difficult to read both of these statements through a distinctly Haida lens. *Yahguudang* is a significant phrase and concept in contemporary Haida life, acting as a mandate for and description of a host of different relationships between different communities of humans and other-than-humans (Weiss 2018, 134–36; Blackman 1992, 136; Boelscher 1988, 70–71). The phrase has also been taken up by the Council of the Haida Nation (CHN), the governing body for the Haida Nation as a whole,[2]

of this research were conducted with the support of the American Philosophical Society and the Canadian Museum of History, and we would also like to thank the Old Massett Village Council and the Village of Masset for giving us permission to use elements of this work and for their feedback and support.

[1] A more typical spelling *Xaad Kil* in the Northern dialect of Haida, would be *Yahguudang*, which we use going forward to avoid confusion.

[2] Council of the Haida Nation is distinct from the Old Massett Village Council and the Skidegate Band Council, which administer the individual Old Massett and Skidegate Bands and associated reserves, respectively. By contrast, CHN negotiates for the Haida Nation as a unified entity with regard to Title claims, resource management, and cultural revitalization projects, among other responsibilities.

which named its foundational 2005 "Land Use Vision" for the islands of Haida Gwaii *Haida Gwaii Yah'guudang*[3] – literally, "respecting Haida Gwaii." *Yahguudang*'s twinning with "Stop LNG" makes sense from this perspective. The proposed project is deeply unpopular on Haida Gwaii, particularly with the Haida community, and its environmental threat to the islands can be read both as an attack on Haida sovereignty – a violation of *Yahguudang* between human communities – and, equally, a violation of the rights of the islands' other beings and thus precisely the opposite of "respecting Haida Gwaii." In short, these are mottos that can be read as deeply engaged with Haida rights, Haida politics, and the ways in which these things are fundamentally intertwined with Haida cultural practices and concepts.

At first glance, the second photo, with its slogans of "Hello, I'm glad you exist" and "Teach teens to be radical & love their bodies," seems to belong to a quite different world. And yet, we would suggest otherwise, drawing on Lenape scholar Joanne Barker's seminal (re)-articulation of the concept of sovereignty for (and within) Indigenous polities. Surveying the then still ongoing writing process for what would become the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Barker (2005, 19–20) writes:

> Human rights for indigenous peoples, in other words, became translated to mean rights to a self-determination that was indelibly linked to sovereignty. So strong is this conceptualization that it is now virtually impossible to talk about what sovereignty means for indigenous peoples without invoking self-determination. As a consequence, sovereignty has been solidified within indigenous discourses as an inherent right that emanates from historically and politically resonant notions of cultural identity and community affiliation.

Sovereignty, in this reading, is not just a political formation; rather, it is the assertion of an Indigenous right to exist *as such*, inextricably bound to both ongoing cultural histories and processes of community formation. Sovereignty thereby becomes read as a particular (broadly construed but *not* thereby underspecified) means of being human.[4] In this essay, we suggest that the graffiti that now adorns the ruined walls of the former

[3] http://www.haidanation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/HLUV.lo_rez.pdf.

[4] Barker's point in this, it is worth adding, is not necessarily that this understanding of sovereignty is *correct*; rather, she uses it to demonstrate the ways in which sovereignty has become opened up to Indigenous resignification, which pushes the concept well beyond the confines of its Western European, Westphalian origins.

Canadian Forces Station Masset can be read as sovereign in a similar sense: a means of expressing the complexities of what it means to be human, to be Haida or a neighbour of the Haida Nation,[5] and to exist politically and personally without needing to draw firm distinctions between these categories.

