

CIRCLE

by

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ABSTRACT

This written thesis supports the MFA exhibition, *Circle*. In both thesis and exhibition, I articulate that the act of speaking language creates connection for both the speaker and the listener to the history of knowledge and ideas within its specific community of origin. The spoken language is connected to the history of knowledge and ideas within its specific community of origin and has a structure which implies physicality; therefore, the spoken language exists beside other established created objects within indigenous practice. Through the documentation of unique situations of indigenous language speaking within contexts of cultural practice, this thesis articulates my process of speaking my indigenous Tahltan language as a performance of indigenous Tahltan meaning which, in turn, is part of the creation process of the indigenous Tahltan objects in *Circle*. Both thesis and exhibition together are an offering of a blanket, a river, stones, salmon, and the Tahltan land, as an embodied practice of articulating Tahltan epistemologies through the creation of objects connected to spoken Tahltan language.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....ii

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... v

DEDICATION..... vi

1. GATHERING THE STONES FOR THE CIRCLE..... 1

2. WRITING THE TAHLTAN RIVER INTO A CIRCLE..... 2

3. RIVER STONE SPEAKING THE TAHLTAN STORY ABOUT RAVEN AND THE SALMON..... 10

4. RIVER STONE SPEAKING THE TAHLTAN STORY OF HOW THE SALMON WAS FIRST PUT INO THE RIVER 11

5. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A TAHLTAN PEDEGOGY FOR SPEAKING TAHLTAN LANGUAGE.....12

6. RIVER STONE SPEAKING THE STORY OF TAHLTAN CREATION.....16

7. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A DREAM STORY ABOUT HOW CULTURE IS A BASKET.....21

8. RIVER STONE SPEAKING RESEARCH NOTES.....22

9. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A CLASS STORY.....27

10. RIVER STONE SPEAKING RESEARCH NOTES 2.....28

11. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A CLASS STORY.....29

12. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN PETER'S BODY37

13. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT THE TAHLTAN RIVER.....40

14. RIVER STONE LECTURING ABOUT THE LANGUAGE.....41

15. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING USING INDIGENOUS PEDAGOGICAL MODELS.....	42
16. RIVER STONE SPEAKING TO A CLASS ABOUT CULTURE.....	44
17. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHING.....	46
18. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT THE ESSAY THAT SHOULD WRITE ITSELF - AN UN-OFFICAL HISTORY OF TAHLTAN EPISTEMOLOGY.....	50
19. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT GATHERING THE MEMORIES OF A TAHLTAN RIVER - A STORY CONNECTED TO THREE THOUSAND PRINTS OF SALMON.....	59
20. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT A JOB TEACHING LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE.....	62
21. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT LANGUAGE.....	69
22. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A DREAM.....	70
23. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT WHY LANGUAGE SPEAKING IS HARD.....	71
24. CONCLUSION: RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT MY RETURN TO THE RIVER.....	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	77

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Gathering the Memories of a Tahltan River

is dedicated

to my brother, my friend, my teacher

David Melville

Now you are sharing your bright eyes with everyone

1. GATHERING THE STONES FOR THE CIRCLE

I go to the River

I put tobacco down

And I ask these stones for help with this story

2. WRITING THE TAHLTAN RIVER INTO A CIRCLE

For northern hunting people, knowledge and power are one. To be in possession of knowledge is more important than to be in possession of an artifact. Their technology depends upon artifice rather than artifact. As Sam told me in his gruff way, “If I see something once, I know it”. (Ridington 73)

As Fanon has argued, the problem of creating and legitimating a national culture “represents a special battlefield”. And intellectuals are important to this battle in a number of different ways. In recognizing that intellectuals were trained and acculturated in the west, Fanon identifies three levels through which “native” intellectuals can progress in their journey “back over the line”. First there is a phase of proving that intellectuals have been assimilating into the culture of the occupying power. Second comes a period of disturbance and the next for intellectuals to remember who they actually are, a time for remembering the past. In the third phase the intellectuals seeks to awaken the people, to realign themselves with the people and the produce a revolutionary and national literature. In this phase the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. (Smith 70)

For my written and visual thesis, I look to the Tahltan River as my guide for the recovery of experience connected to Tahltan language speaking. Tahltan epistemology has been directly influenced by our Tahltan River. Growing up within the Tahltan Nation meant hearing stories of the River. Growing up in the Tahltan community also meant traveling on the river. Our older forms of bead work recall images of this river winding through the landscape. Our historical stories include the river (Stone 1878, Teit 1910). Our main village was also located near where the two rivers meet. We have summer settlements which are beside the river (Albright 1984). We have sacred sites which are located close to where the two rivers (Stikine and Tahltan) meet and our main summer gathering place is located by where the two Rivers meet as well. Later on in my work as a Tahltan scholar, I found the river within the pages of travel narrative by Edward Hoagland original published in 1959.

Spoken language implies a structure that imparts a physicality of meaning. This physicality within the spoken language is also connected to the history of knowledge and ideas within its specific community of origin. In his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) Noam Chomsky distinguishes between *competence* -- “the ideal general knowledge of a language possessed by a speaker of it” -- and *performance* -- “the specific application of this knowledge in a speech situation” (Carlson 56). As a Tahltan Nation person I found that I was able to perform general Tahltan ways of knowing but unable to elevate this performance through spoken language. In Tahltan language speaking I was able to speak twenty words of spoken Tahltan language; however, in my performance of Tahltan meaning, I was able to make button blankets, make drums, do bead work, make birch bark baskets, organize a potlatch, and able to speak my family tree.

I wanted to be able to use the spoken Tahltan language to articulate my feelings. In 2007, I attended a language conference in which language immersion educator Kathy Michel spoke about the language immersion program at Chief Atham School. In her workshop, she spoke of her participation in the creation of a language immersion program, and about her son (a graduate of that immersion program) who gave a twenty minute valedictorian speech at his graduation in their shared Secwepemc spoken language. I was envious of their ability.

Cree Scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) writes, “The shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality, or that relationship forms reality. The shared aspect of an indigenous axiology and methodology is that research must maintain accountability to all the relationships that it forms (137).” Similarly, Hawaiian scholar, Manulani Aluli Meyer (2003) also writes, “Knowledge was the by-product with an idea, with

others' knowing, or with one's own experience with the world. Knowing was in relationship with knowledge, a nested idea that deepened information (knowledge) through direct experience (knowing) (231).” The act of speaking language is an act of performing meaning. This relational position of indigenous knowledge connects my own desire as a younger Tahltan person to speak these one hundred words and phrases in Tahltan language to the experience of the young Secwepemc's valedictorian speech in his spoken indigenous language.

Julie Purce (1974) wrote that organisms have a natural inclination to self-organize. This is an intriguing proposition to the development of knowledge structures and praxis. When we understand the development of indigenous epistemological systems we can begin to articulate our continued contributions to the development of knowledge here on this land. Learning the acquired experience involved in overcoming challenges to our survival had to be organized. This organization of experience also becomes an embedded system for future knowing, and knowledge, and continued survival. It might be an oversimplification to write that the formation of indigenous epistemological practices happened because of the need for survival but I think the awareness of survival happens only by a highly sophisticated and self-aware being. Secwepemc people have created relational based structures which support the development of Secwepemc epistemology and knowledge that is able to be reproduced in the younger generation, i.e. a valedictorian speech. Because Tahltan people also move on the land, developing knowledge in this way through relations to the land and each other, we are also able to continue to redevelop and redefine Tahltan epistemological practices as a nation.

How do you write the River into a circle? For the last two years, I have been thinking about the young Tahltan and Kaska Dena people who I had the opportunity to learn language with in the school at Lower Post. My research into my language began with watching these young students speak their indigenous language within a western-based education system. I witnessed their struggles with the speaking and acknowledged my own struggles with speaking language. This MFA has focused on investigating those challenges, but more specifically the research that supports this MFA exhibition and written thesis has investigated how spoken language is a system for performing Tahltan meaning.

In my work over the last two years, I have privileged indigenous epistemological and pedagogical practices to shape cultural spaces as places of exchange of knowledge for this research and creation process. For example, I produced 12 performative interventions at *Open Space Gallery* that took place between May and June 2009 which focused on examining the grief and loss connected to language speaking and performance. I also facilitated a series of workshops which took place between January and June 2010 which focused on the creative practices connected to language speaking and memory. During these two years, I taught many young people, foster parents, and university students, cultural immersion workshops, focusing on the creation of cultural objects. This thesis presents anecdotal documentation of these exchanges.

The exhibition *Circle* organizes itself following a similar indigenous system of organizing stories and images. The MFA exhibition presents itself like a Circle ceremony over ten days. The exhibition shifts as new visual works are added to the space throughout to support the experiential learning of indigenous meaning.

Additionally, this supporting thesis document is written utilizing a similar model of practice – the En’owkinwixw model. En’owkinwixw is a traditional decision making model developed by the Okanagan peoples. Okanagan Elder Jeannette Armstrong (2005) writes:

When the community is faced with a decision, an elder asks the people to engage in En’owkin, requesting that each person contribute information about the subject at hand. What follows is not so much a debate as a process of clarification, incorporating bits of information from as many people as possible – no matter how irrelevant, trivial, or controversial these bits might seem –for in En’owkin, nothing is discarded or prejudged.(14)

I am engaging with the En’owkinwixw process as a model to represent my research to the academy. My research for the last two years facilitated the creation and implementation of temporary culturally defined spaces. In these temporary cultural spaces the research focus shifted from documentation of indigenous defined experience to the engagement of experiential learning within the research focus. It's clear to me that the Enowkinwixw model is able to reconnect experiential and relational knowledge to the western epistemological system. With the En’owkinwixw model, the researched experiential learning is presented as relational knowing. Language is a system of indigenous meaning, and the performance of that meaning in community creates a legacy of relational knowing and new culture.

In order to begin this process, I have collected twenty-four river stones from the Tahltan River. Each stone represents a section in this written thesis and has offered to carry a story of the research I’ve been collecting. As a reader of this thesis, or a viewer of this MFA exhibition, you add yourself into this circle; you become a participant in the creation of new experience. Within the structure of a circle sitting together, no research story is privileged; rather these stories sit in support of each other. The experience of reading and connecting to

these stories allows for the continued legacy of indigenous meaning to exist and creates opportunity for spiritual, physical, mental and emotional growth. The struggle for me, as a student of Tahltan language and meaning, is how to represent the experiential components so necessarily ingrained within any and all indigenous practice into the English language. It is also my hope that the Tahltan epistemological practice inherent in this research will be able to reside in this circle and not be swept away by western hegemony.

