DENE K'ÉH GŪDZEDEDÉH:

**THE ONGOING CONVERSATIONS OF KASKA LANGUAGE RECLAMATION
AND REVITALIZATION**

by

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Abstract

In this dissertation I examine the modes of post-rupture claiming, maintaining, and re-shaping of the Kaska homeland, primarily through Kaska language practices, including ordinary interactions, storytelling performances, and various forms of political action. The Kaska are northern Dene (Athabaskan) people, residing primarily in the eastern part of what is now known as the Yukon Territory, and northern British Columbia in northwestern Canada. *Dene kēyeh* – Kaska land — is the tenacious thread, intricately woven through all aspects of Kaska life, ensuring its cohesiveness and continuity. *Dene kēyeh* and all the imaginings associated with it permeates everything, including the way people think about and understand their language and how it can be revitalized and maintained. I focus on the Kaska's contemporary relational and restorative responses to mitigate the disruptive impacts of colonial violence and the ongoing linguistic, political, and economic marginalization. I highlight how these linguistic and semiotic interventions work to assert Kaska people's rights to their land, which includes rights to their language and cultural practices. In this post-rupture reckoning, my primary goal is to illuminate the many ways the Kaska language has continued to live a remarkably vibrant life, despite the many forces that work diligently to devalue it, attempting to make it disappear. Consequently, the aim of this ethnographic account is not to tell a story about a language in decline. Instead, I focus on the persistent continuance of diverse linguistic practices creatively mobilized by Kaska speakers to attend to their contemporary realities and communicative needs, accomplishing a host of social and political goals. Keeping these "unexpected" vitalities of the Kaska language in mind, I reflect on what these responses can tell us about the future of the Kaska language, and how they might shape and inform future language revitalization movements, and the Kaska language's trajectory more broadly. Finally, I describe how people envision their future going forward and the concrete actions they are committed to take to carry their language forward for generations to come.

Lay summary

Until the 1940s, the Kaska Dene (Athabaskan) people, residing in the eastern part of the Yukon and northern British Columbia, lived relatively undisturbed from the outside world. With the construction of the Alaska Highway, facilitating the influx of outsiders and with it an increase in various government programs, including mandatory residential school attendance for children, their way of life changed dramatically. Today, the ongoing decline in the use of the Kaska language is a serious concern for the Kaska people, as they see their language and the knowledge it carries directly linked to their unique identity, history, and survival. Efforts have been undertaken to mitigate this gradual decline over the years, but more needs to be done. This is a story of Kaska people's linguistic resilience, ingenuity, and determination to carry their language and their culture into the future, capturing a vision of what true reconciliation could look like.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual property of the author Martina Volfova. The fieldwork research discussed throughout was endorsed by Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS) and approved by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) under the title "Kaska Language Project" BREB number H16-00579; Principal Investigator, Dr. Patrick Moore. Unless otherwise indicated, all photos included in this dissertation were taken by the author.

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Note on transcriptions and translations

Throughout this dissertation, whenever Kaska language text is used, it is italicized. In the data I collected and transcribed, the standard Kaska spelling currently in use by the Liard First Nation Language Department and related Kaska language projects associated with the University of British Columbia and the Yukon Native Language Centre was utilized. This standard spelling is used in all Kaska words or phrases I use as in-text examples. Whenever I use Kaska text written by someone else, I preserve their original spelling. In most translations from Kaska to English, I use either literal (word-to-word) or free translations. Whenever relevant and necessary to illustrate specific correlations, I use interlinear glossed text on the second line below the original Kaska text. I use free English translation below the interlinear glossed text on the third line. All translations and transcriptions were done by the author with the help of Kaska speakers Leda Jules and Jocelyn Mallay, and with the assistance of Patrick Moore.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help, support, and encouragement of many people.

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the many Kaska people, who took the time to share their stories, their thoughts, and their insights with me. These thoughtful engagements and ongoing conversations have been guiding and informing this work from the beginning. I am thankful for everyone's generosity, patience, and humour. I want to express my deep gratitude to Elders Leda and Robert Jules for their gift of unconditional love, unwavering support, and trust; for adopting me into their family and their Clan; and for giving me my Kaska name. I will always try my best to be a good daughter. Leda and Robert have been instrumental in teaching me and gently guiding me in how to respectfully engage with the Kaska world around me, including learning the Kaska language. Without them, my experience would have been very different. *Łá̃néyéh sốgá sāhlā'. Ests'į̃' nēhdī yéh nehghą̄h sốgá nessen*. I am truly thankful to Elder Maggie Dick for her kindness, generosity, and unconditional love and support. Words cannot express how much I miss her and how incredibly thankful I am for all the time we were fortunate to have together. *Łá̃néyéh sốgá sínlá̃' Tsésdōlemā.* I am thankful to Elder Alice Brodhagen for her beautiful stories, her sense of humour, and her willingness to open her home and take me in when I first arrived in the community in 2014, not knowing anyone. I will always cherish our time together, our conversations around her kitchen table, our drives out on the land to look around, and our many berry picking excursions. I am grateful to her for letting me in on all the good berry picking spots around town, when everyone else was sending me on a wild goose chase. I miss her every day. *Łá̃néyéh sốgá sínlá̃'.* Many thanks also go to Elder Aggie Magun for her generosity, her friendship, and for inviting me to tag along to many handgames tournaments all over the Yukon over the years. I am thankful for her willingness and patience to teach me how to play, despite my hopeless lack of talent for this game. I would like to thank *esdāde'* Linda McDonald for her friendship, unconditional support, and all her insights she shared with me over the years. I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to observe and participate in her Kaska language classes. I am thankful for her always believing in me and in my work. *Łá̃néyéh sốgá sínlá̃' esdāde'.* I am thankful to *esdāde'* Ann Maje-Raider, whose passion and dedication to advocacy and fighting for

justice has been an inspiration to me from the first moment we've met. I am honoured to have been a part of some of the efforts Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS) has been working on, and I am grateful for LAWS's support of the many language projects over the years. *Łá̕néyéh sǫ́gá sínlá̕.* I want to acknowledge all the Kaska youth, who too have been my teachers. My gratitude goes to Paul Caesar-Jules and Emeral Poppe for their friendship and their love of and dedication to the revitalization of the Kaska language – they are an inspiration to me and many others. I am thankful for their encouragements, their insights, and support, and for continuing to make *Gūzá̕gī kǫ́ą̕* such a welcoming place not only for me, but for everyone. I am excited to see where their language learning journeys will take them. I am incredibly proud of them both. *Łá̕néyéh sǫ́gá sāhlā̕. Nehyéh sénést'īn.*

I owe many thanks to my friend and colleague Tina Jules, whose passion for and unwavering dedication to promoting and supporting the revitalization of Yukon First Nation languages has been inspiring to me. I am grateful for her mentorship, her guidance, ongoing support, and most of all, her friendship. *Aatlein gunalchéesh!*

I am grateful to my PhD supervisor Dr. Patrick Moore, who has been a source of tremendous support, encouragement, and inspiration over the years. I am thankful to him for introducing me to the Kaska communities and for providing the much-needed guidance in how to navigate community-based language work. His unwavering dedication and commitment to Dene languages and Dene people is unmatched and something to aspire to. I am also thankful to my supervisory committee Dr. Barbra Meek and Dr. Mark Turin for their helpful feedback and their encouragement. I am especially thankful to Mark for his thoughtful insights and our many conversations.

I owe my gratitude to the Shoshone and Goshute youth and Elders who I worked with during my MA research project in Salt Lake City, Utah in 2012 and 2013, and with many of whom I maintain contact with until this day. They were my first teachers and guides in community language work, patiently sharing their wisdom, their perspectives, and their priorities not only for what work they wanted to do, but crucially, how this work can be collaboratively conducted in a proper and respectful way. My experience working with the Shoshone people has not only inspired me to continue in Indigenous language work, but it has also fundamentally shaped the way I engage in it. *Aisen Tsaa!*

I want to recognize all the wonderful friends in north, who have so generously offered their lovely cabins and homes in breathtaking places for my many extended reading and writing retreats over the years. I am certain that without these escapes and periods of time free of distractions of various kinds, I would not have been able to complete my studies!

Lastly, I would be remiss to not thank my family in the Czech Republic, my friends, and my fellow UBC graduate students, all of whom have contributed to the completion of this work in so many different, equally important ways.

To my parents

Prologue

Travels on the Land

It is early September. The air is getting cold, and the leaves are well on their way, turning beautiful deep gold. It's my favorite time of the year. This is also the time people get busy in the bush in the north, hunting, berry picking, and collecting medicines for the winter. The smell of wood smoke and dry meat is in the air – this, to me, has become emblematic of fall time in the Yukon. With plenty of sunshine in the forecast, I and a Kaska Elder, with whom I have been working on various language projects and have gradually become close to, have decided to drive up to Tū Chō for the day, just to look around. Driving "just to look around" with people has become a regular pastime for me since I have moved here. Located about 2 hours north from *Tets'élūgé'*, or Watson Lake, as it is called on official maps, on the Robert Campbell Highway in southeastern Yukon Territory, *Tū Chō*, or Frances Lake, is an important cultural and spiritual area for the Kaska people and many consider it their sacred homeland, a site of countless important events in the long Kaska history in the area, a place where many people were born, and many are laid to rest.

Tū Chō is also near the halfway point on the dusty highway between *Tets'élūgé'* and another Kaska community of *Tū Łīdlīnī,* or Ross River, as it is referred to in English. There are no towns, no gas stations, and no motels for nearly 400 km on this stretch of the highway and nowadays, for much of the year, the traffic is limited to people travelling between the two communities, or to and from their cabins or bush camps located in the vast area in between. For most of the year, it is not unusual to encounter only a vehicle or two on the road for the entire length of the trip to *Tū Łīdlīnī*. Later in the fall, however, it is different. Many Kaska families travel to spend extended periods of time on the land. Once the official Yukon hunting season opens, the road becomes busy with non-Kaska hunters too, both local Yukoners and also non-locals from elsewhere, fully loaded with supplies and equipment, venturing ever so deeper onto the land, hoping to get a moose or caribou to provide wild meat for the winter.

Hunting and fishing still remain a significant source of food for people in the north, and for the Kaskas, the ability to supply fresh wild meat for families remains fundamental to the Kaska way of life and to the community's food security in general.