## RESIGNIFYING MILITARY RUINS

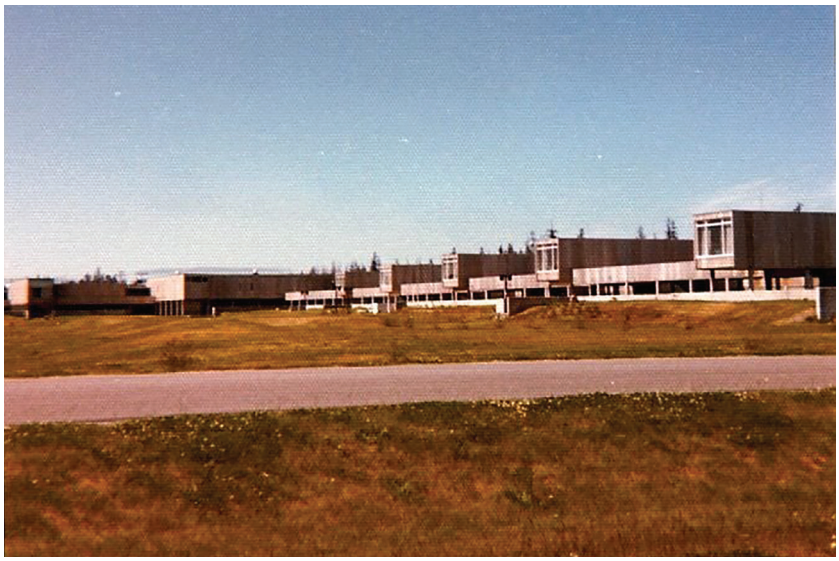

Figure 3. The Base in its heyday. Photo by Shirley Greves circa the late 1970s, used with permission.

The buildings that made up the barracks, recreation centre, and administrative facilities of Canadian Forces Station Masset stood in the centre of the Village of Masset from the end of the 1960s to 2014, though the Base itself (as it was popularly known in the community) was decommissioned in 1997.[6] Though no longer military facilities after 1997, the Haida community of Old Massett and the Village of Masset made the joint decision to maintain the recreation centre – mostly in order to preserve

[5] Of course, the word *xaada* already means "human," or, perhaps more accurately, "person," so to be human and to be Haida are already intimately linked, to say the least.

[6] Though the residential core was decommissioned, the Canadian Department of Defence continues to maintain radio listening facilities outside Masset's immediate environs. These facilities are now known as Canadian Forces Station Leitrim Detachment Masset, staffed by a small crew of operators quite unlike the hundreds of military personnel who occupied CFS Masset during the Base's period of primary operation between the 1970s and early 1990s.

its swimming pool – until this became cost prohibitive and the buildings were fully abandoned and then, ultimately, demolished in the fall of 2014.[7] The squat brown buildings that had dominated the town were gone; all that is left were the outlines of concrete walls and a few old steps jutting out of the grass.

Figure 4. The ruins. Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

Ruins can be many things. They can exist as the "enduring gashes," the "indelible fissures" of ongoing colonial histories, to borrow the wonderfully evocative language of Ann Stoler (2016, 6) – material reminders that our contemporary infrastructures have been shaped by projects of violence and domination that continue even as their material remnants seem to have decayed. Or ruins can work to hide those very projects, making it appear that a prior era has vanished as its structures gradually efface themselves in ways that hide the very real continuities between past and present, then and now (Gordillo 2014; Weiss 2021). Whether they reiterate, hide, or both at once, however, ruins themselves matter and are thereby open to resignification in ways that have the potential, at the very least, to simultaneously reject both historical violence and the erasure of that ongoing history (Leathem 2021). Ruins, that is to say, can be a canvas.

[7] For a more detailed account of the history of CFS Masset and the aftermath of its decommissioning, see Weiss 2021.

The fact that ruins can act as canvases upon which new meanings can be made does not remove them from their original forms of signification, complex and ambivalent as those already might be. Rather, aesthetic work like graffiti or street art "layers" itself on already established historical narratives, acting as forms of commentary, rejection, refusal, and transformation (Leathem 2021). Indigenous graffiti, moreover, engages a specifically colonial landscape, acting, as Mathew Ryan Smith (2018, 254) argues, to draw "attention to the ways that the existence of settler colonial infrastructure and architecture operates as material evidence of indigenous suffering." The potential of graffiti to *de*colonize rests precisely on the resignification of colonial spaces towards Indigenous ends. The ruins of CFS Masset are thus more than simply a neutral site upon which new words can be written; nor, by definition, does the space overdetermine the meanings being conveyed by the graffiti artists. It is in this juncture between overdetermination and innovation, we suggest, that there exists the work of a contemporary figure of sovereignty.