In his book *Red on Red* (1999), Creek Nation Scholar, Craig Womack, questions why we feel the need to privileged a western epistemological and ideological practice. He writes:

Without Native American literature, there is no American canon. We should not allow ourselves, through the definitions we choose and the language we use, to ever assume we are outside the canon; we should not play along and confess to being a second-rate literature. Let Americanists struggle for their place in the Canon. (7)

What's useful for our discussion is the action of redress (Miki 2004) as Womack places indigenous epistemology, and the ways that this indigenous knowledge is able to unfold itself within those communities of origin, into the centre. When Womack writes, "there is no American Cannon", he is challenging anyone to prove him wrong. For the new researcher, this statement is helpful to guide a process that can witness the damage that has occurred to indigenous knowledge production as a result of over-dependence and over-privileging of Western epistemological practices. When I return to Tahltan ways of knowing, like the Tahltan Creation story, I experience what Womack is telling us. This Tahltan Creation story is a highly structured epistemological body, embedded with values that exist in performance of meaning, which support the transmission of Tahltan knowledge. (I speak

to this specifically in section 6, “River stones speaking the story of Tahltan Creation.”). I want the Tahltan Creation Story to be a part of this circle.

The challenge for this MFA exhibition using western methods is to embody Tahltan epistemological meaning inside of the western paradigm of the gallery. One method to address this concern is to continue to locate the English language within its true nature as a language of trade between indigenous communities and settlers. The material production of visual art can also remain a potential avenue for the exchange of meaning. It is not new for Indigenous communities to use the spoken English language to convey Indigenous meaning. A particular passage from the Cruikshank book *Life Lived Like a Story* (1991) reflects the use of English by Elders as a methodology to continue the transmission of indigenous epistemological values. Cruikshank’s work with multi-lingual Tagish Elder Annie Ned speaks to this idea about transmission through spoken English language:

Mrs. Ned sees herself as one of the last elders and therefore as a particularly important teacher. She knows that, in her own childhood, instruction came directly from “long-time people,” who taught with stories. Her primary concern is that now “school kids learn from paper,” and so her continuing objective has been to prepare a book they can read. “Kids used to do jobs for old people – get wood, water. They paid us with stories! We bring wood: now! Time for school! We stayed there – we listened.” Her recurring theme is that authority to speak about the past comes not from originality but from accurate repetition. In all her teaching she insists on naming her source, and she differentiates between two kinds of authority. First, and most important, is the received wisdom from elders: “I know what I tell. This is not my story – lots of people tell story. Just like now they go to school, old time we come to our grandpa. Whoever is old tells the same way. That’s why we put this on paper.” The second kind of authority come from direct experience – from having witnessed a particular event. “That one story my grandpa tells me. But this time, myself, this time I’m telling you the story” (268).

Tagish Elder Annie Ned understood Cruikshank’s ethnography. Indigenous communities, in particular Annie’s community, had been in contact with English language

speakers for over one hundred years by the time this book was produced. Annie Ned was not new to the use of English language as a way to convey indigenous meaning when she sat down for tea with Cruikshank. This book, a subsequent performance of indigenous meaning through the spoken English language, is also present now as a tool which supports the communication of indigenous meaning. In this way, Elder Annie Ned, and all other elders who allowed their knowledge to be recorded can sit down in this circle.

This *Circle* is focused on the act of speaking Tahltan language. This supporting thesis focuses on recovery and translation of experience gained through the investigation of challenges to the speaking Tahltan language. Spoken language is a created object. It has structure which implies physicality. This physicality facilitates connection between the thesis document and the thesis exhibition. The act of speaking indigenous language is an act of performing indigenous meaning. Hopi Filmmaker, Victor Masayesya (2000) writes “Language is a sovereign matter. You cannot learn to speak, or mean it for me (237).” My grandmother Violet said, “It’s your language. You will learn it fast, because it speaks to you”. My grandmother’s sense of language as a living and breathing member of the community, speaks to a body of knowledge that lives in relation to the other physical Tahltan bodies, who have an innate ability to perform Tahltan meaning. Our ability to acknowledge the relational aspects connected to indigenous ways of knowing is the key to development and performance of Tahltan meaning and survival.

3. RIVER STONE SPEAKING THE TAHLTAN STORY ABOUT RAVEN AND THE SALMON

Raven travelled along the seashore. He knew of the salmon in the sea; and when he called to them, they jumped out of the water. He thought he would try to catch one; so he went ashore on the beach, and called, "come, friend, and jump on my belly!" The salmon jumped, and hit him so hard on the stomach that he was rendered unconscious for a time. When he came to his senses, the salmon was just about to enter the water again. He did the same thing again, with like result. Then he built a corral of stones on the beach, and lay down in the middle of it. Now he called for a third time, and the salmon struck him and again rendered him unconscious. When he revived, he saw the salmon jumping out of the corral, trying to get out. He clubbed it and killed it. Now Raven did not know how to cut up salmon. He defecated, and asked his excrements for advice. As soon as they began to speak, he held up his hand, and said, "Hush! I know." However, as soon as he began to cut the fish, he forgot what he had been told and asked again. This happened many times in succession. At last, however, he listened to the end; and they said, "Make a cut around the gills next to the bone, then around the tail the same way, then down the belly from one cut to the other. Take out the entrails and backbone, and then hang up until the skin is dry. Dry well. Then split well, spread out flat, and hang up to dry in the wind and sun.

(Teit 205)

4. RIVER STONE SPEAKING THE TAHLTAN STORY OF HOW THE SALMON WAS FIRST PUT INTO THE RIVER

Once a big crow lived up in the Tahltan country. He travelled over the country a great deal and after a while came to the coast where there was salt water. He head there was a large village on an island not far away in the salt water and that there were lots of salmon people there, for salmon was all the same as one kind of people and crow were people and birds were people all kinds of animals were once people.

This big crow called around him a great many of these little bird people and set them to work making a very large canoe. When the canoe was finished a large seat was put in the centre of it for the big crow, for the crow was the boss and a very big man.

They paddled across to this large village where the salmon men lived and when they got pretty near there, the crow told all the little men that when they got ashore, some big salmon might send for him to come into the house and for them to follow him in.

Pretty soon a big salmon man saw the big crow and sent a little salmon man to tell him to come into the house. All the little men followed the big crow into the house.

After they were seated, the big salmon man said he guessed the crow was hungry and he took a young salmon man and boiled it all up and when they went to eat the crow knew that the big salmon man knew just how many bones there were and that he would count them after they were through eating, for he did not want the people who lived on the rivers or streams to have salmon. He wanted to keep them all in salt water and he never let the bones be carried away. The crow knew this and told all this little men in bird language that as soon as they were through eating and the big salmon man began to count the bones that they must be very quick to jump up and run to the boat and he would come too.

All this time the crow was keeping bones in his mouth pretty soon the salmon man began to count the bones and they all jumped up and ran to the boat. The salmon men tried to catch them but could not and the big crow returned to the Tahltan country and scattered the bones in all the streams throughout the whole country and there has always been plenty of salmon in the streams ever since.

There is a hole in the rock wall of the canyon of the Stikine just opposite the mount of the Tahltan that this same crow used to sleep in.

(Stone 78)

5. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A TAHLTAN PEDEGOGY FOR SPEAKING TAHLTAN LANGUAGE

Indigenous people are all about place. Land/aina, defined as “that which feeds,” is the everything to our sense of love, joy, and nourishment. Land is our mother. This is not a metaphor. For the Native Hawaiians speaking of knowledge, land was the central theme that drew forth all others. You grew in a place and you had a relationship with that place. This is an epistemological idea. (Meyer 219)

The spoken Tahltan language remains as an example of a continued relationship to the land. The land remains a constant within this system. The function of speaking indigenous language acts as a way to connect the body to locations on the land (Blondin 1990, Ridington 1990, Basso 1996, Cruikshank 2005). The words act like directions to locations on the land, for example, a hunter who returns from the hunt always returns with a story. This spoken indigenous language and subsequent organization of language as story, creates a picture of where the hunt took place, what animal was killed, how the animal was killed, and the geographical information on the land. The system connects the hunter back to the community. A hunter needs to tell the story of the hunt because this is food for the community. The stories become a structure, or a form, which aides in our ability to remember the land.

The stories also act as a way to mnemonic device which records time on the land. If I spoke the story as a mapping project, it might look like this:

A hunter walks on to the land.
The hunter takes an animal.
The hunter returns to the village to distribute the meat of that animal.
The story of the hunt is distributed with the meat.
The distribution of the story encourages development of meaning within the structure.
I am not a hunter.
I will not have a hunter’s knowledge of the land.
I can imagine being the hunter taking the meat to an elder’s home.

I remember walking the land. I remember walking after the animal.
I remember using my physical and spiritual strength to end this animal's life.
When I am cutting up the animal's body, I know the parts of the animal.
I know the physicality of the animal's body, the parts that help the animal walk on the land.
I remember our elders when I am cutting up the meat of the animal.
I remember what meat is good to give to elders.
I put this meat aside.
I make sure there is enough meat for elders before I take meat for myself.
I return to the story of the hunt so that I may tell it well to these elders.
I imagine the time I need to visit with these elders.
I feel excited to hear the stories the elders will tell me.

The initial act, or the doing of the event, informs the subsequent performance of the same act in future seasons. Meaning (i.e. the provision of food for the community, the development of hunting knowledge within a family), defined by indigenous ways of knowing (i.e. the places and ways we have always hunted), continues to exist after the performance (i.e. the telling of the story of the hunt), and re-performance (the re-telling and re-telling of the story of the hunt) of the event. This is an age-old process. For thousands of years, it has happened in kitchens and campfires in our communities, both rural and urban, and will continue to happen. This meaning is birthed into a land of stories and becomes a part of the development of new knowledge.

Our community has a rich visual and historical record in the spoken forms like storytelling, the spoken language, ceremony, spiritual ceremony, and the creative object; these objects serve as a record of our development of ideas and how we remain connected to the land. In looking at the historical practices of the Tahltan community, you encounter a history of objects that act as historical documents recording the story of experiential learning of the Tahltan and the land. For example, the beadwork on a hunting bag which is passed

along to another generation or a hide dress worn to ceremonies for generations. I acknowledge the following objects, and subsequent object making, as examples of this Tahltan epistemological document: button blankets, moccasins, snowshoes, stories, speeches, beadwork, medicine, dance and songs. As an artist, and maker of objects, and future fluent speaker of the Tahltan language, I choose to privilege the created object and subsequent performance of meaning connected to the making of that object as an example of spoken language. If these objects are speaking Tahltan language and history then the performance of making of these objects represents the embodied meaning required to create an embodied practice of Tahltan epistemology.

The function of spoken language, within this structure, conveys useful experiential information which supports connection to the system of knowledge for the sake of better survival. The flow of spoken language, or collected experience, is important to keep everyone alive. Acquired experience occurs as a result of challenges faced in the continued survival of that body, family, and community of families. The necessity of acknowledging this structure of organizing meaning, and the potential depths of meaning within, aide in the work of articulating spoken Tahltan language, and the continued performance of Tahltan meaning within that spoken language.