For multiple, interrelated, and compounding reasons, local food security has become significantly more precarious in recent years. As a result, hunting has become a highly contentious issue for the local Kaska hunters, as they see the ever-increasing numbers of outside hunters encroaching on their traditional hunting territory. In many people's view, there are too many hunters out there, taking out too many animals, threatening the health and well-being of not only of the animal population, but also threatening the Kaska people's right to obtain traditional foods for their families and communities, increasing people's reliance on store-bought foods, which are often expensive and inferior quality. Regardless, most people prefer traditional foods from the land and regard them not only as inexpensive, nutritious, and healthy, but also as socially and culturally beneficial and necessary to the Kaska people's well-being.

One doesn't need to travel deep into the bush to witness this seasonal inundation of outside hunters. Since Watson Lake is located on the crossroads of the Alaska, the Robert Campbell, and the Stewart-Cassiar Highways, this phenomenon is impossible to not notice, as the increased traffic becomes evident right in town. People can be seen in local stores rushing to top off their gas tanks and getting last minute supplies before heading out. Additionally, it becomes the topic of everyday conversations in the homes and around town. Those active on social media such as Facebook give regular reports on what they saw in terms of the movement of outsiders in and out of the bush. For many, especially those who had not yet been able to get a moose for the winter, it can be distressing to see or hear of the many departing trucks, proudly displaying moose or caribou antlers tied to the top of their loads. With the hunting season getting further and further on its way, it truly becomes the dominant talk of the town, people sharing with each other what they saw and who they might have interacted with, outraged they are unable to stop this from happening year after year.

People also regularly report on the evidence of an improper handling of the animals and animal parts at kill sites, as well as finding dirty abandoned hunting camps. These occurrences are always evaluated as disrespectful and unacceptable and one more in a host of reasons to pressure the Kaska leadership to demand a hunting moratorium for non-Kaska hunters on Kaska lands. Messy or not, people can always tell whether a camp was occupied by a Kaska or a non-Kaska hunter based on the way the camp was set up, cared for, and left behind.

Resource extraction activities and related disturbances to animal habitat too are often attributed to the declining health and well-being of animals in the area. The Kaska territory has seen its share of resource extraction projects, and at least two, the Faro and the Wolverine mines, have become Territory-wide examples of what can and did go wrong. There are countless concerns people have with mining sites specifically, but in all cases, increased mining activity also means increased traffic on local roads. More traffic results in increased dust, noise, and collisions with wildlife and other vehicles. When a mine is in full production, people are hesitant to drive to areas that involve negotiating mining traffic, drastically limiting people's access to crucial hunting, fishing, trapping, and foraging areas. Additionally, access to areas near mining projects is usually restricted or more often entirely prohibited. When a mine closes and enters the reclamation, remediation, and maintenance stages, many locals avoid harvesting in its vicinity for fears of long-term contamination of the animals and plants in the area. In short, people's ability to engage in their cultural practices freely and safely is always at risk with each new resource extraction project approval.

I first traveled on this at the time mostly gravel road to *Tū Chō* in the year 2001, as a part of my solo bicycle journey from Minnesota up to Alaska. I remember being struck by the beauty and remoteness of the place, marveling at what seemed like "nothing" but a boreal forest for a long way and in all directions. Occasionally, one would see some small, overgrown trail heading off the road, deeper into the forest, and once in a while, one might even see a dilapidated old cabin along the road, a sign of different times. I fell in love with the place for its, as I saw it at the time, remoteness, emptiness, and rawness. While I knew I was on Indigenous lands, I didn't know whose territory I was on, and honestly, I probably didn't give it too much thought at the time either. I never saw any overt, deliberate representations of Indigenous presence that would be legible to me at the time, no orthographic announcements along the way, informing me and other travelers in some familiar way whose territory we were travelling through. Little did I know that there were plenty of signs all around me, I just didn't know how to look. I was a stranger with no real connection to the place, and a very little understanding of its history and its people.

I camped by streams and lakes along the way, counting my blessings for being able to experience this seemingly undisturbed "wilderness," awed by it all. My journal

writing from this period is filled with heartfelt reflections on this solitary experience and the profound effect it was having on me. The irony of traveling on a road, however remote, yet admiring the "untouched" wilderness at the same time, had somehow escaped me at the time. I paid more attention to what might lay beyond the gravel road, imagining and dreaming of different times, and less to how the gravel road actually got here, and the deliberate nature of where the road was taking me, and where it neglected to go.

I suspect, my experience back in 2001 was not unlike most people's, who venture into this part of the Yukon and to the north in general, looking for solitary experiences off the beaten track. After many days spent in this part of Kaska territory, without realizing it, making it to Ross River and further on the North and then South Canol Roads, I eventually traveled beyond this area, but not without a sense that I must eventually make my way back here, somehow, unsure when or why exactly. Many Elders have asked me repeatedly about this trip, wanting to know not as much why I did it, but more about what animals I saw, if I met anyone and if anything along the way ever bothered me, and if I was ever afraid. More than once people concluded that I must have been called to come and that the old Elders were looking out for me, keeping me safe, guiding me back here all these years later. "The land knows you; I don't have to worry about you" one Elder told me after she heard about this particular trip many years ago, and also knowing of my ongoing propensity for solo mountain outings whenever I have a chance. Elders are always curious about where I am venturing off to next, and always happy to suggest new places I should visit and share stories about places I might want to avoid.

On this beautiful September day, nearly two decades later, I no longer had the same naïve, simplified notions of empty wilderness in my mind, how could I? I knew I was travelling through a well- developed, culturally significant landscape, crisscrossed by ancient trails, dotted with dwellings, camps, water holes, animal licks, places regularly visited by Kaska people. By then, I also came to understand that the highway we were travelling on was built following an ancient route the Kaska people had travelled by foot with their dog teams for millennia. As we drove, the Elder pointed out places that bore memories dear to her heart: "we used to camp up there, hunting for moose" she motioned, "there is a small graveyard further up" she pointed to a faint trail

up a small ridge, "that's a good place to set fishnets" she said as we slowed down by a small creek. As we travelled, she pointed to steep alpine ridges, towering in the distance, teasing me: "You have good legs, you should go up there and get me that groundhog, sitting way up on the ridge. Do you see him looking at us?" We both laughed at the thought of me running up the mountain and coming back with a groundhog for her.

While we didn't have any particular activities in mind for the day, besides just looking around, we did hope to find and pick some lowbush cranberries for the winter. Picking berries is another pastime I came to love while living here and lowbush cranberries have become one of my favourites. So, at one point we turned off the highway and followed a side road to the banks of the Frances River. As we drove, we began seeing a couple of different kinds of berries from the car windows, so we decided to stop and pick for a while. We walked along the river, berry containers in hands, picking and marveling at the quiet and peaceful atmosphere. It is always good to get out of town, however short of trip it might be. It always feels so good to spend time on the land, especially on a nice fall day like this one.

The views were exquisite and as were looking at the river quietly flowing by, the Elder began sharing her memories of growing up along its banks, travelling with her family all around this land, first as a child, later as a young mother with her children and husband – those were the happy memories that make all Elders smile on one hand, but also often lead to conclusions about how now a days, people live so differently, not spending enough time in the bush, not knowing the stories, and not being able to speak or understand the Kaska language. "I often wonder about what our lives would have been like if we were just left alone" she said, gazing across the river. It is hard to imagine and fully comprehend so much can change in one lifetime.

Chapter 1

Introduction – Persistence of Land in the Everyday

I have experienced moments of deeply personal reflections similar to the one I describe in the opening many times before. While the details are always a bit different, the older generation of Kaska speakers frequently engages in the practice of reminiscing about their childhood and youth, indexing particular images of the past where people lived healthy lives on the land, undisturbed from outsiders, and where the fluency in the Kaska language was not something to be concerned about. This was also the time, the Elders maintain, when people lived in a strict adherence to *Dene ā' nezen* –a set of land-based, spiritual, social, moral, and legal protocols, a life fundamentally grounded in respect and bounded through reciprocal relationships and obligations, a way of life that, according to them, is too often not followed today.

It is the straying away from living according to *Dene ā' nezen* and living disconnected and displaced from the land, which becomes the primary diagnosis of the many challenges the community is facing today, including the gradual weakening of the Kaska language. Knowing the land and being able to properly provide for oneself and one's family involves extensive bodies of environmental, cultural, and linguistic knowledge gained through personal hands-on experience and lifelong learning and sharing of land-based teachings from one generation to the next. In short, learning through and from the land is the foundation of what it means to be a Kaska person. This land-based, reciprocal system functioned exceptionally well until relatively recently, when it was disarranged by unprecedented external forces, violently rupturing and upending people's lives through land dispossession, forceful removals and relocations, and the separation of children from families facilitated by the residential school system. The effects of these and other cultural and linguistic ruptures have been far reaching.

Kaska Elders often place the way of life in the bush in opposition to the life in towns, to contrast the moral and spiritual power associated with life in the bush with the contemporary life in towns, which they argue are places riddled with moral and spiritual disorientation and decline. However, it would be a mistake to deduce that these contemporary references to the past aim to somehow re-create or reconstruct what was lost in effort to return to a reality created in the past's image. Similar to Julie

Cruikshank's (1998) experience working with Dene Elders in southwestern Yukon, I found that stories about past events, including traditional narratives, have the potential to not only broaden our understanding of the past, but these stories are highly portable across time and space, and their skillful deployment can tell us even more about the present, making connections in places where rifts and gaps occur to provide an order and continuity. In the context of Kaska revitalization work, these narratives are uniquely positioned to inform current and future approaches, possibilities, and directions for language work to take. Furthermore, as McCarty et. al. suggest, highly personal, experiential narratives constitute epistemic, theoretical, pedagogical, and methodological lens through which it is possible to both study and practice language reclamation and revitalization (2018, p.147). Storytelling possesses an explanatory power through which it is possible to gain insights into what language reclamation means to different communities.

In this dissertation I take a closer look at the modes of post-rupture claiming, maintaining, and re-shaping of the Kaska homeland primarily through Kaska language practices, including traditional and personal storytelling. I focus on the contemporary relational, restorative responses to the systematic and ongoing colonial attempts at "unmaking of place" (Hinkson, 2017) and the various creative and assertive linguistic and semiotic responses by Kaska people to resist these attempts and to protect their homeland, including asserting their right to their language and cultural practices. In this post-rupture reckoning, my primary goal is to illuminate the many different ways the Kaska language has continued living a remarkably vibrant life, despite the many forces working diligently to devalue it and ultimately trying to make it disappear. Through the Kaska speakers', and now also the new generation of Kaska learners' strong commitment to their ancestral language and cultural practices, the Kaska language continues to not only exist, but through this work, it is being carried forward in many creative, innovative ways, asserting its rightful place among the Kaska Dene and in the world.

