

Uplifting Voices

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IN HER 2010 FILM, *Spelling Bee*, Zoe Leigh Hopkins—member of the Heiltsuk First Nation—envisions British Columbia as a province with thirty-four official languages, thirty-two of which are Indigenous.⁶⁹ Her film is a powerful visualization of a dream. Many Canadians are unaware not only of the dream but also of the rich linguistic diversity of Indigenous nations in Canada, of the knowledge encoded within Indigenous languages and their importance to Indigenous communities. Connected to territory through traditional ecological knowledge and ceremony, Indigenous languages have vast historical depth and are, at the same time, entirely modern. Visible on social media, and mobilized through online dictionaries, radio, art, and music, these languages are spoken and taught in communities across Canada.

The story of the resilience of Indigenous languages across Canada over the last 150 years is one of local endurance and immense perseverance against opposition by Canada itself. Although they have been spoken, sung, and shared for thousands of years, many Indigenous languages are now critically endangered. English and French became established and prevailed in Canada while Indigenous languages and culture were actively suppressed through the many processes of colonization. Not the least of these strategies was forcing Indigenous children to attend residential schools, where punishment for speaking their mother tongue was a traumatic reality. Nevertheless, Indigenous

languages survived through secrecy and the deep commitment of Elders and community members. Until 1952, Canadian legislation prevented Indigenous people from turning to the Canadian courts for help with government injustices. Indigenous advocates and community leaders worked hard to bring legal action and gain public attention to residential schools and language loss.

Belief in the superiority of Western culture is the basis of the assumption that Indigenous cultures were destined to die out. Because Indigenous people did not abandon their culture and language, drastic measures such as residential schools and criminalization of Indigenous cultural practices were developed to disrupt intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Research that valued Indigenous cultural and linguistic knowledge, but assumed it was destined for extinction, was oriented to preserving fragments of knowledge outside communities, rather than supporting cultural vitality within communities.⁷⁰

In contrast, Indigenous individuals and groups have sought to uplift Indigenous languages and fluent speakers. Indigenous-led organizations—whether national organizations such as the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres (FNCCEC), Crown corporations such as the BC-based First Peoples' Cultural Council, or local First Nations cultural centres and Band schools—continue to engage in groundbreaking and urgent work to collect, protect, and connect living languages and cultural traditions in ways that are ethical and sustaining. For example, all of us (authors of this piece) work to support the dissemination, acknowledgement, and use of language research and documentation undertaken by and for the Heiltsuk Nation in Bella Bella. This began in earnest in 1973 when the Band Council welcomed a linguist, John Rath, a PhD student at Leiden University, to come to Bella Bella and work with our fluent speakers. John stayed for many years, working out of the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, and developed a writing system, grammar, dictionary, and many learning aids. Two of his students, Lillian Gladstone and Evelyn Windsor, completed the Native Indian Language Diploma Program at the University of Victoria and returned to Bella Bella to establish the Heiltsuk language program in the Bella Bella Community School (BBCS). Since 1978, the language program has been a formal part of the school curriculum, and it has

focused on curriculum development, Heiltsuk language teacher certification, and the pursuit of effective language-teaching strategies. The Heiltsuk College has supported mentorship and provides opportunities for adult Heiltsuk language learning.

Indigenous language revitalization speaks as much to hard indicators of health and well-being as it does to soft indicators of culture and identity. As the Sto:lo/Xaxli'p educator and writer Q'um Q'um Xiiem (Jo-ann Archibald) said to Aboriginal educators at Oral Traditions: The Fifth Provincial Conference on Aboriginal Education in 1999, while “we need to preserve our oral traditions, we also need to let them preserve us.” Recent studies demonstrate both the central relevance of language to many aspects of community well-being and how the transformative healing nature and holistic benefits of language revitalization have an impact beyond nurturing linguistic vitality alone. Underscoring the interrelatedness of language and community well-being, Hallet, Chandler, and Lalonde’s 2007 study, summarized in *Cognitive Development*, showed a compelling correlation between Indigenous language use and reduced Aboriginal youth suicide rates in BC.

How can the Canada 150 commemoration help us understand this moment in time and understand what can be done now? In contrast to calls of celebration, we call out the need for more Canadians to recognize the deep grief and incredible resilience that have long been a part of Indigenous language stewardship in Canada, a need to acknowledge loss, survival, and enduring damage from colonization.