When I see myself as a Tahltan speaker, artist and meaning maker, I see myself as being able to make meaning being true to a Tahltan presence. This created meaning is connected to a Tahltan center. To be successful at performing Tahltan meaning, we have to develop strategies which help us to articulate collectively responsive relationships to colonial

systems of power. We continue to move on the land which remains a much older practice of knowledge making and production than the western practices.

6. RIVER STONE SPEAKING THE STORY OF TAHLTAN CREATION

Tahltan ways of knowing are reflected in the story of light. The story builds a foundation for our continued relationship to the land. For example, in a story where there is no light the development of knowledge for moving on the land in darkness requires a very intimate and sophisticated understanding of landscape. The light reflects a new understanding and even deeper understanding the environment. The story models how Tahltan people are connected to the Crow person who gave the light. The story also models how we, as Tahltan people, are expected to give back and share what we have with the other members of our community. An important performance in the Tahltan Creation story is the act of giving the light. This significant gift and the act of giving so freely is another key demonstration of Tahltan ways of knowing. The finding of the light was important but this act of giving the light made life easier for all who travel on the land. At the beginning of the story there is no light in the world. Time still happens. People are still living on the land. The light is more like a dream. Tsesk'iyé Cho (Crow) hears the cries of his fellow animals. Tsesk'iyé Cho hears their weariness for the darkness and decides to find another way. Crow decides to find the light.

The voice of our respected elder Grandma Eva Callbreath tells this version. This version of the story is found in a compilation called *Tahltan Native Studies* (1984) published by the Tahltan Indian Band in partnership with School District 87. A dedication in the book reads, "For all Tahltan Indian Children... So you will better know and understand the ways of your people." I've re-edited the published version to reflect the performative nature of our spoken Tahltan language and our Grandma Eva's storytelling.

How Crow got the Sun, Moon, and Daylight

Long, long time ago, there was a man and wife who has a daughter
When the time came she became a woman, they took her to a cave far from the
village
They put her in that cave and they put a moose skin over her head
That moose skin came to her knees
They make her stay in the cave
Only women can come to see her
They brought sewing for her to do
They brought roots and moss and they put it around her neck like a necklace
Her mother tied just like string around her fingers
That was to make her so she wouldn't be lazy
They put fancy little decoration right beside her hand where that string is tied
That daughter couldn't see anyone
She just learned how to sew and make things
If the women didn't think it was good, they tore it apart and made her do it over again
She learned everything
Two months she stay in that hole in the rock
Then they take the string off her hand and the moss and roots from her neck
They went to clearing and found young trees
They tied the string from her hand to a brand and it flapped and moved in the wind
That was to always keep her fingers busy
The moss and roots they put on a tree to give her luck
To always bring good luck to her
Now the daughter could go home
Her parents wanted to keep her good so she could marry some nice man
They made little place for her to stay behind their own house
She never went anywhere
She just go from her place to her parents
She was real good and never fool around with anyone
They watch careful to even see what she want and drink to make sure she don't
swallow anything to make her pregnant
Crow, he know that girl's father keep sun, moon, and daylight for himself in his
house
He think, how am I going to get light for the world?
One day he make himself as small as a speck of dirt
He put himself into her cup of water
Her mother bring her water to drink
The daughter say, Throw that water away. There's a speck of dirt in it
So they spill the water and Crow jump out
He watch that girl

Just as she was ready to drink again, he jump to her lips as just a small speck and she
swallowed him
After a while that girl said, Mother, I don't know why something is growing in my
womb
The mother said, Maybe you not careful
But the girl said, How come? You never see anyone around here?
They know she's been good
So they wait
Here, in nine months she have a little baby boy
They wonder how come
The father say, Wait until he can talk, then we learn how he come here
They wait
That little boy grow fast
One day he can walk around
He's about as big as my grandchild – five years old
That kid he see moon on the wall
He start to cry for it
He cry, cry, cry
He won't stop crying for that moon
But his grandfather won't give it to him
He cry until grandmother say, Oh, why don't you give him the moon to play with?
He won't hurt it
Then you can put it back
Don't be so stingy
So grandfather give him the moon
That little boy he play with it for a little while then he say, Grandpa, give me the sun
to play with
But grandfather don't want to so that boy cries
Grandma says, Give him the sun, maybe he get headache and get sick from crying
So grandfather give him the sun to play with
He play with that
Then he ask for daylight, Give me the daylight to play with Grandpa
Grandpa say No
but that kid cry so much he finally give it to him
When that boy got daylight, he grab the moon and the sun and quick as anything he
turn to crow and fly up through the smoke hole in the roof
Long ago, you know, they have five on the floor and hole in roof for smoke
Crow go CAW! and he is gone
When he get outside, he throw the moon in the sky and theres a great loud noise in
the world
CRASH!
Then he throw the sun up in the air and there is another really loud nose
All the animals get really scared

They start running
The fish go to the seas
The goats and sheep ran to the mountains
The beaver to the rivers
All the animals ran
That's how we came to have animals all over the world
Martin ran up a tree
He see crow and he see he's got daylight and he shout out daylight coming, daylight coming!
Grizzly bear was under the tree
He scared and in such a hurry to run, he put his moccasins on the wrong feet
That's why if you look at grizzly tracks, you see he got toe on wrong side of foot

All those animals have always had darkness
Now they got sun, moon and daylight
(Callbreath 37)

Crow's act of giving changed the community relationship to the land. This contribution supported the survival of the family. I see reflections of this today in our community when hunters distribute freshly gathered moose meat to elders, at potlatches when gifts are giving to guests and opposite clans, and when elders share their knowledge. If we were going to try and create a form for the structures of Tahltan epistemological practice, we would see the finding of the light as one part and the giving of the light as the other significant piece of that structure. The light made life better on the land. Life on the land continues. In this sense, the gathering of light could also be understood as the gathering of knowledge, or food, or medicine, or stories, or songs, or laughter, or history, or art, or tears. Tahltan knowledge changed because of the light.

I want to examine Crow as a speaker of the language. Crow is an active searcher of the light. We know story because the Crow told the story to someone. In reflecting on Crow as a speaker of the language we know that the spoken words create images of the land. We

are able to travel on this hunting trip for light. Language is given freely. We see small acts of this giving throughout the entire story. The grandma gives language freely to the Crow. The grandpa gives language freely, as well as his possessions, to the Crow. The daughter gives language to the Crow. These actions in the story reflect performances of Tahltan meaning. If we imagine these acts as performances of language, then we see the grandfather giving knowledge to the grandchild. Most importantly, the grandparents rarely say no. They give freely of what they know. Knowledge is a gift. Everyone deserves to receive knowledge. As a new speaker of Tahltan language I am only just returning to the meaning connected to this story. The meaning, shape of performance, and organizing of structure, can only help us return to the spoken language and return experience to others looking to learn Tahltan language. Then potential Tahltan language speakers become like Crow searching again for light.

7. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A DREAM STORY ABOUT HOW CULTURE IS A
BASKET

In the dream
He told me that inside all of us is a basket
Inside of the basket is all of the pieces of culture
When we come to a cultural place
We take out the basket
And take out the piece of culture
When we meet people they also have a basket
And they also take out the pieces of culture
We place these objects outside of the basket
And when we are done we put the basket back inside our bodies
And when they are done they put their basket inside our bodies
And inside the basket is culture

8. RIVER STONE SPEAKING RESEARCH NOTES

In my research I have been practicing culturally-based pedagogical forms (i.e. Beadwork) and practices (i.e. smudging) within my daily work as a method for regaining access to Tahltan meaning connected to the spoken language. I have focused on these non-verbal creative practices as a way to re-create experiential knowledge connected to spoken language and performance of meaning. I was thinking about building on the non-verbal meaning attached to culturally based performance, strengthening these pieces, and applying the experiential knowledge of practice back towards the speaking of language. I need to shift the language learning process, promoted by linguists, which was occurring within my language learning. I noticed that there was a heavy emphasis on the English words within the language learning materials. I was listening to the language tapes, reciting the Tahltan phrases with the voice of our Elder Pat Carlick and still looking to the written and spoken English as a bridge to establish any appropriate meaning within the Tahltan words.

Elders talk about being born into the sweat lodge, being born into the practice of epistemological values connected to ceremony. Language is also a growing practice. At one time we were all babies developing language and developing meaning. There is something comforting in this knowledge. Babies have fun building skills and knowledge. These skills can eventually become a way to participate within the structures which are defined as cultural practice. I like the idea of returning to language learning that was fun and filled with funny sound making. Becoming like a baby made each practice an indigenous pedagogy that re-connected you to an opportunity to start a lifetime of learning.

I participated in an urban sweat lodge ceremony in 2004. The lodge ceremony was a part of a larger coming-of-age ceremony being hosted by the Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services for youth and service providers working in the downtown east side. The focus was to begin a process which supported future coming-of-age ceremonies for youth in our community. This sweat lodge became a way to introduce culturally based teaching to these aboriginal youth from the city. It was at this sweat lodge ceremony that I met an elder who considered himself twenty years old. He became a baby in the lodge. His age reflected his first sweat lodge ceremony took place twenty years ago. In 2004 I was twenty-seven. My first sweat was in 1994 and this made me sixteen (again).

This sense of being a baby in ceremony is interesting when applied to the history of the indigenous community. We know what happened because of the Residential schools. We know what happened because of the Potlatch Ban. We know what happened as a result of governmental policies which supported the genocide of indigenous peoples. There is still a life-long practice of gaining experiential knowledge which supports the community survival. As an artist who is interested in articulating meaning connected to the making indigenous objects, I know there are unique challenges to the survival of the body, knowledge, culture which need to be faced as a part of the completion of the object. In the Tahltan Creation Story we see a baby Crow waiting until it was the right time before asking for the light. In that same story, we see a grandfather, or knowledge keeping, handing the light to the grandchild. This is applied learning that results from acknowledging these challenges and investigating options for overcoming these challenges. There is also creating a strategy or a process for organizing the experiential learning that results from the making and completion

of object. Language speaking is a challenge. The communication of meaning, the cultural performance of meaning, and the speaking of language require practice, patience, and initiation into a culture of meaning making. You are initiated through the ceremony. You are initiated when you are born. When it was time the baby Crow was gifted the light. The ceremony completes the body. The body speaks the language.

I grew up speaking English. I don't deny that. But I also grew up entrenched in Tahltan epistemological practice. The form of the spoken language and the subsequent meaning which occurs as a result of the Tahltan speech act is Tahltan knowledge. This system of meaning still exists outside of the colonial dominant English position. So, either the English was re-colonizing me and my learning of the language or I had to figure out a way to shift this emphasis on the spoken English to a secondary position and re-establish a priority of Tahltan.