As a common thread, woven through all aspects of Kaska life, ensuring its cohesiveness and continuity is *Dene kēyeh* – Kaska land. *Dene kēyeh* continues to be the fundamental underpinning of Kaska life and the moral and spiritual centre of the Kaska society. Learning from *Dene kēyeh*, speaking about it, and spending time on it,

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continues to be at the centre of daily discourses and interactions among the Kaskas. The land and all imaginings associate with it prominently and consistently emerges as people regularly reflect on long-ago times, mobilizing voices of ancestors, recollect their own memories, and discuss current experiences and events. Evocative of Keith Basso's 1996 account of Apache articulations of the land always 'stalking' people to look after them, *Dene kēyeh* too brings about myriad of moral and spiritual lessons and guidance for Kaska people's contemporary lives. The land and all the land-based teachings it has to offer, permeates everything, including the way people think about and understand their language and the metadiscursive musings about how it can be reclaimed, revitalized, and maintained. The tenacious persistence of land, inseparable from its people and their language, must therefore also be attended to here, on the pages that follow.

Consequently, my aim is not to tell a story about a language in decline as such. Instead, I focus on the determination, resilience, and continuance of the Kaska people, highlighting the ongoing vitality of linguistic and cultural practices despite the odds. It's a story of Kaska contemporary responses to the historic and the current Indigenous cultural and language marginalization and language decline, but as I demonstrate, these contemporary responses are not necessarily reactionary. They are consistent with long-standing traditions of Kaska-informed conduct and tradition, which has carried people forward for thousands of years. Gerald Vizenor has written extensively about what he calls native survivance. By survivance he means Indigenous peoples' deliberate efforts to bring about "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent." (2008, p.1). The resounding sense of continuance is what I hope to make clear throughout this ethnographic description.

The active, culturally-grounded responses and acts of resistance are driven by well-established, long-standing oral traditions and laws of conduct, utilized exactly the way they were intended to be utilized – as tools to think with and as a mechanism to aid in navigating the complexities of ordinary people's daily realities. Survivance as continuance comes into view in examples of contemporary storytelling practices, which build on and interlink with traditional storytelling in multiple ways; in the practice of language adaptations and innovations, which has historically been and continues to be

a common practice as people encounter new ideas and new concepts; and in the strategic employment of the Kaska language to assert people's rights to their ancestral territory and their refusal of the systematic attempts at dispossession of Kaska ways of knowing and being. Survivance as continuance is the essence of how Kaska people imagine themselves and their language continuing into the future, which is reflected in their setting of priorities and goals, actively shaping the trail forward for generations to come.

At the same time, I want to be careful as not to give a false impression that all is well with the Kaska language. The Kaska language is vulnerable. There is no doubt that the use of Kaska has been shifting for a while and its daily use has been declining, particularly among the young generation. However, I believe a more nuanced look is warranted to fully and accurately account for and understand local ideas about language and language practices among different generations and across a variety of domains of use. A more subtle understanding of these issues can then be placed at the centre of Kaska language work, bringing about a positive change and a more desirable future, reversing the course of the current linguistic trajectory. This writing aims to honour all those who have dedicated their time and efforts, so the Kaska language can be strong and healthy again, reclaiming its rightful and honorable place for generations to come.

1.1 Nostalgic Themes in Language Revitalization

While firmly rooted in the present, practices focused on the revitalization of a language whose daily use is in decline, are first and foremost ambitiously future oriented and therefore hopeful, with future speakers and future domains of language use on the forefront. Yet, undeniably, the past continues to emerge. While one's initial inclination might be to interpret the reoccurring nostalgic themes as simply a romanticized reminiscence on bygone days, it is worth looking closer at how these types of narratives fit into the larger Kaska language revitalization efforts and other practices surrounding language work, since the generation of Kaska speakers most intimately involved in language work, is the same generation that most often produces this type of narratives. The Elders' frequency and means with which they index the past in various ways during language activities suggests that for Kaska Elders, these

fundamental principles reiterated through narratives of the past serve as a tacit model to aspire to and to be guided by, not to necessarily emulate.

Keith Basso (1996) reminds us that world-building or place- making as he prefers to call it, often involves an intricate and complex interplay of remembering and imagining and that is, I believe, precisely what is at play in the Kaska context I describe in this dissertation. I further suggest that these narratives of the past serve to turn our attention to what must be learned and carried forward from the past and how it must continue to inform not only what we do today, but also how we conduct ourselves in the future to grow and to sustain durable and vibrant language and cultural life. They serve as a positive feedback loop to keep us, language workers, on the right track, not only guiding, but also constraining workable possibilities.

Jane Hill (1992) observed that discourses of nostalgia among Mexicano speakers have a strong linguistic-ideological component. There, nostalgic longing for the past, where speaking Mexicano free of Spanish loan words is invoked as a metonym of respect and ultimately, as a desire to return to a linguistically pure past. This imagined pure past is connected to life immersed in traditional practices and values, intrinsically linked to a more desirable social order. However, Hill reports that ironically, people who produce this sort of rhetoric are relatively successful men, who have achieved a high level of local hierarchy and who benefit from social relations invoked in this discourse. Hill also found that producing these types of nostalgic discourses generated an oppositional discourse by women and men with a significantly less social capital and less language mixing, who exposed the discourse's contradictions, contesting the idea that the past was in any way better, acknowledging that many of the changes between long ago and now are welcomed improvements.

Unlike in Hill's discussion, Kaska nostalgic discourses do not appear to function as a form of nostalgic purism, nor are they produced to uphold a social order to benefit or reward those who produce them. Additionally, the types of nostalgic discourses I have encountered don't appear to be rooted in any type of linguistic ideology nor do they rationalize or justify any particular language structure or model use. Instead, I suggest that they serve as a navigational roadmap for others to follow and as a reminder of personal and community responsibilities and obligations to live up to. Also worth noting,

unlike in Hill's discussion, I have never witnessed a counter discourse being generated as a response, which would reject the past as a source of legitimate and valuable guidance. There is no denial that life in the past was at times hard, in fact, many of the stories people shared are precisely about that. However, the point that is often made in these contexts is that people were better equipped to deal with the adversity at hand and had tools at their disposal to overcome difficult circumstances. Narratives can also serve as cautionary tales, detailing how people strayed away from proper conduct, ignoring proper protocols, and suffering the consequences as a result at the end. These are lessons to hold close to heart as sources of lifelong learning and teaching. This is why the importance of knowing the stories is so frequently reiterated (for more extensive discussion on this topic, see Kroskrity, 2012c).

In her research with the San Ramón Pueblo, Erin Debenport (2015) began an important work of rethinking and advancing a new understanding of these, up to now largely underexamined, "nostalgic motifs" (p.106), frequently present in various forms in language revitalization movements. Citing Svetlana Boym's (2001, 2007) work on nostalgia, Debenport makes further relevant the distinction between two types of nostalgia identified by Boym - the reflective and the restorative. Reflective nostalgia "occurs at the individual level and is expressed through recognition of the vast space between the present and the past", while "restorative nostalgia doesn't think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition," manifesting as a desire to return to origins (2015, p.110). Debenport skillfully demonstrates that language revitalization practices are often driven by what she calls "hopeful nostalgia" where if "read through the lens of nostalgia, language revitalization can be seen both as a symptom and a cure, a way to diagnose the amount of cultural loss and a way to reinstate what has gone missing, what has been taken, and what is vital to the health of the community" (p.111). Nostalgic discourses, then, Debenport argues, are not a backward-facing stance, and hopeful nostalgia is also not only about the future – both can occur at the same time, as a response to social upheaval. Debenport concludes that both, the reflective and the restorative types, are in fact firmly rooted in present conditions. Additionally, as I demonstrate in the following pages, if diligently attended to, they have the potential to contribute to the assembling of a transformative roadmap towards language recovery,

and to the making of a different place, altering the language's trajectory towards a different, more desirable future.

Elaborating further on the Kaska context, nostalgic articulations of the past can also be understood as expressions of collective experience among the generation of Kaska speakers who primarily produce them. They occur against the backdrop of a particular type of colonial violence these speakers themselves experienced as the first generation of Kaska children, removed from their families and placed in residential boarding schools on a large scale. In the Yukon and northern British Columbia, this began in the early 1950s. It is hard to think of any other governmental policy having more devastating impacts on the Kaska lifeways than the residential boarding school system. These violent government interventions and remakings were severe, resulting in disruptions of language, cultural, and historical intergenerational socialization and transmission.

Barbra Meek highlighted the role of language as a socialization practice and as the means of acquiring historical knowledge around which one's identity and identity formation revolves. As such, knowing one's language becomes central to understanding one's history and therefore one's identity (2010, p.145). It can be argued then that recounting stories about Elder's childhood and youth, such as the one I opened this dissertation with, are also an important method of teaching Kaska collective history, deeply rooted in and inseparable from the Kaska land. The common articulation of the juxtaposition between then — the past / history — and now not only underscores the fundamental interdependence between people, language, and land, but it also how each struggle without the other when these core connections are broken.

It is therefore unsurprising that many suggest that language learning and teaching is best done on the land, through hands-on activities, embedded in Kaska pedagogical models, centred around oral traditions, and land-based skills, not "with papers", sitting in a classroom. I recall a discussion during one of our language planning meetings about how learners' language skills should be assessed in the process of their studies. A Kaska Elder from Ross River, clearly already many steps head of us in thinking about this, immediately suggested that each level could easily be assessed in a small camp in the bush – "The beginner level could be something easy", she remarked, "the student

would learn how to snare and skin a rabbit and it would gradually go on from there to hunting for moose", highlighting for us all that in her mind, Kaska language proficiency, cultural competency, and the mastering of land-based skills are inseparable. Having it all is what makes a Kaska person truly Kaska. One cannot be truly fluent in the Kaska language without a robust land-based knowledge and skills. These types of priorities and expectations of course, stand in stark contrast with the more conventional, mainstream ideas about fluency assessment, which more often focus on the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and not as much on other skills seen as not directly related to language.