The graffiti that now festoons the ruins of the Base was painted by the Grade 11 and 12 students of Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay Secondary School soon after the Base was demolished, between 2015 and 2016. The graffiti was painted under the supervision of a teacher, but beyond asking students to avoid sexually explicit images, the teenagers were given free rein simply to "express what they were feeling," as their instructor, "Sam," put it.

Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay is the only secondary school on the north side of Haida Gwaii, and its classes thus include both Haida and settler students. In order to protect the identities of these students, we have not attempted to identify or speak to individual artists directly.[8] Consequently, we do not know which artists painted each individual piece of graffiti. While it might then be tempting to identify the graffiti that explicitly invokes Haida rights and culture as belonging exclusively to Haida students, we would push against this for several reasons. First, while there is a substantial history of anti-Indigenous racism on Haida Gwaii (Weiss 2018, ch. 2), there are also many families that count both Haida and non-Haida among their relations. Second, and rather more important than demographics, the graffiti was painted by Sam's classes together, meaning that we should not assume that any of the pieces that

[8] We spoke to Sam, the instructor who initially organized the graffiti project, extensively, and we also asked him to read over this essay for accuracy and content. In addition, one of us, Joseph Weiss, has been conducting fieldwork on Haida Gwaii for close to a decade, and this analysis builds on those experiences and prior publications, most significantly Weiss 2018, Weiss 2020, and Weiss 2021.


Figure 5. "Hope." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

now cover the ruins have sharply individuated authors. Finally, and most crucial for the purposes of this essay, the fact that the graffiti we are examining conveys explicit messaging about Haida political and cultural rights in conjunction with messages of self-care, peace, and healing is even more significant when we understand it as having a "hybrid" author – classes containing students who are both Haida and non-Haida individually and as a class on the whole. Haida sovereignty here is thus foregrounded for (and by) equally Indigenous and settler subjects.

## PEACE AND TITLE

To wit, "Haida Title" (Figure 6) painted in bold yellow ink, just to the right of a peace symbol and the message "The best thing you can do is to believe in you" and a smiling face. As with the vast majority of First Nations in what is now called British Columbia, the Haida Nation never gave up, sold, or negotiated away the Title to their ancestral territories, which in this instance comprise the entirety of the islands of Haida Gwaii, the surrounding waters, and the air above the islands. Haida People have asserted Title from the very first attempts of settler colonizers


Figure 6. "Haida Title." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

Figure 7. And its context … Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

to occupy their territories. In response to the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission of 1913 on Indian Affairs in British Columbia, for instance, Haida Chief Alfred Adams told the commissioners that Haida "had been in sole possession of the island, with our houses scattered at the mouths of every river and stream." Fellow Haida leader James Sterling commented in response to the commission's effort to establish and demarcate reserve boundaries on the islands that "we tried to make ourselves believe we were in our own country, but we are more and more reminded that what we supposed was ours, is said on [*sic*] many cases to belong to men who never saw these islands" (quoted in Krmpotich 2014, 29).[9] Building on this history of opposition to colonial incursion, the Council of the Haida Nation was established in the 1970s to negotiate for Haida Title to this territory on behalf of the Haida community as a whole. By the 1980s, it had developed into a fully formed Haida government, with its own constitution and elected officers. This transformation was galvanized through a series of acts of land protection that centred Haida sovereignty, most famously the blockade on Athlii Gwaii (Lyell Island) (Collison 2018; Weiss 2018, ch. 5).

CHN's leaders built on the successes of this activism in order to begin negotiations with the Crown for the recognition of the Nation's sovereign rights to its own lands and waters over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. Likewise, the ultimate Haida victory in 2004's *Haida v. British Columbia* established that both the Crown and individual corporations have a *legal* (rather than simply a moral) duty to consult with Indigenous Nations on whose (claimed) territories they wish to engage in resource extraction (Takeda 2014). Dissatisfied with the Crown's offer of Title for around 5 percent of Haida Gwaii's total territory, the CHN's leader at the time, Guujaw, asserted that the only percentage that the Haida would be satisfied with during negotiation was 100 percent (Gill 2010), positioning the CHN to engage in extended (and still ongoing) negotiations with the Crown and British Columbia in a "treaty-alternative" framework.