It always meant something to me that first time I danced in our home community. Our cousin Johnny Frank was there. He was still alive. We were at the community school in Telegraph Creek. My grandmother was still alive. I can't remember what we were actually dancing for but I can remember the dancing. It was a memorial. My grandmother was wearing her black velvet jacket with the gold nugget pin that was shaped into her initials. She was sitting with her friends. I can't remember how I ended up dancing. I can't remember if I danced the steps well but I do remember Johnny's dancing. He was wearing dark glasses, the kind of dark glasses that cover up your eyes and most of your face. They were the glasses with the heavy tint because apparently he was sensitive to bright sunlight. He was also wearing a beaded shirt. And when he danced in he made a shape with his hands like a bird. I

remember him checking in with an Elder in the room to make sure that this hand position was correct. And for some reason I remember someone saying this hand shape was a chickadee.

Like I mentioned, I don't remember how I ended up dancing, I was either pushed up there to join everyone or just went on my own volition. Probably this was instigated by our mom. I remember being overwhelmed. Not sure. Laughing. Sick to my stomach. Afraid. I remember the look on my grandma's face. It was a look of love. I still remember who this look made me feel. This look became a reflection to our shared culture.

My dancing was speaking to her. The dancing was saying something to our grandmother. I was speaking the language of Tahltan meaning through my movements. I was performing a cultural history which connected me to our community, to our family, to our nation, to the history of ideas, and to our grandmother. I felt good about the dancing. I wasn't shy. I wasn't worried about making mistakes. I was ten when I danced for the first time. So, I guess that makes me a twenty-three year old Tahltan Nation person.

The spoken language is one piece of a well designed and highly conceptualized system of thought, spirit, poetry, material object, and land. Colonization has systemically silenced our ability to speak (perform this connection) and our bodies are still too connected to that memory of silence. I've met fluent language speakers who choose not to speak for fear that someone will laugh at them or because they don't want to experience shame again. Our bodies are connected to the development and practice of indigenous ways of knowing. Our bodies help us to achieve success by connecting us directly to the different forms of spoken meaning, and connecting to the non-verbal signals which identify culturally based

meaning. This silence of our bodies has worked better than everything else that has been done to our cultural communities. This silence, based in fear, shame, not wanting to make mistakes, not wanting to try because we might get reprimanded or laugh at, is slowly killing us. Time to become babies again.

9. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A CLASS STORY

In my class, we told stories about significant moments of cultural learning. The moment when the light turned on and we were experienced really connected to practice of cultural meaning. We find these stories inside our bodies and we told these stories to each other. Then we shaped these stories into birch baskets. I told them the basket is an ancient form which supports the survival of the community. A good basket collects food and our younger siblings can eat. A bad basket spills the food and our little sister goes hungry. A poorly made basket breaks and means no one gets to eat.

For the class, we made baskets to hold our stories. These baskets carry these stories and help develop our ways of knowing. In the class I learned that Cultural practice is big and small at the same time. From the students I learned that the practice of producing objects, based in and defined by cultural values, supports the learning better than any learning aide or activity.

10. RIVER STONE SPEAKING RESEARCH NOTES 2

We had the opportunity to learn from a younger teacher in class last night
She came in and shared her knowledge about pine needle basket making
This situation was nice because often we have teachers who are elders
And it's nice to learn from elders
And it has meaning to learn from an elder
It was nice to learn from someone younger
And the knowledge that she shared - ancient knowledge - meant something but was also
experientially shifted because she was younger
We started talking about language speaking and about how when you speak your language to
someone in the community it is a sign of respect
We talked about how to speak with baskets

11. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A CLASS STORY 2

His language brought us to an old conversation about indigenous languages going extinct. He said, it's really too bad about indigenous languages. We really need to do something about them.

She responded with a statistic something like there are six thousand indigenous languages globally and four of these languages go extinct every day. She gave him just another flora and fauna comparison. This is a typical response to a very complicated question about language extinction. This was from the teacher I invited to teach the class. This teacher was a young indigenous woman from the local community who made pine needle baskets. She made pine needle baskets so well that they reminded me of breath, breathing, and living. Neither of them batted an eyelash at her statistics or her sadness at not speaking her indigenous language. And no one noticed my anger.

Keep in mind. This young woman just taught the class on pine needle baskets which are connected to her culture.

He said, do they teach indigenous languages in school?

This is another typical part of the conversation concerning indigenous language speaking and extinction.

This conversation is boring.

She said that they taught her language at her elementary school only after she left to go to the high school. Later on she didn't get a chance to learn because they taught it in the high school after she left.

So she didn't get a chance to learn.

She didn't get a chance to learn in a school setting.

Why does it always need to be a school setting before you can learn?

Keep in mind she just taught pine needle basket making to thirty students.

I couldn't believe I ended up in this conversation again. The question about language extinction and the common response of "nothing we can do". This concept of the *extinction of languages* is a colonial mind set which extinguishes indigenous meaning, indigenous systems of meaning, and indigenous practice of meaning. All things are relational. All knowledge is relational.

His Colonial-based perspective shattered any potentially positive conversation that may have happened afterwards. His questions were also shattering to all the work we were doing in class that night. I tried to interject that this notion of extinction is false but they didn't listen. They had already gotten on the wheel of colonial *manifest destiny*. And who am I to oppose the wheel? I tried to tell them that the teacher who taught basketry was speaking meaning defined by cultural parameters. She was speaking language, her indigenous language. There was still language and there was still growth of language in the room with us. But it was too late. He didn't know his question or comment would do this. He was a young man trying to demonstrate solidarity. He also wasn't registered for the class.

I remember the first time I faced this question of language extinction. We were in Terrace BC. I was working with Arts Umbrella. I was teaching printmaking to art teachers along with this awesome young indigenous guy. We did a printmaking workshop at his high school with teachers from the school district. Just happens that one of his high school teachers was attending the workshop. We flew through the hour workshop like a breeze. At

the end, there were a linger group of teachers still wanting advice about teaching art. After a while we were cleaning up and his teacher watched us. The teacher was asking very privileged questions. She knew he was Indian. She asked if I was Indian. She told me that I didn't look Indian. She asked me if I spoke my language. Then she asked him if he spoke his language. Her questions were cold. I answered no. He answered no.

Afterwards there was nowhere left for the conversation to go except awkwardness. I immediately felt shame about not speaking my language. And she kept looking at us for answers to her questions. Later on, I realized that this shame was colonial. This was my guilt which came from mostly surviving this genocide. Her questions were shaped to remind me that I had mostly survived. My family survived. Our bodies survived. Our traveling on the land survived. But our ability to articulate the practices of indigenous meaning didn't. Up until that point I thought that I pretty good at being Tahltan, even if I didn't speak the language. I didn't speak my language. This shame is the key to the continued silencing of indigenous bodies as a result of colonization. I didn't speak my language. I don't speak my language. I'm less than Tahltan Indian. I could believe in that. I could believe that finally the Indians and our knowledge are disappearing from the landscape. I could believe that all the genocide, oppression, poverty, residential schools, potlatch ban finally worked. Or I could recognize that Tahltan epistemological knowledge helped me teach art making to teachers.

Indigenous people understand the psychological reasons behind the silencing of our languages. This silencing is supported by historical trauma that has occurred due to hundreds of years of oppressive systems of power over indigenous knowledge. There are so many

physical reasons to be silent. Funny this silence of indigenous meaning requires indigenous people to speak English.

I can't.

It's too hard.

I didn't grow up with the language spoken in the home.

My parents went to residential school.

Silence.

silence.

silence.

silence.

silence.

All of this is not real.

The basket maker had and still has the opportunity to walk down the road on the reserve and chat with an elder. The question is what is stopping us from making the speaking of language meaningful?

We all have the potential to speak our language.

The language is a creative act, just like any other creative act. When you are speaking your language you are making something. Your speaking becomes a small contribution to the survival of your community. And you are allowed to do this. You have to give yourself permission to speak and perform indigenous meaning. Make no apologies. There is no need

to apologize if you are making contributions. You are expected to make contributions to your community because your contributions mean survival and the continued survival of your community.

I keep thinking back to that time in Terrace BC. I didn't really focus on my own feelings of shame. I remember how that young man was shamed by colonization. And I remembered how much I wanted to protect him from that shame. I remember how I felt witnessing the effect of that shame in the young man's following behaviours. We were in the thick of all of it. The room was defeated. We lost our space. We lost our opportunity for success. I responded with anger at the teacher's behaviour even though she didn't understand the weight of her questions. I went to the young man and apologized on her behalf.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry that that just happened

What just happened?

What that teacher did. How she made you feel.

Oh.

You told me that you sing and dance.

Yep.

And the singing you do is in your language.

Yep.

So you are speaking your language. The songs are composed in your language. You are just singing it. So. Next time anyone asks you if you speak your language. You say yes. You have always spoken your language.

The next part of the conversation concerning *language speaking* and *language extinction* revolves around the need for young people to acquire their language. This is usually followed by a statement that *young people don't want to*, or *young people aren't interested*. Young people these days. I have yet to meet a young person really truly interested in anything. This lack of interest inside young people has been around a really long time. The blaming of young people is the worst part of the *language extinction* conversation. This young man in class, a young white man, when he says "young people aren't interested" he is saying that young indigenous people are letting us down. Wow! Residential schools have created four to five generations of people in indigenous communities who are still living out the childhood trauma of the residential school experience. In this sense, we are all still young people. And we all still have potential behind the pain. I hate this comment about the commitment of young people. In all of my work with 'those' young people I have never been let down once. I have only encountered potential, possibility, and enterprise. The question of *those indigenous young people* sounds especially sour when coming from a white mouth. *Those young people* are weighted down with historical emphasis almost like *those Indians* who were diving towards extinction due to disease five hundred years ago. In fact *those white mouths* have been saying that about our *young people* since time immemorial - a time before time.

Did he know what he was doing when he started this conversation about indigenous language extinction with indigenous people?

No, he didn't. He didn't understand how his language was in line with structures of power which have privilege western white hegemony over indigenous epistemological ideas. This conversation concerning indigenous language extinction is in place to maintain the hegemonic relationship. He performed a five hundred year old ritual. He performed a certain kind of meaning and the effect of that performance along with the subsequent meaning lingers. There are many effects on the spoken language.

In all the conversations about *indigenous language extinction* we still have our bodies, bodies with the potential to create new indigenous meaning. Our bodies are creating and demonstrating new indigenous meaning as defined by community based art practices and values. It is the basis of the *DiDene k'eh*, which is the Tahltan phrase used to indicate our people's voice.

One final word about the *language extinction* conversation, we are obligated to shift our connection to these language questions. The Basket Maker who taught class that night spoke her culturally based language. She communicated indigenous meaning and facilitated connection to that meaning through her performative language. She performed language to this white student. He didn't notice. He didn't connect to the performance of indigenous meaning. And she wasn't able to articulate this perspective yet. We still have work to do. And we are still able to walk out onto the land together. And when we return, we will tell the story about walking out on to the land. We will tell this story to those who weren't able to walk with us, so that they will also be able to find the way home if they choose to walk on the

land. The spoken language and the language performance will describe the steps so that the next person would be able to walk the same footprints.

12. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN
PETER'S BODY

*That one there
Is the maker of things
That old man.
His name is Old Man Alone.
The name of the one is Kapkimyis.
(Bringhurst 271)*

I am a beginner Tahltan language speaker. I grew up in a community where Tahltan and English were spoken. Tahltan sound resides in my body as does English and French.

My mom is a Tahltan Nation Elder. She was born in Tlegohin (Telegraph Creek, BC). She is a member of the Crow Clan. She grew up in Tlegohin, and has also spent the last 15 years living in an urban environment. My Dad is an Elder. He was born in Thetford Mines, Que. He is French Canadian. He has spent the larger part of the last forty years living in our Tahltan community.

In reflecting on the presence of spoken Tahltan language in our home, I remember Tahltan words that were shared with us by our mother. These were her favorite things to say in Tahltan and were the pieces of the Tahltan language that she was able to say with confidence. It is from her that I learned the Tahltan names of most of her brothers and sisters. It is from her that I learned and remembered the Tahltan names of my brothers and sisters – along with each one of the stories of those names. I also learned the story of my own Tahltan name and how this name became mine to carry for now.

From my mother I learned words like: *hurry up, quit that, get out of here, sit down, eat, white man, white lady, underwear, pants, spoon, moose, grouse, gopher, big horn sheep,*

horse, and *deer*. The spoken words reinforced the values connected within Tahltan culture that my mom communicated to us. The way she said the words, the scenarios of when and how these words were spoken, and the performance of Tahltan meaning within the words also are here with me.

As a Tahltan meaning maker, it is my goal to forget how to speak English. I want to be a fluent speaker of my Tahltan language. This is my goal. This is a Naming, Restoring, Returning, Reframing, Envisioning, Representing, Connecting, Indigenizing, and Revitalization project (Smith 142), as much as it is the dreams I have about the speaking the language to describe my thoughts, feelings, idea, and perspectives on the world around me. My desire to speak Tahltan language means I am removing myself from the spoken English language as my primary means of communicating meaning. This MFA exhibition is an offering of a blanket, a river, stones, feathers, and the Tahltan land as an embodied practice of articulating Tahltan epistemologies through objects connected to spoken Tahltan language.

Artists have a natural inclination towards the organization of knowledge. Artists also have unique opportunity to further engage, observe, and re-organize new knowledge. There is a natural desire to organize knowledge (Morgan 1998). Artists have created visual records of this organization through material practice which records and develops a historical record of this observation. As an indigenous artist, I participate in a process of making that contributes to the continued organization of knowledge for the Tahltan community. This history of making is visible within cultural values and practices of the indigenous community, some of the forms include: ceremony, spiritual practice, storytelling, and cultural practices. For indigenous artists, who practice meanings, in a gallery or artist run culture

system, this organization of indigenous meaning requires an installation approach to the creation of the work. Indigenous meaning, presented through the creative acts, within a western defined location often require a different approach to organizing the experience of the viewer. Curators of indigenous meaning within the gallery need to adjust their curatorial process to acknowledge the structures of power within these western hegemonic centers. I would further add that this significance of organizing meaning in relation to the development of ideas, values, and community practice is a defiant factor against the process of colonization. The spoken language and the performance of meaning within the speech act (Austin 1955) continue to define these creative acts.

13. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT THE TAHLTAN RIVER

The River has a vibration
It is like a singing vibration
And if you sing in harmony with the River
You will catch a fish

14. RIVER STONE LECTURING ABOUT THE LANGUAGE

I was thinking about the language as an object
It's something that is your creation
All created objects that are created perform cultural meaning
And have potential to contribute to the community cultural center
As a person living away from our home community you have to feel like you are entitled to contribute to the community
Often you as you live away you can feel a bit like you are alone isolated an island
There are often no culturally specific relationships in place to tell you that you are doing a good job
So the idea of creating a contribution to the community cultural center can feel like you are trespassing
So if you live away from your community you need to give yourself permission to contribute

15. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT LANGAUGE LEARNING USING INDIGENOUS PEDAGOGICAL MODELS

I attended a Kaska Dena language immersion gathering at Francis Lake, near Watson Lake, YT. There were about thirty of us in total. Some had forgotten their language. Others were in a process to regain their first language. And some, like me, were trying to learn. Many of the older people in camp were fluent speakers of Kaska. The sounds of spoken language often filled the learning space.

Some of our lessons focused on understanding the structure of International Phonetic Alphabet prepared dialogues. This focused changed the language lesson. The fluent speakers would stop speaking and start reading. The energy became stiff and unproductive. The structure of IPA was so different from the structure of meaning within the spoken language that we stopped speaking Kaska, stopped any performance, and started reading a version of Kaska.

At the start of the camp, the language teacher Leda Jules said it was mandatory to be working on something with our hands if we were going to learn language. Leda Jules, a Kaska Elder who lived in Watson Lake, said, “This is how we learned our language, we were always sewing when our mothers were teaching us how to speak”.

Indigenous languages, like indigenous knowledge, are organized in an indigenous manner. Language structures defined by western epistemological practices can't represent that indigenous meaning and often shut down what is happening, performing, when someone is speaking indigenous language. Leda's teaching connected performance of meaning with the spoken language; her teaching was based in indigenous philosophy. This philosophy

reminds a new speaker of how meaning is organized and how the learning of language is organized utilizing work as a mnemonic device to aid in the acquisition of meaning.

The moving of our hands is creating something that contributes to the community and supports our ability to mirror our language through action. Leda reminds us our community objects also speak the language and that we can turn to them when we need to be reminded of our community language and values. The languages of our communities are fluid just like the materials we use to represent our community identity/practice/location/history. There is an inherent performative aspect involved in the speaking and making of an object.

16. RIVER STONE SPEAKING TO A CLASS ABOUT CULTURE

Back at the front of the classroom, I need to shift students' perspectives beyond the preconceptions they have experienced concerning Indian, Native, Aboriginal, First Nations, and Indigenous. In order to move the class towards thinking critically about their positioning to the words Indian, Indian culture, and cultural practice, I need to create a way for them to understand their privilege, and their ability to access their privilege. I present to them the idea that culture practice is circle. This circle is pedagogy, a way of experiencing indigenous meaning. I tell them our class will be organized follow this pedagogy. We will all have to speak in this circle.

I write on the board, "If we organize our thoughts and experiences of culture in the following way we will have an indigenous methodology to shape and share what we know about our own cultural practices." The way I address spaces of the colonial privilege like a class room is to trust in our indigenous form of cultural knowledge production. And remind everyone in the room that we sit in the circle as equals with equal knowledge that can facilitate learning as well as teach.

I write a method for understanding the indigenous creative practice, 'Culture – Idea – Material – Enactment – Collective – History'. This model addresses the material production of culture, as well as how the creative process informs the transmission of indigenous meaning within a cultural form. The maker of objects, the organizer of indigenous meaning, moves through a process that promotes experiential meaning through the process of making objects that reflect culture.

I decide I am going to write four statements of culture on the board:

1. You don't just get to be part of a culture with your Indian card or blood quotient.
2. The culture of sharing a meal means something.
3. Culture is practice, it is learning, it is moving, it is participating, it is contributing, and it has immeasurable outcomes.
4. And it is because of these immeasurable outcomes that culture is a form for the practice of meaning.

I then decide to write four true statements about Tahltan Culture on the board:

1. We love moose meat, complimented by Kraft Dinner from the blue box.
2. We love to judge. We have opinions galore, and we aren't shy to share them with you, with your boss, with your friend, with our boss, with our partners, with our grandmothers, and random people on the street.
3. We love to dance to Tahltan Country Music. Our cousins are the best musicians in the world. They can sing the old country music, and the old gospel songs. When these songs are sung to a large gathered Tahltan audience in our community, angels come down to join us.
4. We have a love to drive long distances. Our people are nomadic still. Some of us live in Vancouver, Victoria, Prince George, Smithers, Kitimat, Hazelton, Whitehorse, Atlin, Yellowknife, and that place in the states. And for those of us, who live in the home community of Telegraph Creek (where the road ends), Dease Lake (close to where the road ends), and Iskut (on the way to where the road ends), we like to shop at Costco which is in Prince George.

17. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHING

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark. "You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it?" Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees –he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled towards Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalmar knew: if you surrender to the air, you could ride it. (Morrison 1997 337)

From September to December in 2006, I was employed as the language and culture teacher at Denetia School in Lower Post, B.C. I worked with fourteen students over these five months. Together we created opportunities for language games, lessons plans, tests for language acquisition, and stories that promoted language speaking and awareness of indigenous epistemological practices.

The spoken language became a vehicle for these kids to experience indigenous epistemology practiced within the classroom. The cultural models embedded within the practice of speaking our language shifted our relationship to learning in the classroom. Our spoken language helped our ancestors to come into the classroom to help us learn. The land came into the classroom. The history of the community came into the classroom. On the land we all had potential. We all became teachers of language and teachers of culture. The drive to return the land back to its rightful place as an epistemological cornerstone meant we needed to change the world. This subversion meant something in a community damaged by a residential school. When our language speaking was successful, and the students felt confident with their speaking, they also appeared taller and more confident in the classroom. As their teacher, and as a student of language speaking, I could feel my own confidence grow

when we spoke language together. For the scheduled two hours a week for language speaking and study, we became language heroes.

Indigenous language speaking is difficult. When the students and I acknowledged our desire to speak our indigenous languages we created new indigenous knowledge and experience. As a community member I wanted to demonstrate a healthy connection to the spoken language as a forum from which to base the shared learning. The students were learning how to reconnect indigenous meaning to the spoken language. I was also a student in this classroom. I was also learning how to reconnect indigenous meaning to the spoken language.

This shift of western based pedagogy within the classroom happened because the students and I privileged our indigenous experience as a primary mode of engaging with learning. I began by asking students what words they already knew and used. We brought these words, first and foremost, back into the classroom. The students were able to actively engage with their known Kaska/Tahltan words and were able to bring experiences around those words into our shared dialogues around cultural practices. Our stories continually transformed and were consistently being redefined by our speaking with indigenous meaning. The speaking our language also allowed us to envision a space outside of this classroom, where we could bring this spoken language back to our homes, families, and elders.

In the role of teacher, and community member, my practice of speaking the language was supported through how I acted as a community member. For example, I acknowledged where I am from, how I was connected to the land, and how I was connected to the Tahltan Nation. I acknowledge that I was living as a guest on the traditional territory of the Kaska

Dena Nation. I acknowledged that I was also a guest in the language of the Kaska Dena people. I was also accountable to the local village of Kaska Dena speakers to represent their language to the best of my abilities. I consulted with local Kaska Dena language speakers, and we created priorities for the Kaska Dena language in the school. These factors contributed and influenced the ebb and flow of Kaska Dena knowledge into the school classroom. This required certain behaviors that emphasized respect. I was hired as a teacher of language and culture by the School District 87 but I was living in the Kaska Dena community.