A closer examination of the various ways in which exemplary past is evoked and mobilized by Kaska speakers reveals unexpected instances of ongoing language and cultural vitality, creativity, and innovation, uncovering not only a more nuanced view of the current state of the Kaska language, but also demands of us to re-think our evaluation of and our approach to Kaska revitalization language work and how to effectively participate in it. The following chapters attempt to not only look closer at these places of innovation and creative reworking, but also draw attention to the ongoing and purposeful deployment of the Kaska language as a means of accomplishing a variety of social and political goals. As such, understanding communicative practices requires the study of language-in-use over time and across a variety of genres, which is what I attempt to capture in this dissertation. My hope is that it inspires a productive reflection on what we can learn from these moments when the Kaska language comes into full focus, even if ever so briefly, and how it can inform our thinking about and approach to Indigenous language work in general.

1.2 Dissertation and Chapter Overview

This dissertation consists of six chapters, each examining a different but interrelated aspect of language use among the Kaska Dene people residing primarily in and around the community of Watson Lake, Yukon in northwestern Canada. Chapter 1 sets the stage by laying out detailed context for this research location and my place in it. I provide a brief overview of the Kaska pre-contact and early contact history, followed by much more impactful events of the 1940s, such as the construction of the Alaska Highway, one of many northern expansion projects, which has dramatically reshaped the region, and upended the lives of Yukon Indigenous people. In this chapter I outline

my own positionality and the diverse roles I have taken on while living and working in the community, participating and facilitating various Kaska language documentation and revitalization activities and projects. Lastly, I provide an overview of methodologies employed in this research project.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth reflection on how contemporary storytelling works to maintain narrative continuity. In personal narratives such as the one I discuss in this chapter, speakers demonstrate how contemporary storytelling practices build on traditional storytelling, working to transform and adapt modes of traditional storytelling to address countless contemporary issues, including the history and legacy of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. I identify a series of intertextual linkages between contemporary personal narratives about residential school experiences, and a genre of traditional Kaska narratives describing female journeys, which I suggest performing these contemporary accounts aims to establish and cultivate. By creating these linkages, Kaska speakers defy and contest common conceptions of "tradition" as a static, unchanging state, demonstrating that storytelling continues to be a highly dynamic and relevant practice in contemporary times. Through these linkages, contemporary storytellers integrate their personal memories into the larger Kaska collective memory, connected to those who came before them, and through their storytelling performance, also to those in the future. This chapter provides a more complex and nuanced view of linguistic landscapes that continues to exist in Indigenous communities, revealing an unexpected linguistic and narrative vitality, often obscured, or not captured in the common rhetoric surrounding the so-called endangered languages.

In chapter 3, I explore how Kaska model behaviour is conveyed through a narrative performance, examining an excerpt from a recorded conversation between two Kaska speakers. I show how everyday Kaska language interpersonal interactions are not only informed by *Dene ā́' nezen*, but they are also bounded by it. In this performance, multiple voices coexist and interact to produce a voice system (Hill, 1995) through which the speaker mobilizes socially significant meanings, whose interpretation relies on the participants' and audience's recognition of indexical references to the principles of *ā́ʔ* – described by Barbra Meek (2010) as both a taboo and respect. Lessons about the principles of proper Kaska behaviour guided by *ā́ʔ* must themselves be conducted in

adherence to *ā́ʔ*, which the speakers skillfully accomplish in this performance. In the context of a reflection on the disruption and gradual decline of an important cultural practice of sharing meat with others, the Elder skillfully issues a highly culturally informed directive to the community to return to this practice. While in this performance the speaker consciously and deliberately conveys the necessary cultural understandings of proper behaviour, including the importance of reciprocity, perhaps much less consciously, a model of a linguistic behaviour, likewise informed by these protocols, comes into view through her performance. In this chapter I argue for the need to attend to and document all genres of speech and across all domains as an essential component of language revitalization. Such materials will not only provide learners with an insight into how the language works from a grammatical perspective, but crucially, what fluent speakers actually do with it and how it is informed by Kaska cultural knowledge.

At the core of chapter 4 lies Kaska peoples' struggles over knowledge, meaning, and responsibility for the stewardship of their lands. In opposition are fundamentally different claims, articulated by wildlife management officers and other governmental and private agencies, exerting institutional control over the same lands. I explore various strategies through which the Kaska articulate and assert rights to their traditional territory, and in particular, I focus on instances in which individuals choose to draw on a system of Indigenous linguistic and semiotic resources to strategically employ the Kaska language in order to contest and subvert colonial place naming practices. The emplacement of Kaska toponyms in opposition to the "often confused" colonial place names, disrupts the oversimplified, one-directional narrative of place, providing means of discursively challenging the status quo, rejecting the non-Kaska place name, deeming it illegitimate. It also highlights the enduring systematic privileging of western knowledge and the persistent disregard for Indigenous ways of knowing, including the disregard for local Indigenous languages and Indigenous place names. The employment of the Kaska language provides a deep historical and social context to productively disrupt and confront the current, everyday flow of things, including many "common-sense" understandings and assumptions guiding institutional land management decisions. I suggest that the public mobilization of Indigenous languages should be understood as a tangible form of social action, capable of accomplishing a

host of social and political tasks, rather than simply a means of conveying a referential meaning in another language. Indeed, as I show, the Kaska language is uniquely suitable for this task.

In chapter 5, I examine how through language innovations, adaptations, and semantic shifts, Kaska speakers claim, and in some cases re-claim, the largely Euro-Canadian built environment in which they find themselves as their own. I discuss various lexical and genre innovations as well as the shifting and semantic expansion of the Kaska directional term system as responses to the changing social realities of people's daily lives. I argue that despite some of the local metadiscursive practices fundamentally rooted in conservative ideologies of language purism, careful attention to some of the historical documentation records and more importantly, attention to the contemporary Kaska speakers' everyday communicative practices, reveals that language innovating is and has been widespread, and in many cases, going well beyond the lexical level. I argue that in addition to understanding these innovating practices as responses to the rapidly changing contemporary realities, these practices are not fully reactionary in nature. They are powerful evidence of continuance, building on long-standing Kaska traditions and strategies, revealing deep seeded progressive ideologies which favour innovation and adaptation over conservative ideologies of language purity.

In chapter 6, I consider Indigenous language reclamation and revitalization as a primarily future-oriented endeavor, where possible futures are discursively imagined and materially realized through the production of various language objects. I reflect on how the task of planning for future has been understood and undertaken by different actors and stakeholders over the years, including looking closer at some of the documentation materials and other resources which have been produced in the process and what more they can tell us about the contexts in which they came into being, and the evolution of priorities and goals over time. I consider some of the ideological tensions which have emerged in these future making contexts over the years as people expressed their concerns and deep anxieties about how to go about the task of ensuring the Kaska language withstands the relentless pressures of contemporary realities, what must be carried forward, and how it should be done. I discuss the impacts of some of these ideologies have had on local revitalization efforts, while at the

same time, give examples of important ideological recalibrations and reorientations which have also occurred. Finally, I reflect on the current Kaska language work dynamics, including planning for the language's future through a formal language planning session, and how what unfolded during this session fits into the overall efforts of Kaska language and cultural revitalization. I provide examples of some of the recent projects I have been a part of at the Liard First Nation Language Department and how these fit into what was articulated by the language session's participants. I suggest that direct and robust support of language revitalization efforts, including sufficient and consistent funding and language policy changes, can and does make a significant difference, not only in elevating the language's and its speakers' prestige, but also in inspiring new generation of learners and language advocates. A closer examination of community-based language planning activities and the materials produced in the process, including multiyear strategy plans, provide yet another insight into Kaska people's post-rupture reconning with their contemporary realities, where together they contemplate possibilities and viable solutions, ultimately forging a collective and strategic pathway forward

1.3 Rupture in Kaska Context – A Brief Overview

To contextualize this dissertation, I will now provide a brief ethnographic and historical overview of the region and the Kaska speech community overall. I will focus on some of the social and political changes that have occurred in the region, giving rise to the ongoing decline in Kaska language transmission and daily use. I will also provide an overview of Watson Lake, the community where this research took place and where I currently live. In cases where a more detailed contextualization of a particular historical event is pertinent to the topic at hand, I provide more context in the individual chapter discussions.

Historically, prior to colonization, the Kaska language was spoken by most of the Indigenous people of what is now southeastern Yukon, southwestern Northwest Territories, and northeastern British Columbia (see Figure 1). Kaska is a member of the Dene (Athabaskan) language family. This extensive language family consists of many languages in the northern region of western Canada, including parts of Alaska and extending as far south as California, Arizona, and New Mexico. The traditional Kaska

territory is vast, encompassing more than 240,000 square kilometres of land, with large swaths still free of roads and permanent settlements.
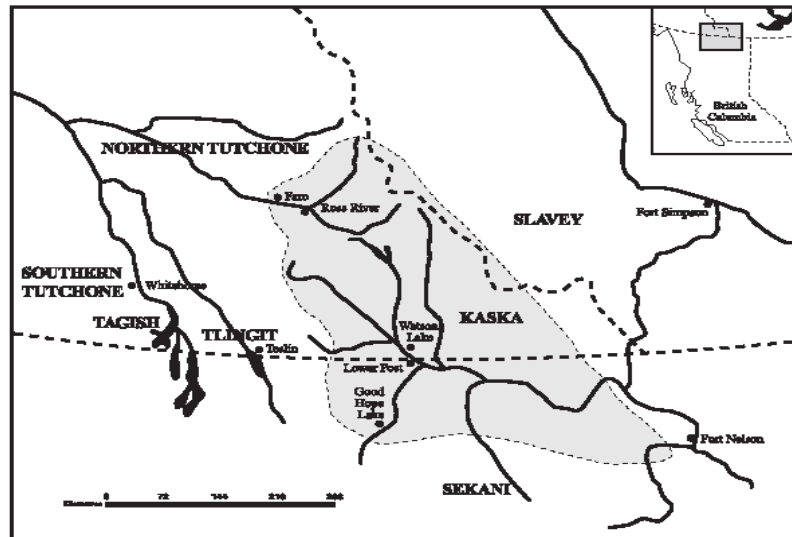
Figure 1. Map of Kaska traditional territory

Following years of relatively low-impact fur trade activities which began in the region in the 1840s, the most dramatic change in the Yukon occurred following the1896 discovery of gold in the Klondike goldfields near Dawson City. This event led to a massive stampede of thousands of gold seekers flooding the territory in search of wealth. While the activities and effects of the gold rush were extreme in the western and central parts of the Yukon, the Kaska territory in the east was relatively spared from the influx of gold seekers. Most chose the coastal route to the goldfields, arriving in the port of Dyea near Skagway, Alaska, traveling over the Chilkoot Pass, and down the Yukon River to Dawson, with very few who dared to travel the alternative, overland routes. However, this influx was temporary since most people left a few years after the gold rush had peaked. The construction of the Alaska Highway in the 1940s, as a part of the US and Canadian national World War II defense efforts, was the first major infrastructure project which had an enormous impact on the entire region, including the Kaska territory. The newly constructed highway facilitated easier access to the previously largely inaccessible part of northwestern Canada, leading to dramatic and irreversible regional alterations to the land and people's way of life. This increase in

accessibility facilitated not only the Canadian government's firmer hold on the region, but also the intensification of resource-based industry development and the influx of non-Native population seeking employment opportunities in this growing sector. With these new developments came increases in various government-sponsored programs, which the residential school system was a major part, aiming at assimilating the Indigenous population into mainstream Canadian society (Coates, 1991; Cruikshank, 2000; Meek, 2010).