We offer this (very) schematic history to give some sense of the political landscape in which the students of Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay have grown up. Title is an ongoing topic of conversation, intimately interwoven with people's senses of Haida culture as both personal and political. The negotiations process can be controversial for some, but we are not sure that we have ever met anyone on island who identifies as Haida and who does not support the fight for Haida Title in principle,

[9] We are grateful to Jaskwaan *Amanda Bedard* for encouraging us to thicken our historical account of Haida Title here.

at the very least. These are children, in other words, who have grown up aware that part of being Haida is participating in the fight for the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and that non-Haida on island have a necessary relationship to that struggle as long as they live on Haida lands. Thus, we see "Haida Title" in bold capitals on the ruins of the Base, keeping company with affirmations and symbols of peace. All of these are means of articulating proper relationships – proper relationships between the Crown and the Haida Nation, proper relationships between people, and proper relationships to the self. Taking these messages together – painted in the same ink whether or not they are all by the same hands – offers us a political theory that refuses to distinguish the public from the private, the political body from the corporeal body, the aspirations of an Indigenous community from the hopes and dreams of teenagers attempting to understand themselves and the world that, one day, they will inherit. We should learn to love ourselves and we should honour Haida Title.

It is worth highlighting how genuinely radical these interwoven enunciations are, especially given the ways in which the institutions of settler


Figure 8. "In Haida we trust." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

colonialism in Canada have attempted to erase Indigenous communities throughout the history of this country. Alongside land appropriation and resource excoriation, attempts to condition Indigenous people – especially children – to feel ashamed of their backgrounds, traditions, languages, and modes of being have been endemic since the earliest missionization efforts in British Columbia. Punishing children for speaking their languages and practising their cultures was, as is now well known, a significant dimension of the ways in which the residential schools system attempted to "kill the Indian in the child," as was teaching children that their parents were ignorant of law, reason, and proper religion (TRC 2015; Milloy 1999). If Native children were conditioned to hate their own backgrounds, the logic went, they would be easier to assimilate into settler society. This would, in turn, make what was frequently referred to as the "Indian problem" in British Columbia – the ongoing presence of Indigenous communities who continued to claim collective territorial, cultural, and political rights despite their ghettoization on reserves – into a non-issue, as a distinctly Indigenous population would simply disappear on its own (Harris 2002).

The confirmation of the word "trust" in the message "In Haida we trust" is thus more profound than it might first appear, as is the language of affirmation that recurs throughout the graffiti. In the face of systematic policies that attempted to make the parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of Haida children disappear, either through outright violence or the imposition of shame and self-loathing, to "trust in Haida" radically inverts more than a century of colonial logics. The phrase plays on the American motto "In God we trust," putting "Haida" in the place of the word "God" and leaving the "we" unspecified. There is refusal in this, without question, as per Audra Simpson's (2014) influential formulation: the ways in which Haida assumes the place of God can be read as a rejection of the power of Christianity, whose various denominations had primary responsibility for staffing and managing the vast majority of Canada's residential schools and commonly took conversion as a primary objective in their relations with Indigenous communities.[10] More simply, the phrase positions Haida – not differentiating between cultural identity, political affiliation, or traditional or elected leadership – as worthy of the trust of a similarly undifferentiated "we." Here, it is Haida that leads, that enables the formation of community through its trustworthiness. It is strength and connection, not shame.

Recognizing the ways in which so many of the graffitied slogans and phrases are proscriptive (either explicitly or by implication) is crucial to

[10] Which is not to say that these relationships were necessarily uncomplicated or one-sided, as Susan Neylan (2003), for instance, shows.