In her speech to the Nobel committee Morrison (2000) speaks about how language is a key piece for the construction of meaning within a community's identity, history, and future. Morrison writes "When language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference, and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat, not only she herself but all users and makers are accountable for its demise (14)." Her reflection on language, as a re-memory of African American experiences, offer insight into the development of new practices of creating meaning through speaking language. As learners of Tahltan language in our own re-memory project, the students and I were able to shift our shared experience of the western paradigm enough to become successful speakers of indigenous meaning.

Morrison's critical reflection on spoken indigenous language doesn't need to reflect the state of languages and language speakers but takes care to reflect our connection to the living spirit of those spoken languages. As my grandmother would say, "It's your language". Grandmothers are 'smart in the language'. Morrison is a grandmother. This is a truth that matters. As speakers of language we experience this truth of language in our bones.

Morrison's investigations of meaning could be characterized as a revolution of memory; a project that forever changes everyone that it comes in contact with.

Antonio Gramsci writes "Revolution requires a spiritual emancipation of the oppressed class that transforms it from a mere object of historical and political powers into a genuine agent of history. In addition, the revolution cannot be predicated or understood in advance of its achievements (Edgar 86)." Language, as an agreed upon process of making connections, functions also as a process that connects the speaker to the history of community, the history of knowledge, and the history of acquired experience. In this way spoken language also functions as a creative act.

The students of Denetia School had that dedication during those months. I witnessed indigenous meaning take shape and reshape stories in English. I watched students get excited about speaking their language. I watch other students become teachers. The students for this brief period got a chance to remember language and performance similar to how Milkman was able to remember this at the end of Toni Morrison's book, *Song of Solomon* (1997). With language we all have a chance to surrender to the air (337).

18. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT THE ESSAY THAT SHOULD WRITE
ITSELF - AN UN-OFFICAL HISTORY OF TAHLTAN EPISTEMOLOGY

In my work, as an artist and speaker of Tahltan language, I am interested in investigating and building strategies which allow for Tahltan meaning to be experienced, practices, and lived. This essay looks at articulating some of these strategies, influences to the creation of these strategies, and teachers of strategies. These strategies shape the creative practices I use to produce work and help reconnect the Tahltan body with Tahltan meaning. The body performs meaning, performs speaking. This performance helps a beginning speaker to remember the words. This essay talks about how these strategies shape the work an *Un-Official History of the Tahltan Epistemology* presented in the MFA exhibition.

I believe that spoken language is a created object. It has structure which implies physicality. This physicality is engaged with through the body. Language is connected to the history of knowledge and ideas within its specific community of origin. The act of speaking my language is an act of performing meaning, history, and ideas. The act of speaking this history, organized as language, creates a connection for both the speaker and the listener to the history of knowledge and ideas within its specific community of origin. When I speak the Tahltan words, as a person of Tahltan ancestry, I am re-organizing, re-shifting, re-creating a re-memory by performing Tahltan meaning (Austin 55).

Duda-antini

Ezeck-tah Onye

Es Didene T'sini Tlegohin, Tat-lah, Kluwecheon nande

Es Didene Dendatah Tle gohin, Tat-lah, Kluwecheon nande

Dzene s hoti'e

Tsedze susahts'a n

EzekTah ushye

E, diden tsedle usehs'an

Edu didene K'eh soga hodese

(Artist statement, "An unofficial history of Tahltan epistemology 2010")

Tahltan spoken words play a utilitarian role within the cultural exchange through the act of speaking. Within the gallery, these words reveal a play of indigenous meaning within the Euro-centric western hegemonic framework that has dominated and written out most indigenous experience within our shared Canadian Nationhood. A dialogical model that builds meaning through interaction of experience could also provide a much needed strategy for re-building a transformational space (Bahktin 1981). The dialogical model also can account, and create space, for the spiritual essence contained within the performance of spoken language (Vergne 2005).

In her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Maori Scholar, Linda Smith (1999) writes about how indigenous knowledge has been represented, dominated and exploited by the west. Specifically, she writes:

Imperialism and colonialism are the specific formations through which the West came to 'see' to 'name' and to 'know' indigenous communities. The cultural archive with its systems of representation, codes for unlocking systems of classification, and fragmented artefacts of knowledge enabled travellers and observers to make sense of what they saw and to represent their new-found knowledge back to the West(60).

However, indigenous scholars and communities are reclaiming theories of their own knowledge through indigenous research methodologies. These methodologies have always

existed and have continued to be practiced within communities. Creation of knowledge has never been lost. Smith articulates that indigenous knowledge is a site of specific organization and able to reorganize itself to incorporate English language to communicate these indigenous structures of meaning. Indigenous knowledge has the discovery of new knowledge practices embedded within its structure.

The definition of indigenous art and artists has to shift along as our relationship to indigenous knowledge is being redefined and rediscovered. Indigenous artists create work with indigenous art practice that shapes their creative choices. In this sense indigenous artists, much like indigenous researchers, become organizers of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous artists shape forms which support the practice of investigating knowledge defined by indigenous ways of knowing and are able to transform space through the performance of that recovered, experienced, articulated indigenous meaning. Artists and speakers of language have a responsibility to contribute to the epistemological history of the community. Indigenous artists, because of this commitment, are constantly in process of communicating and organizing new indigenous meaning.

The Tahltan meaning resulting from the performance of these Tahltan words also has a profound and transformational effect on the space. The performance of Tahltan meaning, as a Tahltan practice re-arranges space, time and history within a gallery space that is dominated by western perspectives. The meaning attached to the performance of these Tahltan words changes and deepens in relationship to a location transforming our relationship and understanding of the physical space. In particular, performance art, a relatively recent category within western art, with its emphasis of shifting boundaries within

the gallery, has re-written, re-organized, and transformed our memory of space (Vergne 2005, Carlson 1996).

Performance art and performance of indigenous meaning should be read as two separate but connected entities. Both artists and speakers of language, as organizers of knowledge, have a responsibility to effectively represent their connection to epistemological truths and practice. We also continue to create meaning which contributes to the overall well-being of the epistemological body. In the Tahltan story, “The Crow Searches Out The Light”, Crow contributes the “light” to the community (Teit 1919). We know this story because the Crow told the story to someone. The Crow’s commitment to speaking, or performing indigenous meaning, forever changed the direction of the community and who we are as a people. In turn, the performance of Tahltan language also affects the listeners’ sense of who they are and what they bring to community.

This commitment to creating new knowledge as a contribution is traditional within indigenous communities. Robert Davidson, in speaking about his own community practice, remarked:

Expanding my understanding of the art form is not unlike hosting a feast. When I hosted my first feast, in 1980, I really bent a lot of people out of shape because of the way I did it without consultation. It was a profound lesson. The potlatch I hosted most recently came from the knowledge and experience of all the potlatches and feasts I’ve hosted: it came from coaching from my naanii [grandmother] coaching from my uncles and some of my elders, and consulting with my clan
(Duffek 2004, 16)

This act is reflected throughout the history of indigenous art, indigenous artists, speakers of indigenous language, all are organizers of meaning. As Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson writes, “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right (135).”

Artists have been talking, and representing meaning for a very long time. My plan is to contribute spoken Tahltan words, and the subsequent performance of meaning, to the *Circle* exhibition. This piece is called, *there is a circle at the bottom of the river/meaning happens at the bottom of the river/un-official history of epistemological practices of the Tahltan Nation*. These spoken words, and performance, will organize itself into the space. I will have prepared objects which will act as transmitters of energy connected to the Tahltan indigenous meaning that I am representing. These objects will carry this Tahltan meaning throughout the space.

The experience of indigenous meaning conveyed by creative practice has the ability to change who we are. This spoken language refers to the practice of indigenous based meaning within western dominant locations, and is attached to the practices defined by indigenous epistemological centers of knowledge production. The *Circle* exhibition is proposing that the spoken language has deeper implications for the relocation of meaning for both the indigenous society and the western dominant hierarchy.

I had a dream that creation of Tahltan meaning happened at the bottom of the Tahltan River. I've been to the Tahltan River many times. There is place where the Tahltan River meets the Stikine River. It is this place, where the two rivers meet, that our Tahltan nation gathered its salmon in preparation for the winter months. I remember standing by the Tahltan River. If you stand at the place where the two rivers meet, and look upwards towards the sky, you can see my great-grandmothers smoke house. If you stand where the two rivers meet you can see the house of big Crow.

I think there is a sweat lodge at the bottom of the river. I can hear the singing. I can hear the drum beat. If I listen closely I can hear the spoken words, along with the words being sung in the language. If I imagine I can feel the red hot lava rocks speaking the language to their grandchildren in the sweat lodge. There is room for spoken language in the sweat lodge. There is room for transformation of understandings in the sweat lodge. There is room for indigenous meaning to be indigenous meaning in the sweat lodge. The sweat lodge is epistemology. In the

sweat lodge white people are transformed by the truth of indigenous meaning. Afterwards, I see them glowing like children who are learning the language, and then a voice tells me ‘We all got to start somewhere’.

I blindfold myself and climb under the edge of the button blanket. This button blanket covers the entire floor of the gallery. It reaches from wall to wall. It is its own gallery representing Tahltan meaning. It is huge but still moves like a button blanket should move. A button blanket should flow like the river. There are buttons on top of the blanket. They are not fixed to the blanket. Their movement makes a sound like the river. (Artist statement, “The un-official history of Tahltan epistemology”)

Artists have been performing meaning and creating dialogical opportunities for the creation of new knowledge for a long time. We see examples of this in the performed meaning connected to language speaking, and its ability to re-organize our ways of knowing. Knowing is the key. Artists reflect a continued investigation of the land. This investigation helps the community to understand the land better. Land equals survival.

Investigating these strategies has been useful to the development of my MFA exhibition. Joseph Beuys re-organized the energy flow of the gallery. Louise Bourgeois re-organized material as a means to communicate dreams. Huang Yong Ping re-organized process of investigation. Xu Bing re-organized the representation of language and book. Cai Guo Qiang re-organized painting. Robert Davidson re-organized the culturally drawn line. Nancy Spero re-organized printmaking. Jimmy Durham re-organized the Indian. Rebecca Belmore re-organized the history of Canada. Faye Heavyshield re-organized everything.

When we look at a body of work, as a viewer, we engage with a record of an artists practice or we engage with a record of investigation of knowledge and knowing. This record has a particular way of staying inside the body, or the mind. Indigenous art is inherently a performance of indigenous meaning because of the strict organization of meaning by western

epistemological practices. The named Western Art, Asian art, Non-Western Art, Indian art, Native art, African art, African American art, represent the chapters of organized western knowledge. These chapters, if organized chronologically, referred to the development of colonies by colonial powers; however, if we look beyond the chapters, and specifically at the living practices of artists connected to these communities, we can see that this organization is false. Each artist is living and practicing as they are connected to the epistemology of the land they are living on. That is, African art is still defined by African based epistemology. African land, Asian Land, Indian Land and Native Land are still present and able to represent meaning to their respective cultures. Even while the colonizer attempts to re-organize meaning and re-frame the knowledge of the colonized, Art is still reaching out to people and we are still organizing it in indigenous ways.