For the Kaska, the construction of the Alaska Highway and other WWII projects such as the North Canol Pipeline and the Canol Road cutting through the heart of their traditional territory, and later in the 1960s the construction of the Robert Campbell highway and the development of the Faro mine site near the town of Ross River, have been particularly impactful (Moore, 2003, p.133). Historically, the Kaska, like other Indigenous groups in the Yukon, were hunters and fishermen who had to adapt to the at times extreme sub-arctic environment. Since availability of food and other resources– both, animal and plant based–varied cyclically, people were forced to travel in small kin groups over a large area of land to sustain themselves (Honigmann, 1954). The size of a given group was larger in the summer (up to forty individuals) and much smaller during the winter (around ten to fifteen)–enough to ensure adequate number of hunters to dependents (Cruikshank, 1983, p.10). In summer months, people would come together for large gatherings, visiting with one another, harvesting, sharing food, and telling stories. This was also an occasion for countless celebrations, drumming, singing, dancing, and handgames. Social organization of groups revolved around the system of matrilineal moieties–Crow and Wolf. Marriages were exogamous, reinforcing rights and obligations between kin groups (Honigmann, 1954). The epidemics and depletion of land-based resources associated with the construction and operation of various development projects, the subsequent consolidation of communities along the highways, and the enforcement of residential school attendance, all resulted in severe disruptions and dismantling of traditional forms of governance and kin-based relationships as well as severe alterations to the regional linguistic landscape for all Indigenous groups in the Yukon and northern British Columbia (Cruikshank, 2000, p.23).

In the Kaska country, language shift to English was initially facilitated by the increasing prestige of English among prominent Kaska men working with non-Kaska, and after 1942 was gradually accelerated by the increased number of outsiders in the region (P. Moore, personal communication, 2015). Coates (1991) argues that even though contact with Europeans began in the 1840's during the fur trade era, most Yukon First Nations people nevertheless remained outside of the government and religious leadership until the 1950s after the construction of the Alaska Highway. Additionally, many of the Kaska historical narratives suggest minimal contact between Kaska people and non-native individuals (Meek, 2010, p.18). Moore's (2007) and (1999) publications provide some excellent examples of these Kaska contact narratives, providing an important Kaska perspective on colonial contact experience. The shift from the exclusive or dominant use of the Kaska language into English was further accelerated by the mandatory residential boarding school attendance, beginning in the 1950s, where children were punished and forbidden from speaking their ancestral languages and were shamed for their culture. Most Kaska people attended the Catholic-run Lower Post Residential School in northern BC, which was particularly abominable and notorious for abusing Indigenous children. The harm caused by the Lower Post Residential School is still felt today, many decades later. Some children also attended the Whitehorse Baptist residential school, or the Carcross Anglican Residential School, which had slightly better reputations, but nevertheless, was also incredibly harmful to children and families.

Today, most Kaska people reside in the Yukon, in and around the communities of *Tetsí'lūgé'* -Watson Lake and *Tū Łīdlīnī* - Ross River. Other predominantly Kaska settlements include several communities in northern British Columbia such as *Dālīyǭ* - Lower Post, *Man Chō* - Muncho Lake, Good Hope Lake, and Kwadacha. According to Moore (1997), there are about six geographical dialects of the language. The following dialects have been identified: Ross River, Pelly Banks, Frances Lake, Liard, Lower Liard, and Good Hope Lake. The dialects vary in some grammatical features, sounds, and vocabulary and vary in mutual intelligibility based on their geographic location in relation to one another, as well as historical contact between groups. Although fluent Kaska speaking Elders generally understand other Kaska dialects, as well as other neighbouring Dene languages, learners often find these differences confusing.

Teachers find accommodating the various dialects in their classrooms difficult as well, since learners generally want to learn the dialects best reflecting their own family's heritage and tradition (Moore, 2003, p.132).

Contemporary Kaska communities are not linguistically homogeneous but reflect instead what Hill calls "organizations of diversity" (2006, p.117). In addition to varieties of English, a given community might have speakers of several different dialects of Kaska present. I have personally observed at least four different dialects of the Kaska language in the Watson Lake area. Dialects generally correspond to matrilineally organized extended families, where the mother and the father would speak different dialects, but the children would acquire their mother's variety (Meek, 2014, p.78). However, dialectal differences are not necessarily clear-cut categories agreed upon by all. Many identify by family-specific varieties of the language, rather than regional ones, rejecting any type of standardized varieties or ways of speaking categorization. Hill argues that the organization of diversity has real consequences for language work and should not be overlooked. Especially important is how linguistic resources of the minority language versus the other language are distributed "across the repertoire of possible speech events and acts, across the kinds of speakers and addressees, across channels, across affective keys" (2006, p.217-218). In other words, what domains of language use are available to people and how this plays out in language socialization and language transmission is a significant component when tracking places of linguistic decline as well as linguistic vitality.

Acquisition of Kaska as a first language by children ended in the mid-1960s (Meek, 2010, p.21). Consequently, the youngest fluent speakers of Kaska are now in their mid to late sixties. A comprehensive survey of Kaska households has not been conducted since the early 2000s. According to the Yukon Aboriginal Language Services report, in 2004, approximately 1 in 3 Kaska persons did not speak their ancestral language. Out of 1,166 respondents, 758 reported to speak and understand the Kaska language, while 407 reported not being able to speak or understand it. According to the 2011 Canadian Census, 300 people reported being active speakers of Kaska, while 150 people reported passive knowledge of the language.

Even though survey figures such as these do not always reliably capture the situation on the ground, they do suggest a general trend towards the decline in Kaska language fluency. While both reports showed an increase in the number of Kaska speakers relative to previous reporting, these numbers might be misleading. Both reports didn't provide definitions of fluency or an opportunity for respondents to elaborate on what fluency means to them, as to account for more accurate and nuanced view of the various stages of language acquisition and degrees of language fluency and how these are locally understood. Leaving out these critical details has the potential to create misconceptions and further harm because it creates an inaccurate impression that the Kaska language is a lot healthier and more vibrant than it in reality is. The Kaska language has the most first language and fluent speakers of all the Indigenous languages in the Yukon, however, the language is nevertheless in decline and currently, there are no children growing up, learning Kaska from birth as their first language.

While there are no official, up-to-date community language survey results to determine the numbers of speakers with native or native-like fluency accurately, the communities are relatively small, and a reasonably reliable estimate is possible. Both Patrick Moore and I are familiar with the communities and have worked with or know most if not all the speakers. In the Watson Lake area, including Upper Liard, Two Mile Village, and Lower Post, about 25 people with native or native-like fluency reside. In Ross River the number is about 30 people. It is important to note however, that the number of speakers is unequally distributed among the dialects. For example, most numerous are speakers of the Ross River and Pelly Banks dialects, while the Liard and Lower Liard dialects have considerably less speakers. For example, the Lower Liard dialect, which is probably one of the least documented dialects, only has 3 fluent speakers left. In addition to fluent speakers, there are a number of people with high degree of fluency and even a higher number of the so-called silent speakers, people who understand the language but have a limited ability to speak it. Unfortunately, an accurate estimate of these individuals is much harder to determine, since these individuals generally don't openly share this very subjective assessment publicly, and they also often don't always participate in language related events.

While the relatively large number of Kaska speakers still living in the communities is something to cherish and celebrate, it does tend to create a sense of lesser urgency and false security. Most fluent speakers are of the same generation, in their 70s, with some in their 80s, so we can expect the situation changing dramatically in the following decade. There has been a lot of interest in the community in working with silent speakers on re-awakening their language in the last several years. However, no suitable programs and related supports have not been put in place yet to facilitate this. A successful program which would help people in regaining their language abilities, lost mostly as a result of residential school attendance, could potentially dramatically increase the number of Kaska speakers in the communities and increase its vitality.

The town of Watson Lake is situated on the Alaska Highway, just 14 km north from where the highway crosses the British Columbia border into the Yukon, and is home to Liard First Nation, one of the Kaska First Nations in the Yukon. For the purposes of Yukon tourism marketing, Watson Lake is often referred to as "The Gateway to the Yukon," since it is the first community where the Alaska and Stewart-Cassiar highways enter the Yukon Territory from northern British Columbia. The town is also a key transportation hub because of its location at the junction of the Alaska Highway, an access route to western Yukon and Alaska, the Robert Campbell Highway, an access route to east-central Yukon and the Northwest Territories, and the Stewart-Cassiar Highway, providing access to central British Columbia. The town also has an airport, whose history dates back to 1940s. At various times during periods of mining booms the airport was a busy place, handling flights to not only the Territory's capital Whitehorse, but also to Vancouver and Edmonton, for example. Nowadays, the airport only handles medical evacuation flights, chartered flights for nearby mining operations, and small private aircraft traffic. Whitehorse, the capital city and a frequent destination for various services and shopping, is located 434 kilometres west of town, on the Alaska Highway.

Watson Lake is also the home to the Sign Post Forest, a popular roadside tourist attraction and destination. Situated at the centre of town, The Sign Post Forest features over 77,000 signs from all around the world, brought in by travelers passing through, for the purpose of marking the distance away from their homes. The beginning of this tradition dates to 1942, when one of the US solders working on the construction of the Alaska Highway erected the first sign, indicating the direction and distance from his

hometown in Illinois. During the summer, scores of tourists can be seen stopping by and putting up more signs daily. This site is an obvious, yet frequently completely overlooked testament and an enduring reminder of the colonial takeover of the region. Because of its visibility and of its prominent location at the centre of the town, in recent years, this site has been utilized by the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS), a Kaska, women-led non-profit organization, to make visible and advocate for various causes. Most recently, raising awareness of gender-based violence, highlighting the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in the region and across Canada. In the spring of 2021, LAWS organized a community gathering to install a life-sized painting of an Indigenous woman in a red dress, a symbol of this movement, to honour all the victims and their families (Figure 2). This piece is large, impossible for both visitors and locals to overlook. It effectively subverts the common historical narrative, which uncritically celebrates frontier history in the region, such as the construction of the Alaska Highway or the Klondike Gold Rush, while completely disregarding or erasing the devastating impacts these developments have had on the local Indigenous population. Currently, this piece is the only public acknowledgement of the Kaska territory and the Kaska people in the town of Watson Lake.