Figure 9. "Teach Peace." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

understanding the social work they are doing. Haida Gwaii is relatively remote, and even its largest towns comprise fewer than a thousand people. The students of Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay have not had the same opportunities as have their fellow young people in British Columbia's urban centres to participate in large-scale protests or youth-driven political actions (though certainly Haida teenagers *do* participate in these things when given the opportunity, sometimes spectacularly).[11] Likewise, they are not yet old enough to participate in most of the formal political opportunities that do exist on island, either in relationship to Haida or to settler governments. Their field of engagement, then, must by definition be primarily aspirational. But aspiration is a powerful thing: it allows these teenagers to set the terms for the kind of worlds they wish to live within, to define the field of relationships (to other *and* self) that they hope to embrace. It is a part of a process that one of us has previously termed "future-making" (Weiss 2018): the attempt to realize certain futures (and avoid others) becomes both an ideological orientation and

[11] Haida youth Haana Edenshaw's speech to the United Nations in 2019 is remarkable evidence of the political insights, commitments, and ambitions of which the islands' young people can be capable, and it is given here in full: https://www.haidagwaiiobserver.com/news/haida-youth-travels-to-new-york-for-un-forum-on-indigenous-issues/.

a concrete target for social work.[12] This is performative work, in the classically Austinian sense – it changes the world with words, or at the very least it attempts to do so. In this sense we can understand both the explicitly prospective sentences ("Teach Peace," "Teach teens to be radical and love their bodies," "Stop LNG") and the seemingly descriptive ones ("In Haida we trust," "*Yakuudang*," "Haida Title") as participating together in the same performative, aspirational project. They are all working together, aspirationally, in sketching out the desired future for the students of Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay and, in doing so, are playing a part in realizing that very future.

## "MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR"


Figiure 10. "make love not war." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

While this graffiti would do at least some of this social work wherever it was placed, the fact that these statements and images were painted on the remnants of a Canadian military installation positions them in

[12] Future-making might seem prosaic in settler contexts, but for Indigenous communities who were defined as being doomed, unable to even continue to exist, much less generate new or innovative futures for themselves, it is of tremendous social, political, cultural, and affective significance.


Figure 11. "Stop Wars." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

dialogue (both implicit and explicit) with militarism – both Canada's and, one suspects, more broadly. These messages are unequivocally anti-war, centring "love" – an affect that recurs throughout the graffiti – and invoking the need for war to end. While such messages certainly resonate with a broader landscape of teenage idealism, they also "pulse" more specifically within the broader history of Haida Gwaii, to borrow Ann Stoler's (2008) term. For older residents of Haida Gwaii, the ruins of the Base index both the presence and the absence of the Canadian military in the communities of Masset and Old Massett. They are a reminder that, for most of the second half of the twentieth century, the economic (and often social) life of Masset revolved around CFS Masset, paving the roads, providing employment, and dividing the communities between those who had access to military stores and facilities and those who did not. Equally, they remind Haida people of the ways in which access to their lands and resources were restricted by military personnel, who, as one Haida friend put it, would "meet Elders out berry picking with loaded rifles." Yet more complexly, even, the ruins of the Base are *also* an index for the ambivalence that many felt when the military left (or, rather, appeared to leave) so quickly in the late 1990s, leaving little behind but a recreation centre whose operation could not be maintained (Weiss 2021).

"Stop Wars," "make love not war," and other such messages mark a break with this ambivalence. They speak to war as a broad concept that the military incarnates rather than the intimate histories of CFS Masset, eliding the specificities of the Base itself even as its ruins form their canvas. Their horizons are general, punning on pop culture shibboleths and linking anti-war activism to other kinds of political projects. This is, in itself, a potent kind of claim. As we have emphasized, CFS Masset was literally and figuratively at the centre of life in Masset (and even to an extent Old Massett) for much of the lives of the parents and grandparents of these students. To take its ruins merely as an icon of war, as such, is also to remove their centrality in the life of Haida Gwaii. It is to state that CFS Masset itself no longer matters, just as the matter that comprises its ruins is no longer quite the same as it was when the Base stood. (The use of the ruins of a military base as a site for anti-war messages is also a clever means of asserting the validity of these claims; after all, if *this* military base is already gone, why would others not follow suit?)