Indigenous art cannot be defined in the same manner that art located in the western epistemological tradition is. If we re-position art as a performance of meaning, a re-organizing of meaning within space, we are opening up a gateway for a re-development and re-connection to the spoken language. This description of a practice of meaning gives a sense of how indigenous meaning is arranged within a gallery setting. This re-development allows for our spoken language of a culture to create new meaning. This style of performance of spoken language, as an investigation of the forms of epistemological meaning, crosses boundaries, disciplines, and histories. As M. Scott Momaday (1997) writes:

Here are stories told. And they are stories in which we are unmistakably involved. They are not wholly intelligible (neither are the chants of the Mountain Spirits in the contemporary *yei bichai* of the Navajo), but they are deeply moving, and they emerge from the farthest reaches of our racial memory(129).

I am wearing a blanket like Beuys did in I like America and America likes me (1974). (But my blanket is much older form of meaning then the blanket Beuys wore.)

I am C.O.Y.O.T.E. (1941) like Louise Bourgeois did. (But my C.O.Y.O.T.E is a crow.)

I am creating a House of Oracles (1989) like Huang Young Ping did. (But my house is actually a river of oracles.)

I am creating a Book from the sky (1987) like Xu Bing did. (but my book is actually a drum.)

I am creating a space for the Dragon Museum of Contemporary art: Everything is a museum no. 1 (2006) like Cai Guo-Qiang did. (but museum is actually a house of Tahltan stories, a house a grandmother would live in.)

I am creating a space for the Southeast Wind (2004) like Robert Davidson did. (But my potlatch is actually a sweat lodge ceremony.)

I am creating a Codex Artaud (1971) like Nancy Spero did. (But my Codex is actually a history of Tahltan ways of knowing.)

I am creating a Caliban Codex (1991) like Jimmy Durham did. (but my Caliban is myself.)

I am Speaking to their Mother (1991) like Rebecca Belmore did. (but my Speaking to their mother is actually I'm speaking to my mother.)

I am creating a Venus as a torpedo (2002) like Faye Heavyshield did. (Actually, I am creating a Venus as a torpedo just like Faye Heavyshield did.)

(Artist statement, "An un-official history of Tahltan epistemology 2010")

My spoken Tahltan words represent my connection to the Tahltan landscape. They are my contribution to the history of ideas which shape the Tahltan Nation and represent my survival. A hunter walks a circle on the land. Each footstep could be considered a spoken word in the language of the people. The hunter returns from this walk with knowledge. The hunter returns to the community with knowledge gained through new experience. This knowledge is added to the practice of knowledge that occurs in the community epistemology.

The hunter tells the story of the hunt. The hunter tells the story so that we will listen. We sit together and talk about the hunter's experience. We sit together and talk about these new experiences. And we share the meat that was brought back.

Duda-antini

What you are doing?

Ezeck-tah Onye

My name is Ezeck-tah.

Es Didene T'sini Tlegohin, Tat-lah, Kluwecheon nande

My Tahltan family live in Telegraph Creek, Dease Lake, and Iskut.

Es Didene Dendatah Tlegohin, Tat-lah, Kluwecheon nande

My Tahltan ancestors live in Telegraph Creek, Dease Lake, and Iskut.

Dzene s hoti'e

It is a good day.

Tsedze susahts'a n

All of you listen.

Ezek-tah ushye

My name is Ezek-Tah.

E, diden tsedle usehs'an

Yes, I speak a little Tahltan.

Edu didene K'eh soga hodese

I don't speak Tahltan well.

(Artist statement, "An un-official history of Tahltan epistemology 2010")

19. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT GATHERING THE MEMORIES OF A
TAHLTAN RIVER - A STORY CONNECTED TO THREE THOUSAND PRINTS OF
SALMON

My grandmother was Dinah Creyke. She was the mother of fifteen children. In 1969, travel writer Edward Hoagland published stories about my grandmother in his book *Notes from the Century Before*:

June 13, Monday:

You can recognize the old residents like Callbreath and John Creyke by the cluster of vehicles which have accrued to them, a sign of having survived. Creyke lives in an empty church, a high fiefdom at the end of Dry Town. A sleepy call answered my knock. I went in. The bed compartment in the corner was surrounded by a curtain of cheesecloth, and a woman's annoyed voice told me to "Pull it back. Pull back the curtain!" When I did, there they were.

Mrs. Creyke is a bulky woman who looks as wise as a gypsy medium, as Indian woman who have borne fourteen children frequently do. She rolled over to go to sleep again, but her husband rose. He's a vigorous sixty, quiet-spoken and tall, with thriving white hair, deep-set eyes and massive ears. (63)

My family hates these words. If you bring up this Hoagland book in casual conversation they won't respond, they will just leave the room. They hate that these words exist. They are un-invited English words that don't represent my grandmother or my grandfather. This artwork is my opportunity to offer new words.

My grandmother was a proud Tahltan woman. She was born in 1914 and was eighty two years old when she died in 1996. She knew the name of the mid-wife who assisted her in each of her children's births. In 1995, my grandmother and I visited the place where she was born. It was a small one room house built from hewn logs. It had window shutters which were painted green at one point. As I mentioned, my grandmother had fifteen kids – John,

Bruce, Robbie, Tom, Grace, Paul, Sidney, Scott, Diane, Janelle, Chris, Leonard, Vernon, Jerry, and Anna. At the end of her life she had great-great-great grandchildren. She was a contributor to Tahltan meaning by living in Tahltan culture. She knew her family genealogy. She knew how to speak the Tahltan language. She has a life time of participation in Tahltan cultural ceremonies. She contributed to the community epistemological body by sharing food and feeding people. She was always surrounded by family. And even with all those people around her, my grandmother never forgot my name. I have such a strong memory of holding my grandmother's hand supporting her when walking. It felt like my duty to be that support for her. And I was proud to do this for her.

When I was a kid we lived in Smithers BC. We would visit my grandmother in Dease Lake BC. Our visits to see our grandmother, also took us throughout the traditional territory to family who lived in Iskut, Dease Lake, and Telegraph Creek. At the end of summer, we would leave to our traditional territory and we would leave our grandmother for another year. Every time we left home, my grandmother would say, 'Bye. Miss you kids. Write to me in care of Bruce Creyke. Okay'.

I never wrote. I never wrote any letters to her. I love her so much but I never took the time to write. I don't want to know why. The letters didn't matter didn't matter to me at the time. The form of the letter was wrong. It didn't communicate what I needed to communicate. I felt that the letters didn't speak. What I could have written to her in those letters didn't matter. The physical act of connection through the letters mattered. This MFA exhibition is offering the letters I didn't write. Gathering the memories of a Tahltan River is the three thousand letters I've written to my grandmother over the past two years. I've

printed spawning salmon on to the letters and when it is time, like the older Crow from our Tahltan stories, I will put the salmon back into the River.

20. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT A JOB TEACHING LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE

In 2005, I was employed by School District 87 to teach language and culture to students, grades kindergarten to grad 6, at Denetia School in Lower Post BC. Denetia School is located within the traditional territory of the Kaska Dena Nation. I realized quite early in the process of trying to speak and teach the student at Denetia School that you can teach a form of speaking language but you can't teach meaning embedded within that language - especially if you are not connected to, or experienced, in that meaning.

I got the Lower Post language teaching job by chance. I was new in town, a recent addition to the small town of Watson Lake YT. I was looking for work. I am Tahltan. I am Crow Clan. I am an artist. I am an educator. Nobody in town could gossip about me. I knew how to say twenty words in Tahltan. This meant I had pretty good prospects for getting a Kaska Dena language teaching job. So good in fact, I heard about the job on Monday. I was hired over the phone without an interview on a Saturday and started work on the following Monday.

Denetia School has a small staff, two rooms, a gym, and a playground. There were two white teachers (one of whom was the principle of the school), one Cree person who did administration, another Tahltan person who was the janitorial staff, and me. The job worked out to three days a week. The principle of the school told me that I was hired to teach language and culture to the students. In particular my job focused on Kaska Dena language instruction to children who were both Tahltan and Kaska Dena. She didn't specify how to teach Kaska language. She just thought I knew because I was Tahltan and could speak twenty

words in Tahltan. I was particularly concerned because I am Tahltan and had no experience or relationship to the Kaska Dena language. I was also concerned when I realized there were absolutely no language curriculum materials for the specific dialect of Kaska which was located in the village of Lower Post, B.C. When I asked the more experienced white teacher at the school about other Native language teachers and their methods, she responded, “It has been my experience that language teachers come to the class, recite words, and draw pictures”. This is not exactly a clear message about language instruction methods but it was what I had to work with.

I realized early on in the process that conventional methods of language instruction wouldn't work for me. I knew that I couldn't stand at the front of the classroom and just speak the language because I wasn't a fluent language speaker. I had no direct way of language instruction. I didn't have money to purchase materials which would help to practice Leda Jules's teaching about working with our hands and learning language. I didn't want to turn on the language tape and mimic the recorded dialogue because the phrases boring and irrelevant. I couldn't hand out language curriculum sheets (fill in the blanks) because I didn't have any. I couldn't bring in any elders from the community because there was still trauma from the local residential school. As a Tahltan person, I knew the language had power and to speak our language in the classroom articulated that power. I wanted the language to have presence in the classroom. As a community member I knew that I wanted the spoken language to have positive associations for the students. I wanted the language to become a creative force.

In order to achieve my goals I threw out anything which was goal oriented. I re-prioritized our already established language speaking patterns. I erased all language acquisition ideologies because we needed to get re-familiarized with what we already knew. I also asked the white teachers to leave the classroom during language lessons. We began to play with the spoken language. We became animals because we remembered the words for animals in our language. And one of us became the hunter of those animals. We stopped reading the words, or reciting the words and created the words in the classroom. At one point we became black bears, grizzly bears, ground hogs, wolves, crows, rabbits, and a herd of caribou. We acknowledged our history, and hunted for language that is for everyone.

In subsequent lessons, we began to create our own language curriculum. We drew our own flash cards of what we thought the words meant. We rewrote established games like: go, go, stop and duck, duck, goose with our spoken language. We brought our language, spoken and understood, into the classroom. And we were proud when we had words to share. In one class, we told stories of our weekend. Students talked about hunting, playing games, riding horses. In the round of stories, the students used the language without pause, without asking for the Kaska Dena words which represented meaning. The performance of meaning connected to the speaking of indigenous words created new opportunities for successful learners.