How can people on these lands transform the residential schools experience of a “Hundred Years of Loss” for Canada 150 into a story of support, building to the celebrated linguistic diversity for which Canada is internationally recognized?⁷¹ As ever, leadership is coming from the grassroots. Since September 2015, all students in kindergarten through grade four in Prince Rupert, BC, have been learning Sm’algyax. “We are on traditional Tsimshian territory and Sm’algyax is the language of the territory,” Roberta Edzerza (Aboriginal Education Principal for her district) told CBC Radio One.⁷² “We are so proud and we would like to share our language and culture with everybody. It’s one avenue to address racism. Education is key. Learning the language and sharing in the learning and the culture.” Indigenous leaders have committed

decades of careful thinking, advocacy, and heart into work such as the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Culture's 2005 report *Towards a New Beginning*,⁷³ on strategies to revitalize Indigenous languages, as well as the development of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

How will non-Indigenous people in Canada respond to Indigenous languages becoming visible again? In 2011, when *həm'ləsəm* and *qələχən* Houses opened at UBC's Totem Park Residence, the *hənqəmiñəm* names were met with a mix of hostility, acceptance, and pride. The names are significant to the Musqueam Nation—on whose traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia is built—and were gifted to the university by the Musqueam Nation through a transparent and collaborative process. In 2009, Canada's commissioner of official languages, Graham Fraser, was quoted as saying: "In the same way that race is at the core of... an American experience and class is at the core of British experience, I think that language is at the core of Canadian experience."⁷⁴ While Fraser was referring to the friction inherent in the relationship between English and French, we believe the powerful tensions between Indigenous and official languages are also central to Canadian experience. Indigenous leaders have long advocated for Indigenous language revitalization to be a national issue. While English and French have federal support and protection as official languages, what place do Indigenous languages hold in the national consciousness? Moreover, what place, acceptance, and support will be found for Indigenous communities that choose to protect their language without sharing it?

What governmental response will we see? Will we see Indigenous languages gain federal support and protection as official languages? Will the federal government and its research councils provide targeted resources to explore the intersection of language, well-being, and health? Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke to the Assembly of First Nations in December 2016, pledging to introduce a federal law to protect, preserve, and revitalize First Nations, Inuit, and Metis languages: "We know... how residential schools and other decisions by government were used... to eliminate Indigenous languages... We must undo the lasting damage that resulted... Today I commit to you our government

will enact an indigenous languages act.”⁷⁵ The bitter irony of the current context is inescapable: colonial governments have for centuries marshalled their economic, military, and administrative might to extinguish Indigenous voices. Now, in the eleventh hour, they are looking to resource that which they first set out to destroy. Benign neglect would have been less damaging than two centuries of violence followed by a last-minute U-turn. Will Canada’s citizens hold their government to account and demand that an indigenous languages act be enacted in this Parliament? Rather than reinventing the wheel—or worse, the flat tire—the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s 2015 Calls to Action offered the federal government a tangible set of action points, with a clear road map on how they can be achieved.

Elders and youth in Indigenous communities are actively using and appropriating emerging technologies to strengthen their traditions and languages; Indigenous peoples are creators and innovators (not just recipients or clients) of new technologies, particularly in the domain of cultural and linguistic heritage. While technological efforts in the 1970s included specially modified typewriters and custom-made fonts to represent Indigenous writing systems, communities are now making use of digital tools—online, text, Internet radio, and mobile devices—to nurture the continued development of their respective diverse Indigenous languages and cultures. Yet, such interventions are not without risks and consequences. Digital technologies cannot and will not save languages. Speakers keep languages alive. A digital dictionary itself won’t revitalize an endangered language, but it could assist the speakers who will. At the same time, technology can be as symbolically powerful as it is practically useful, and can carry considerable political weight. In the English-dominant world of cyberspace, Indigenous communities are engaging with, disrupting, and reimagining digital practices. By generating digital visibility and legibility, Indigenous communities claim a presence online and exert control over the terms of Indigenous representation rather than risk misrepresentation.

Since 2016, the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre; Bella Bella Community School; and the University of British Columbia’s First Nations and Endangered Languages Program, Museum of Anthropology, and School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies have been

working together to expand, deepen, and mobilize existing community language revitalization and cultural documentation initiatives in a digital environment. We envision Indigenous communities participating in and co-creating a shared digital future, which requires an ongoing investment in the common digital backbone. Infrastructure and capital costs are rarely one-off; technology investments must be long-term and equitable, not just for communities themselves but also for the organizations that support them. We need to understand how digital tools can support endangered language learning. As yet, there is little evaluation of their use. Longitudinal case studies can help assess the success and review the impact of emerging technologies on Indigenous language learning using criteria that are community-developed and methods that are locally appropriate. Respectful research can offer insights for all of us—communities, policy-makers, and academics—about which tools are proving to be most effective, where, why, and how.

We call upon others, both individuals and organizations, who seek to uplift Indigenous languages to listen to and learn from Indigenous communities, and support community-led revitalization programs through respectful partnership. Indigenous communities know their needs better than anyone, and acknowledging this place-based expertise is a step toward reconciliation. Indigenous communities need better resourcing for language instructors to promote stronger learning outcomes, language retention, and trust. They are proposing that learning goals be set by the community, as these are more attainable and more credible, and have a higher chance of fulfillment. Indigenous communities need more funding, dispersed in a better way, to plan strategically over the long term. Communities must not be positioned as competitors for resources and visibility, but rather have dedicated funding streams that will enable long-term sustainability.

A defining element in Canada's next 150 years will be the extent to which Canadians and their governments respond to the language sections of UNDRIP and the TRC Calls to Action. Another defining element will be the resurgence and celebration of First Nations and Indigenous languages and culture in print and on air, in person and online.

Will the rest of Canadian society accept, listen to, and value Indigenous languages and join us in uplifting them?