Figure 2. Dignity and Respect painting on the edge on the Sign Post Forest

In addition to the town itself, the Watson Lake municipality includes a number of surrounding communities that are home to most of the Kaska people living in the area. These are communities of Two-Mile Village, Two Mile and One-Half Mile Village, Upper Liard Village, and Albert Creek Village. According to the latest, Canada 2016 Census (Statistics Canada, 2016), the total population of Watson Lake and the surrounding subdivisions was 790 people, with 300 people self-identifying as having First Nations origins. Most First Nations residents in the area are Kaska and members of the Liard First Nation. The rest of the residents are mostly non-First Nation, English and French speaking Euro-Canadians. Additionally, there has been a relatively recent influx of Filipino and Mexican migrant workers, largely involved in the service industry, employed in the local hotel and restaurant establishments.

1.4 Positionality and Methodology

In this dissertation I write about my experiences and engagements with Kaska people of all ages over a period of multiple years, starting in the summer of 2014 until

the present day, first as a visiting graduate student, and later, making the Kaska territory my home, living in the community of Watson Lake, working for the Liard First Nation's Language Department as its director, a position I continue to hold in the time of this writing. It is difficult to separate the personal from the professional because it was through my initial professional engagements as a visiting graduate student that I got to know people. Gradually, I developed many profoundly personal relationships, including relationships with many Kaska women and Elders, my dedicated and generous teachers, whose teachings continue to guide me, and whose voices I hope my writing reflects.

In the last nearly eight years, my roles have been multiple, evolving, and emergent – besides being a researcher, a substitute teacher, a local photographer, a language director, a supervisor, and a colleague, I have also become a friend, a sister, a daughter, and an auntie. I have been adopted into the Wolf Clan by the family of prominent Kaska Elders and fluent speakers Leda and Robert Jules. My relationship with Leda and Robert in particular, has had a significant impact on my life in general, and my life and work in the community in particular. Leda especially has been and continues to be an unconditional source of love, support, inspiration, and insight, and I owe her my deepest gratitude. Without her assistance and guidance, much of what I have accomplished would not have been possible. I am certain that without her protection and ongoing and unwavering endorsement of me and my work, my experience in the community would have been very different.

The data in this research and my understanding of the community and the various Kaska language practices and imaginings of the language's future emerged over time while not only working and living in the community, but also being actively involved in the community's life. My methodology and my positionality in the community are therefore intertwined one informing and shaping the other. My engagements can be loosely divided into two basic categories – professional activities and informal, personal interactions with people in the community. Both types of engagements have been important for my research and my relationships in the community.

My professional activities in the community involved mostly formally structured Kaska language work – these included linguistic elicitation sessions and language

recording activities aiming to document the language and the diverse language practices of Kaska speakers, including natural conversations, community storytelling events, place names research, and genealogy work, among others. I also participated in various language and cultural camps, language events and workshops, including Kaska literacy training sessions facilitated by the Yukon Native Language Centre, the teacher training sessions facilitated by the Yukon Department of Education, and the Liard First Nation Kaska Language Planning Session, discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation. While for some of these activities I was only a participant, many of them I personally initiated and facilitated or co-facilitated as a part of language projects I was a part of and later as a part of my employment with the Liard First Nation. Much of the work I facilitated and co-facilitated was either audio or video recorded. Some of these recordings have been fully or partially processed, but unfortunately, many have not due to lack of capacity. The process of transcribing and translating spoken word is extremely time consuming and labour intensive, and I have simply not had the time to do anything with a lot of the data yet, but as more community capacity is developed, these recordings will hopefully get processed. Additionally, detailed notes were taken during or immediately after all the activities I was a part of.

Once I began working for the First Nation in 2017, most of my engagements in Kaska language work and related administrative tasks have been in the capacity of the Language Department's Director, working for and on behalf of the First Nation, a role I continue to have up to now. In this capacity, I continue in various documentation activities, creating learning and teaching resources, and facilitating language learning opportunities. In the process, I also began providing and facilitating training workshops for staff and community members to build local capacity and skills necessary for locally initiated language work. For example, I facilitated community recording and data management training workshops, basic training in Audacity, Elan, and iMovie, and training on the basics of language documentation.

As a Director, I have also participated in various municipal, Territorial, Provincial and Federal governments' language related engagement sessions and consultations, representing the interests of the Liard First Nation. Over the years, I have also been called upon to review archival documents and give feedback on various submissions to the Federal and Territorial governments for the Liard First Nation Lands Department. As

a part of my job, I regularly preform various administrative tasks having to do with the department's budgets and reporting, grant writing, staff recruitment, training and management, asset management, and public relations and communications.

The second category of my engagements involved informal interactions with people, which grew out of my prolonged stay in and involvement with the community, including developing close and in some cases kinship ties and relationships with people and their families. In addition to my professional engagements, much of the knowledge and ways of understanding I base this dissertation on is the result of countless informal conversations with many Kaska people in their homes, sitting around a campfire, at family gatherings, accompanying Elders to doctor's appointments, going grocery shopping, going berry picking or hunting, or just going for drives. These engagements were highly enjoyable for me and were essential to my long-term well-being. They made me feel useful and included, connected with people and the land. They were also clearly enjoyable to people I was spending time with, since they continue to open their homes and their camps to me and enjoy my company. I continue to participate in various community gatherings and events, assisting during funerals, weddings, graduations, community potlatches, all as a member of the community and at times fulfilling various roles and responsibilities as a member of the Wolf Clan into which I was adopted.

Being with people in more informal settings, often on the land, doing activities we all enjoyed, was a great opportunity to observe everyday language and cultural practices, learn many land-based skills, and engage in conversations that helped me gain deeper insights about the community and its history, and the role of the land and language in people's lives. Frequently, my interlocutors and I would revisit the same topic of our conversations on multiple occasions, sometimes to clarify, other times to elaborate, and other times still, to find a new way to think about it. The ongoing dialogic nature of these interactions is important, I believe, not only because it has helped me in gaining a much deeper and nuanced understanding of the community and the realities on the ground overall, but also because it reflects the dynamic nature of language revitalization work I have been involved in, deeply embedded in interpersonal relationships.

Since these conversations continue to this day, the story I tell here is unfinished. New revelations, new possibilities, and new opportunities continue to emerge, providing for an infinite number of possible trajectories for the Kaska language to continue on, trajectories hardly imaginable just a decade ago. As one Elder put it "there are many trails we have yet to go on," and this dissertation stands witness to the many explorations of possible trails the Kaska people have been and continue to contemplate.

These interactions and experiences were enormously impactful for me personally, as they contributed to my developing a much more meaningful, Kaska-informed relationship with and appreciation of the place I now call home. Professionally, they informed and shaped the direction and the focus of my research. I listened carefully to what people shared with me to understand their priorities and their ideas, and how the future of the Kaska language is locally imagined. Over time, my research goals and research questions emerged from these interactions, fundamentally rooted in community-informed practices and priorities and not necessarily based on my own academic goals and questions determined ahead of time, before I became more familiar with the community. Throughout this work, I used my previous language work experience with the Shoshone and Goshute people during my MA research, my academic knowledge, skills, and institutional connections to initiate various activities and engagements, but I made sure to always be attentive to the interests of both Kaska Elders and the youth in the community.

Nevertheless, while shaped by the community's input, much of the professional work that I ultimately ended up doing was also significantly influenced by the type and amount of funding that was available to us and our capacity to be able to carry out the work. I initially joined the UBC-based Kaska "talking" Dictionary team, which was funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), a Canadian federal research agency, which promotes research and training in humanities and social sciences. This was an ongoing project when I entered the graduate program at UBC, so I was not involved in its planning and its funding application process. However, it was a project that played an important role in shaping my professional trajectory, since it provided me with the opportunity to begin my initial engagement with the community, working as a research assistant to my supervisor Patrick Moore. I was not just some

random recent arrival in the community, I came with a specific purpose to work with people on the dictionary project.

Next several project-base funding sources were through the Department of Canadian Heritage's Indigenous Languages Component (ILC) funds, which we were able to secure through a joined application with the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society, a local non-profit organization. This funding enabled us to, for example, work with speakers on recording for the UBC Kaska Language Website, organize a week-long natural Kaska conversation recording session, put on a couple of language workshops, and provide local youth with basic training on how to transcribe and process audio and video recordings. In addition, we were able to organize short-term community language learning opportunities. Several other small funding grants were secured in addition to the ILC funding, all to fund smaller, specific projects such as digitization training, genealogy workshops, and youth training. While these were all positive and productive engagements, the nature of this kind of project-based funding model is that it is limited in the amount of funding it can bring and it is extremely unstable and administratively burdensome. Once funds are secured, they can only provide temporary employment opportunities for people, instead of a permanent employment with ongoing training and development, including the development of consistent and long-term programming. All these are essential ingredients for creating long-term stability for a community language work, and ultimately making a difference in language fluency and community-based capacity development. None of this can be achieved when funding is only available for one year at a time.

When I first arrived in the community in the summer of 2014 as a part of the Kaska 'talking' Dictionary recording team, the First Nation had no functioning Language Department and for the most part, there were no organized language learning opportunities or programming taking place. Due to allegations of financial mismanagement and the Nation's ever-growing debt, the federal government appointed a third-party management company to take control of the Nation's finances in the fall of 2014. Immediately, the third-party management began instituting severe austerity measures to cut costs and get the First Nation on track towards solvency.

All services that were deemed "non-essential" and that were still operating were stopped, including all language and most cultural programming. The situation was grim and with no immediately visible path out of it, many worried about how long this would last. All projects I was involved in during this time, between summer 2014 until summer 2017 did not directly involve the First Nation government, and all were funded through external grants. All projects I helped initiate and lead, either on my own, or together with my PhD supervisor Patrick Moore, involved working with speakers in the community he had known and worked with for decades. During this time, I also briefly engaged in participant observations of Kaska classes at the local high school as well as at various cultural events organized by Liard Aboriginal Women's Society and occasionally by Liard First Nation. In addition, I spent time observing and participating in countless formal meetings. Some were public, organized by the Yukon and Federal governments, geared towards Kaska citizens, and other local and non-local organizations serving the Kaska community. I frequently attended these meetings accompanying Kaska citizens, who invited me to come along and participate.