In place of the ambivalent history of CFS Masset, which reinforced already present tensions between settler and Indigenous and created new divisions of its own, these graffiti push instead for unified political


Figure 12. "Work for Justice." Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July, 2017.

action. Peace and justice are given here not just as a desired good but as the concrete outcomes of labour. Do not forget, however, that "peace" here (and "justice," for that matter) are *not* simply blanket terms; rather, they are linked to Haida Title and to *Yahguudang* in its many complexities. Such an association responds in yet another way to the history of Haida Gwaii, and, indeed, to settler colonialism in Canada, by positioning the achievement of Indigenous sovereignty as an integral dimension of what it means to achieve peace and justice. One could also read this the other way, suggesting that peace and justice are just as integral to the realization of Haida rights and Title. Indigenous rights, in this rendering, are not parochial issues of concern only to a "minority"; rather, the realization of sovereignty is (better) understood as a crucial dimension of political action for young people in Canada, tout courte.

## "WE ARE ONE"


Figure 13. Tableau. Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

In these last images (Figures 13 and 14) we see a tableau that illustrates many of the different threads drawn together in this short essay. Affirmations, calls to "speak up," explicit references to Haida Gwaii and Haida youth, and assertions of unity. "We are one." It is this last, in particular, that we want to highlight as a final thought. In the last fifteen years, the term "reconciliation" has become commonplace in Canadian


Figure 14. Tableau. Photo by Hilary Morgan Leathem, July 2017.

political and media discourses, centring on (though not limited to) the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. What reconciliation *means* in concrete terms, however, is often left unclear, particularly within federal and provincial discourses. What does it mean to "reconcile" settler Canadians with Indigenous Peoples when the country still maintains colonial dominion over the territories and citizens of Indigenous Nations (e.g., Daigle 2019)? "Reconciliation," in this context, becomes little more than a "commodity," as Haida scholar and curator Jisgang *Nika Collison* puts it, "commodified by the Western world in certain circles to further certain agendas" (Collison and Levell 2018, 78). Simultaneously, the spectre of Indigenous "rebellion" appears often in more conservative media sources as a threat to economic prosperity and political unity.[13] In these readings, Indigenous sovereignty acts as a dangerous spectre, hovering over and destabilizing a prosperous (settler) Canadian future.

It thus struck us as particularly compelling that the word "reconciliation" does not appear in any of the graffitied messages or phrases on the ruins of CFS Masset. Likewise, there are no invocations of violent overthrow, though invocations to recognize deception, critiques of

[13] See, for instance, former Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole's original party platform, https://erinotoole.ca/platform/law-and-order/ (no longer accessible except via internet archive) or this tweet: https://twitter.com/erinotoole/status/1227398243602124803.

wealth, and one particular phrase that highlights the word "love" within revolution are present. Instead, the graffiti consistently twins assertions of Haida rights and values with calls to work for peace and justice. To achieve the latter *means* fighting for the former. This, we would submit, is precisely *not* reconciliation, at least in so far as the term "reconciliation" is mobilized by statist, corporate, and colonial voices in order to elide the continuing maintenance of settler domination. Rather, the tableau that CFS Masset has become situates unity and solidarity *within* the work of Indigenous sovereignty, centring Haida Title rather than the liberal tolerance of the state (see Brown 2006). It emphasizes love and critical thinking as opposed to fear.

This is not to suggest that either fear or colonial domination are absent on Haida Gwaii or that the islands represent an unusually utopian space within settler colonial Canada. These issues most certainly exist on island – and, we would imagine, they bear down on the relationships between the different students of Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay in many different ways. But this is not the point. The graffiti we focus on is performative social work, aimed at orienting both its authors and its audience to how the world *should* be. It sketches out a social world in which Haida and non-Haida are "one" in relationship to Haida rights, peace, and justice. Likewise, the graffiti positions self-care and cultural and personal affirmation as crucial elements in achieving these things. These messages do not form part of a single, coordinated platform, even though we have read them together; rather, they emerge organically, from young people being asked to "express their feelings." If there is anything that might give us optimism for the future, it is this.

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