At Denetia School I witnessed this collaborative piece as a result of a lesson plan that went south. We finished our language speaking early. We ended our lesson with an opportunity to go snowshoeing. We got ready to go outside. We got our snowshoes. And I had to tell the students that I didn't know how to snowshoe. I was embarrassed when I told

the kids. And they had never met anyone who didn't know how to snowshoe. The moment was transformed when I spoke the word for snowshoe. And in return, they demonstrated how to walk in snowshoes. They took their time being teachers and they took care of me. When they saw that I had gotten comfortable with the snowshoes, they left me behind and raced ahead. This exchange of indigenous meaning, a rather small opportunity to perform indigenous meaning, informed the classes for the rest of year. The students and I had successfully performed indigenous meaning through our exchange, an exchange of learning, an exchange of experience, and created a story to tell in class the next day. We had connected through the speaking of meaning. They spoke the language of snowshoeing. And I spoke the language of snowshoeing. For me, what I recognized in my body was confidence and no apologizes for not knowing.

In my work as the teacher, I realized that indigenous language learning should be approached as a literacy issue not a political issue. The job description used to hire for the language teacher position didn't address the depth of need connected to one's ability to communicate meaning in one's indigenous language. These students weren't speaking and creating meaning in their indigenous language. I wasn't speaking or creating meaning beyond the twenty or so words I knew. I began to explore and implement language literacy models in the classroom, in particular looking at the work of Pablo Freire in *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The students and I could no longer participate in what Freire calls the 'banking approach' to learning (60). Language is not memorization. Language is practice and magic. This banking approach didn't allow for any particular nuances of indigenous language and indigenous meaning to exist within the classroom beyond the western paradigm. At one

point, the students and I made an agreement that we were like babies in the language. This agreement allowed for mistakes to be made, for jokes to be had at each other's expense, and for learning to happen through play. As potential fluent speakers of indigenous language, we could no longer participate in a banking education approach if we wanted to create an opportunity for indigenous organized meaning through language speaking within the classroom. Freire (1970) writes, "Education as the practice of freedom -- as opposed to education as the practice of domination -- denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from men (61)."

There is a tradition of continued learning within indigenous epistemology. Elders are learners. They are called Elders because they have a life time of gained experience which enables them to shape indigenous epistemological knowledge. This lifetime of learning allows them to speak with authority on a subject that refers to the organization of cultural practices. Elders are no longer babies in the culture. A life time of learning means that there is no banking education within this indigenous pedagogy.

In order for the spoken indigenous language to be successful for the kids the lessons needed to create a de-centered class environment, an environment where we could become both teachers and students. This exchange or flow of knowledge and experience was defined by the indigenous models available to us and supported by models discussed in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. There is a need to reconnect meaning to the practice of spoken language. Freire (1970) writes:

The oppressed, who have been shaped by the detached affirming climate of oppression, must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanization, which does not lie simply in having more to eat (although it does involve having more to eat and cannot fail to include this aspect). The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become men (53).

Another major factor to contend with at Denetia School was the residential school.

Lower Post, where Denetia is located, was also home to a residential school. Our language learning always competed with the specter of the residential school which was still standing in the community. These students had parents, and grandparents who attended this Lower Post residential school, as well as others. There was a need to remind students that learning is supposed to be fun and that we can have fun with learning. It was also important to impart that learning, the process of acquiring knowledge, was an important part of the cultural ways of being within our indigenous communities. Learning is our tradition.

Later lessons worked towards providing students with opportunities to practice indigenous meaning, engage within their environment, demonstrate indigenous based knowledge, and perform that acquired meaning through the spoken language. As a language teacher I failed. I was not raised a Tahltan language speaker. I was raised as a practitioner of Tahltan values. I could only speak what I learned. I could use the performance of meaning as a way to shape my speaking and learning with the kids. This performance of Tahltan meaning connected and shaped our learning environment. The Tahltan epistemology helped determine the path of learning language and performance within this classroom. Meaning is entrenched in performance, as well as, language. Toni Morrison writes about this style of epistemological practice in her novel *Beloved* (1988):

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees towards her.

"Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

"Let your wives and your children see you dance," she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just Cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose. (87)

21. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT LANGUAGE

I was thinking about the language as an object
It's something that is your creation
All created objects that are created perform cultural meaning
And have potential to contribute to the community cultural center
As a person living away from our home community you have to feel like you are entitled to contribute to the community
Often you as you live away you can feel a bit like you are alone isolated an island
There are often no culturally specific relationships in place to tell you that you are doing a good job
So the idea of creating a contribution to the community cultural center can feel like you are trespassing
So if you live away from your community you need to give yourself permission to contribute

22. RIVER STONE SPEAKING A DREAM

We were driving in the car towards the river
You were in the back seat
Beside my sister
My cousin Lena was driving
She was driving us to the river
She said i want to show you something
We drove down the hill towards the river
The river was swelled over because of flooding
We drove down the hill
She kept driving towards the water
To the left i saw a giant box floating in the water
To the left of the giant box i saw giant soapstone sculptures floating in the water
These sculptures were of grouse
A family of grouse
My cousin Lena said those were from an international shipping company
As she kept driving
The river pulled the car into the water
Into the current
We floated along with the surface of the river
Out beyond the beach
Out beyond safe swimming distance
I didn't realize how big the river was until i was deep inside the currents
I was scared
I prepared for the car to sink in the river
I told my sister, and you, and my cousin to roll up the windows
That we needed to wait until the river had consumed the car before we could open up the
doors
And that once we opened the doors
We leave the car
Grab a big breath
Keep our legs as together as possible
With pointed toes
And go with the current
The car continued to float on the surface
We moved towards the giant stone sculptures of grouse
These grouse didn't move with the current
The giant box that looked like it housed this family of stone grouse didn't move
I told my car mates to get ready
I trusted that the river would keep us safe

23. RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT WHY LANGUAGE SPEAKING IS HARD

Learning the language can mean finding your way. The words can sound too big for your mouth. The meaning attached to the spoken word can fall out of your mouth and hit the ground hard. Be careful but don't be afraid of your language. Have some fun with speaking. Make jokes to hear elders laugh. Be like a baby in the language. Invite the language to grow inside your body.

Ahda Bes
Eagle Knife

Cha Ch'a'an
Rain Arrowhead

Dih Dleze
Grouse Grizzly

Dzudze Etsen
Bird Meat

Tehk'efe Gah
Frog Rabbit

Ghanje Hih
Canada goose Mountain

Ihti Jani
Bow Here

Kuk'a K'os
Cup Cloud

Labat Luge
Mitts Fish

Men Nogha
Lake Wolverine

Ogisogi Espane
Outside My friend

Sas Shal
Black Bear Fish trap

Tudecho' Dzudzet'oh
Mallard duck Bird's nest

Tli Tl'oge
Dog Grass

Tsa Ts'ede
Beaver Blanket

Dlune Gwel
Mouse Packsack

Yuka ezes
Northern lights Hide

24. CONCLUSION: RIVER STONE SPEAKING ABOUT MY RETURN TO THE RIVER

The Tahltan are very fond of singing and are constantly composing new songs, both airs and words, for their children. They are really love songs to the child, lullabies to make it fall asleep. All the women use them. Some compose a song for each child. Many are forgotten afterwards; others persist and are handed on to daughters to use for their children. (Thompson 101)

In 2005, I had a dream about waking up from my dreaming. This waking up connected me to language speaking. In the dream, I was woken up by a crow cawing outside my house. The cawing was so loud. It roared through my body. I went outside to see what the noise was about. I could understand what the crow was saying. The crow was speaking my language. The crow was my grandmother dressed as a crow. She told me, in crow language, that it was my turn to teach the language. She told me it was my turn to teach. Three weeks later, my partner and I moved to the Yukon. Two months later I had a job teaching language at Denetia School.

Denetia written in English looks like one frozen English word but is actually two words and the words together imply action. Denetia is made up of two words, 'Dene' and 'etie'. The words have been interpreted as 'person' and 'good'. The words together, in an action based language like Athapaskan, represent a person whose actions contribute. You could say, Denetia reflects a good person but that would only be a small piece of the meaning. Denetia means a person whose actions contribute to the survival of the community.

When I was working as the teacher of language at Denetia School, I saw how speaking our language was also a contribution to the community. The speaking of language creates that contribution to the history of the community. The speaking of language is

observed as a performance of indigenous meaning, much like snowshoeing. This performance of indigenous meaning connects the speaking and the listener to the relational structure embedded within indigenous epistemology. This collaboration informed the development of new knowledge and experience which can continually re-develop knowledge and knowing. The function of spoken language is to support the survival of acquired knowledge through shared meaning.

The moment when I gained confidence in my ability to perform meaning and create language was the moment I stopped apologizing for my mistakes in language speaking and I became a producer of Tahltan knowledge. When I came back to the city, I moved away from speaking Tahltan language. I couldn't find the time to listen to my language tapes. I didn't use words in my daily practice. There were no Athapaskan people to talk Tahltan language with. I struggled with speaking the language in my daily life as an urban Tahltan person. I got embarrassed about making mistakes. The hundred or so Tahltan and Kaska Dena words which had become a part of my daily life were fading from my memory, even after I worked so hard to value and practice the meaning connected to the words. There were no Tahltan specific scenarios with which to collaborate with. I would imagine the words during conversations at work but these words would disappear before I had a chance to speak. Once again, I was facing a situation where I was positioned outside the Tahltan language, outside Tahltan meaning, and depending on spoken English language to articulate the Tahltan relationship to the land. I was afraid of making mistakes. I was afraid of misrepresenting my Nation. I was afraid of being Tahltan.

As a result of this, I returned to non-verbal performance of culturally based practice as a way to support the structure of meaning within spoken language. As an urban-based Tahltan person, if I couldn't find another Tahltan person to speak the language with, I could still speak the language of meaning through performance and performance exchange.

Spoken indigenous language is performed indigenous meaning. My definition of language needed to shift from a western paradigm to an indigenous epistemological cornerstone. If language, or the performance of meaning, created connection, purposeful or otherwise, then we still had significant language speaking practices within our communities. These practices, like regalia making, needed to be significant epistemological documents of meaning. The practice of speaking regalia, for example, functioned with the same meaning and connection that speaking the language did by creating a connection, a sharing of knowledge and experience. It supported the continued development and survival of knowledge.

In the course of the research in support of this MFA, when I apply this idea of a multi-centred approach of learning to speak Tahltan, I don't begin from a language deficit position. I am not motivated to learn because of language extinction. I am motivated to learn because my language speaking contributes to the community's survival as a Nation. Language is a process of connection. A hunter takes a walk out on to the land. A hunter returns with a story, with new language and new experience. The spoken language allows me to walk along side on the journey. As an urban-based Tahltan person, I am still walking on the land, still acquiring new language and new experience. The story is the final performance of this acquired meaning. Language is a journey. I have always been on this language

journey. This essay is a piece of my language journey. This *Circle* reflects my language journey. The *Circle* exhibition reflects my practice of indigenous pedagogy to explicate my connection to spoken language as a continued performance of Tahltan meaning without apology.

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