Finally, in the summer of 2017, after months of rigorous and at time contentious community debates and legal procedures to initiate new elections, all of which was eagerly covered by the local Yukon news outlets, Liard First Nation held their election for Chief and Council. The former Chief and Council were unseated, and the newly elected leadership team promised to restore proper governing for the First Nation, and most importantly, promised to lead the Nation out of the stifling years of third-party management, restoring services and programming. It was during this time that I was approached by the newly elected Chief and Council and asked if I would be interested in helping with writing a funding proposal to obtain the necessary funds to get the Language Department up and running again. If the proposal was successful, the Chief and Council asked if I would consider taking the task of reviving the Department on.

After giving it some thought, I accepted this opportunity. While I had some reservations and concerns about what staying and embarking on this ambitious journey would mean for finishing my dissertation in a reasonable timeframe and what my writing process would look like. If I stayed in the field, deeply involved in the Language Department, new revelations would undoubtedly continue to emerge. In the end, I felt that staying and working for the First Nation would be a valuable experience, since up

to now, my work had been project-based, funded through various university grants and through a partnership with a local non-profit Indigenous organization, not working for the First Nation's government. I was genuinely curious about how a bit more adequate and hopefully consistent funding administered by the First Nation would shape future language activities and what effect it would have on altering the local language trajectories long-term.

In the fall of 2017, the First Nation was informed that the funding application was successful and that it was being awarded federal funds through the Department of Canadian Heritage. This enabled the First Nation to begin rebuilding the Language Department, which at that point had not been active for years. At the time of this writing, the Language Department continues functioning, busily working on several language and cultural projects, facilitating language courses, and providing ongoing training of Kaska citizens in language documentation and revitalization to ensure the sustainability of Kaska language work going forward. Currently, the Language Department employs seven full-time employees, most of them youth, most undergoing Kaska language study and participating in various language work related training.

New technologies and the Kaskas' willingness to embrace them, for example, has transformed language work significantly, opening doors to many new possibilities. Following the exciting wave of Indigenous resurgence across Canada, more Kaskas are now taking interest in pursuing serious language study and are actively and passionately advocating for their right to their ancestral language, not only within their communities, but at the territorial and national levels as well. Similarly, the transformation of institutional structures within the Yukon Territory, such as the restructuring of the Yukon Native Language Centre, which provides Indigenous-led support and training for local people to ensure the sustainability of language work in the region, has had a significant impact on regional language reclamation activities.

Beyond the Yukon Territory, with the 2019 passage of Canada's *Indigenous Languages Act*, the federal government has committed to restructuring its legislative and financial models to support Canada's Indigenous languages on a large scale. While these long-anticipated changes have been welcomed nation-wide, the government's slow approach to making truly impactful structural changes does not reflect the urgent

needs, given the troubled states of many Indigenous languages. However, visible cracks in the well-worn system which more often hinders rather than supports nation-wide Indigenous language revitalization efforts are appearing. Case in point, much of what Barbra Meek documented in her ethnographic research more than 20 years ago, working in the same community I now call my home, serves as a useful waypoint on a journey towards Kaska language recovery, a period to reflect on and learn from. Whatever new trails the Kaska people choose to go on will inevitably result in change, leading them to places where they have never been before.

As the work on Kaska language recovery continues, it is essential to reflect and to re-evaluate on an ongoing basis, and if necessary, to correct course. This reflective work is important to ensure that whatever measures are taken continue to support the Kaska language, and not unwittingly undermines it. Meek reminds us that "as endangered languages are reconstituted, so are the contexts within which they are used; the appropriateness and the effectiveness, intertwined, of such linguistic phenomena sustain infinite possibilities for both successful interaction and communicative collapse" (2010, p.34). In my engagement in this work, I keep this precarity in mind, but I am incredibly hopeful and thrilled to see where the trail will lead and what future it will embody.

This dissertation too, therefore, is only a snapshot of a particular point in time and my understandings up to now. After all, that is the nature of ethnography, it is never complete, always only a snapshot of a particular point in time with countless possibilities, many of which have yet to be envisioned and acted upon. A friend and a graduate student in the Department of Geography at the time once remarked how strange it must feel to be working on a project that can never feel like it is "finished" in my lifetime, since language revitalization takes place over many generations. While I acknowledge the dissertation's topic's impossibility of completeness, I nevertheless hope it will be a useful contribution to the body of literature concerning language revitalization and reclamation, providing useful insights and lessons learned. I hope this dissertation too will serve as one documented reference point to reflect on, in the long journey of the Kaska language.

1.5 Lines of Inquiry and Research Questions

My initial research goal was left intentionally broad. From the beginning I was interested in exploring various collaborative frameworks, possibilities, and ways of doing language work that would be community-based and community-driven, rooted in respect and reciprocity. I was committed to moral practice and justice, working towards empowerment of all involved. In essence, I wanted my research to be a co-constructed endeavour with the people I was going to be working with and not driven by predetermined goals based on my own specific academic interests. I wanted to pay close attention to the people in the community and what their ideas were about the directions our work together could take. I theorized that this approach and the work we do together might not only uncover Indigenous ways of learning and teaching, but also facilitate the opening of a new theoretical space from which to critically examine language documentation and revitalization research as it presently stands.

At the same time, I understood the importance of paying close attention to the nuances and complexities of current Kaska language use in the community and what role or roles the language plays in the different contemporary contexts, how the language is mobilized, where, when, and for what purpose. I was determined to pay attention to language practices and expressed ideas about language of not only fluent speakers, but also learners and others in the community, who might not consider themselves fluent, but either utilize the language in some ways, or are expressly invested in the language. Additionally, I wanted to understand the effects of these language practices and ideological articulations as they emerge in various contexts and whether they have the capacity to disrupt, unsettle, or even potentially transform the structures and forces that have historically marginalized the language and the people. In fact, the frequent reoccurrence of various linguistic interventions, "disruptions," and ways of unsettling the ordinary flow of things became one of the major themes that emerged from my research, a theme I attempted to weave into this writing. These interventions powerfully highlight the enduring voices of resistance and survivance (Vizenor 2008), while exemplifying people's strategic employment of the Kaska language to assert the rights to their language, their ancestral territory, and Kaska ways of knowing and being.

Since I stayed in the community for a long time and becoming involved in many different projects, there were many possible lines of inquiry I could have taken. Clearly, not all could be included or addressed in a single dissertation. There are many important themes that emerged from my data that are not explicitly included in this dissertation, but they contributed to my overall understanding of the issues I discuss. Some of these themes I plan on exploring later in future publications, and some, for a variety of reasons, I will likely never write or speak about in academic and other public settings. As I have mentioned above, there are many recordings and other materials that came out of the various engagements I have yet to closely attend to. Undoubtably, they will deepen my understandings of the issues at hand and potentially reveal new lines of thinking and further inquiry.

Chapter 2

Maintaining Narrative Continuity Through Contemporary Kaska Storytelling: The Making and re-Making of Connections

1. *Ī déh sa'ắ*
   And then, long ago

2. *1949 gūjáī.*
   it happened in 1949

3. *School guts'į́' nākṓdílā'.*
   They took us to school.

4. *Tū Dísdís ts'į́h*
   From Pelly Lakes

5. *ts'ídāne kḗnt'ēdé kűgīlā'.*
   they put all of us children in

6. *um*
   um

7. *Plane zűze t'ắt kēdzént'ēdé łą́ nístlōnī.*
   Inside a small plane, there were a lot of us

8. *Īdéh,*
   and then

9. *ī Jackfish Lake kűhyigé nḗdzenēdētl.*
   we landed at Jackfish Lake.

10. *Dūłą́ kűhyigé kḗsdíh ekűh.*
    At that time, I didn't know that place

11. *Kíhseh kűhyigé łāsyāl.*
    That was the first time that I came there

12. *Ī déh tsa'ắ,*
    and then after a long time,

13. *truck chō t'ắt dṓgōgūīlā' kḗdzént'ēdé da'ắ.*
    they put us inside a big truck down there.

14. Ts'édé' zűze guyī́genlā' etsa'ắ Ross
    They gave us small blankets in Ross

15. *Tū Łídlīnī tsʼį́ʼ*
To Ross River

16. *Łídzedéł truck yéh ī déh,*
we went with the truck and then,

17. *kűhyigé*
right there

18. *łą́ tsʼídāne nístlōnī kʼī kwídētl.*
we went with a lot of children.

19. *Gűhtʼē tsídzenīkʼídze,*
like that there was a lot of us

20. *tsʼídāne łą́ nístlōn gūkídédlí.*
a lot of children went into the truck.

21. *Kűhyigé gūtsʼį́h*
from there

22. *ekűdéh*
very quickly

23. *ʼáné gōdeslāʼ.*
they brought us over.

24. *ʼÁné łą́ dűgűsádī gūją́ī tedze gūyéh gūją́ī tsʼídāne nîtsīh,*
It was a long night we passed with the children,

25. *tsʼídāne négétsīh négétsīhī.*
the children were crying and crying.

26. *Łą́ yédé*
Also really

27. *getʼīē kwēnetlʼíjí shēgenehtésī zetl negūdéndí.*
when they got exhausted and fell asleep, it became quiet.

28. *Dzédzidzídí nédzítsīh.*
We cried again when we woke up.

29. *Łą́hse Whitehorse gūyéh truck łáhkósí.*
The truck brought us to Whitehorse.

30. *Łą́ yédé*
also

31. *ī*
    then

32. *tsa'ā́ school*
    down there at the school

33. *gedī kū́hyigé gūyéh truck łáhkósī̆.*
    the truck with us in it arrived there, they say.

34. *Kwī́dzī́dētl.*
    We walked in.

35. *Łā́ dahyigé gūt'ehī dūłā́ kēdzedī̆h.*
    We didn't know where we were.

36. *Ī déh*
    Then

37. *ī,*
    that,

38. *"Nā́dah'ṓts!"*
    "All of you, take a bath!"

39. *Kā́dáhchōde kūgedī kū́hyigé kūgūyīlā'ī̆.*
    They brought us in and told us to go there.

40. *Gūtsíghá', estsíghá', tah yḗdé gū́hłīnī tēgehtl'ích.*
    They poured something on our hair.

41. *Ī*
    That

42. *gū́hłīnī powder gḗt'ē hī̆,*
    it was some powder,

43. *yá' dege.*
    for lice.

44. *Ī déh*
    Then

45. *dūłā́ yá' dént'īnī gólī̆,*
    even though we didn't have lice,

46. *dene ts'ídāne kḗnt'ēdé kā́genlā́'.*
    they did that to all the First Nations children.

47. *Ī déh*

Then

48. *łą́ yḗdé*
also

49. *wash bath nedzesjá' tl'ą̀.*
we took a bath.

50. *Gūtsíghá' yḗdé ká̃gest'āts.*
They also cut our hair.

51. *Gūtsíghá'*
Our hair

52. *gūdzị̄gī kų́hyigé gūts'ị̃' ká̃dáhchōde,*
they cut all of it off, right to our ears,

53. *ī déh dōgī gūts'ege k'ī.*
and around our foreheads too.

54. *Łą́̃*
Really

55. *gūtsị̃' sédį́ht'ē genlá̃'.*
They made our heads look bad.

56. *Ké̃dzent'ēdé gé̃ndzīht'ē.*
We all looked the same.

57. *Ī déh ī*
Then that

58. *Grady k'ī*
Grady too

59. *dę̄ są̀ gīyedéhtīnī dūłą́̃ nes'ị̄.*
I did not see where they put her

60. *Degaudehsá̃t negūt'ī̃hī zedle' megá̃nestān.*
I only saw her from far away

61. *Dūłą́̃ déh gūgáh shenetīn.*
She didn't sleep beside us

62. *Ts'ídānechō tah gūts'ị̃' endų́é dūłą́̃ meyḗsdį́h.*
She was with the big children, I didn't know them

63. *Ī déh*
Then

64. *gūhīnī ī Effie,*
Effie and I

65. *edḗdzé' elīnī,*
she is my younger sister,

66. *yéh degagáh enshedzentīn*
we slept beside each other

67. *Dedzídéh gūtsá'átl néndze'ą̄h.*
We shared our pillows

68. *Tedze gūdéhī gų́dzedich.*
We would tell stories at night

69. *Ī*
Then

70. *kų́hyígé lā gídzedḗlī́ dzedī́hī́ gūdzedich dets'į́'.*
we would tell each other stories when we walked around

71. "*Men jahyigé lēt'ē yḗdé,*" *dī tū mâ tl'endzededéł yḗdé.*
"Here is the lake and all," she said, and we would walk around the shore

72. "*Kų́hyigé ejínjdzedéł yḗdé lā,*" *dzedī dets'į́' gūdzedich*
"Right here we're hunting and all," we said, telling stories to each other

73. *Ī*
then

74. *gūbede kāge*
our bed was a bunk bed

75. *ī board setānī.*
there was a wooden board there

76. *Kų́hyigé ī kāgī lēdzedī.*
The one we were talking about was on top [of the bunk bed]

77. *Men gḗgūht'ē picture gūlīn gḗgūht'ē kāge.*
On top there, there was a picture of what looked like a lake [in the wood grain]

78. "*Kų́hyigé lā kḗdzet'inī,*" *dzedī. Dets'į́ gūdzededéh gūk'éh*
"Right there we used to do it like that," we said. We talked to each other our way (in Kaska)

79. *Dene k'éh gūdzededéhī.*

We spoke in Kaska

80. *Łą́ sáh dene yąh yédé dets'į́' gūdzededéh gūdzedich.*
We would tell stories to each other about people long ago

81. *Sáh dene yédé yąh*
and about people long ago

82. *kēdzedíhī yéh*
we knew it and

83. *gūdzedejī tedze gūdéhį́*
we told stories until it was night

84. *Wédé dets'į́ gūdzededéh gūzą́gé' gūdzededéh.*
We would always speak to each other in our language

85. *Ī yéh dūłą́ eszą́gé' tādes'ą́.*
I did not lose my language

86. *K'ādé jáhdigé,*
It is still here,

87. *Eszą́gé' gūdesdéh.*
I speak my language

88. Kólā!
The end!

I first heard this deeply touching story when a Kaska Elder Dorothy Smith of Ross River decided to share it during a recording session we organized in the community in 2018. Beside myself and my PhD supervisor Patrick Moore, she told it to a group of Kaska speakers, who had gathered at the local Yukon University Campus to record one-on-one conversations, primarily aiming to document Kaska conversational interactions. For this recording session, participating Elders were asked to speak on a topic of their choice, a topic they were comfortable sharing and one they felt was important to have recorded for future generations. When the Elder finished telling the story, the mood in the room shifted, becoming palpably more somber. It seemed, the story brought back painful memories of the horrors many of those sitting in room lived through as children, attending residential schools. The performance indexed a particular kind of social intimacy that is informed by the historical memory of the boarding school experience they all share (Webster, 2015). She looked around the room and concluded

in English, "we were so silly, Effie and I" and with a short, perhaps a bit uneasy laugh, she walked away from the recording area in front of the room, where a recording set consisting of two chairs, a couple of lighting lamps, recorders, and microphones was arranged, to the back of the room, where others were sitting, watching, and listening.

Personally, I was brought nearly to tears by the story weeks later, listening to it again, while working on its translation. I imagined two little girls, far away from home, finding themselves alone in circumstances far beyond their control and perhaps even beyond their comprehension at the time. The girls laying in bed, side by side, sharing a pillow, whispering in Kaska, telling stories about their homeland, following the wood grain on a figured wood board above, seeing it as a representation of the landscape through which their families had traveled for generations. The swirls and twists of the wood fibers became their trails, the crosscuts of the wood knots became familiar lakes, and along the lakes' shores, beloved fishing holes and hunting camps emerged through their stories, bringing memories of happier times to the sterile dormitory room night after night.

Through the highly emotive esthetic details of their stories, spoken in the Kaska language, they called upon their relatives and their land to come close, to comfort them, to help them survive these troubled times. The stories became their lifeline, a nightly exercise of refusal to give up their language, to deny their family's way of life. It became a ritual, an act of resistance against the force which has violently removed them from the well-loved and familiar and transported them hundreds of kilometres away, into the unknown and foreign. "*Ī yéh dūłą́ eszą́gé' tādes'ą́. K'ādé jáhdigé"* - "I didn't lose my language. It is still here", she concluded to underscore the importance and the life-long impact of this nightly practice at the residential school's dormitory.

Webster reminds us that discourses of language use in the residential school context create "an emotionally salient metadiscourse about both language and language users and the links between them" (2015, p.33). Consequently, the institutionally supressed language, Kaska in this case, becomes an affective register to display this emotional bond, indexing social intimacy among Kaska speakers. In turn, residential schools and the English language by extension, function as potent symbols of the state sponsored language and cultural suppression and an attempt at

extermination. Despite the systematic violence bestowed upon the children and their families, many, just like the speakers participating in our recording session, managed to keep their language. This fact attests to the incredible resiliency and strength of the survivors not only now, but even as small children, and to the durability of this affective bond they managed to keep intact. During storytelling performances such as this one, residential school experience works as a trope that gives the metadiscourses an intertextual linkage, functioning as a shared historical memory (Webster 2015, p.34). While all those present in the room shared this historical memory, telling these types of stories further validated their personal experiences. Additionally, they were similarly connected by another common thread. Despite all they have lived through, unlike many other survivors, they did not lose their language, it is still with them.

Moments like these also make visible how the work of language revitalization and documentation is inevitably entangled with these painful colonial legacies and histories of oppression and marginalization. For those of us working with Indigenous communities in their struggle to reclaim their ancestral languages, it is especially important to never lose sight of this entanglement and the challenges and complexities that continue to this day. Reflections on Indigenous language practices in the residential school context often bring up memories of many different types of resistance and the children's employment of creative survival strategies. Indigenous language loss is one of the direct products of the residential school system and the reclamation and maintenance of one's ancestral language is one of the most powerful political resistance and decolonizing acts (McCarty et. al, 2018).

In this chapter, I explore several aspects of Kaska storytelling as it is performed today, both formally, during special events, and informally as stories emerge in everyday interactions. First, I want to build and expand on Julie Cruikshank's observation that Yukon storytellers tell traditional stories to make connections in places where rifts and gaps occur as a way of providing an order and continuity in a rapidly changing world (1998). Second, in addition to discussing the practice of traditional storytelling and how it is employed today, I will reflect on the practice of sharing stories about experiences and events, which have taken place relatively recently, often during deeply troubled times the storytellers themselves lived through. The story above is one such example. In particular, I am interested in exploring the intertextual linkages to

traditional stories, which, I argue, performing these contemporary accounts aims to establish and cultivate. As such, contemporary storytelling practices simultaneously work to maintain Kaska narrative continuity, while at the same time, work to transform and adapt modes of storytelling to address countless contemporary issues, including the history and legacy of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. Third, I want to briefly reflect on the social life of these performances, beyond the moment of speaking. In the case of the story above and all the other that were told during this session, the performances were both audio and video recorded to enable wider distribution and circulation.

For this discussion, I use the term "performance" as it is understood in linguistic anthropology, emerging from three critical reorientations within the study of language, poetics, and folklore as "the enactment of the poetic function" and as "a specially marked, artful way of speaking" (Bauman & Briggs ,1990, p.73). Most of the individuals participating in this session have been recorded many times before and had an extensive experience with the practice of language documentation and recording. Many of these speakers experienced their own recordings being shared more widely via copies of audio tapes, CDs, or more recently, through their publication on websites and their subsequent sharing on various social media. Beyond the obvious local documentation goals and purposes, the use of technology expands the potential impact of local voices, for example, contributing to a much larger project of territorial, national, and international Indigenous restorying and resurgence to counter ongoing colonial legacies (Regan, 2010). At the same time, the movement between contexts enabled by technology presents its own unique challenges to the integrity of the intertextual linkages to previous discourses and narratives articulated by the storytellers at the time of recording. Narrative performances are dynamic, inherently emergent and unfolding within a context in which they are situated. While audio and video recording does offer more contextual features to be carried through, much of which is lacking in strictly textual materials (Carr & Meek, 2013), the inherently dynamic nature of the narrator and audience interactions nevertheless is unlikely to be fully captured. Further, it might be fruitful to begin thinking about what happens to these narratives and their locally constituted contexts as they enter the vast virtual space with all its possibilities and perhaps also pitfalls.

It was not the first time I have witnessed this type of deeply personal and intimate storytelling, linking family, land, and language, mobilized as fundamentally relational tools of survival and resistance. In fact, storytelling has been a prominent feature of my interactions with people during my fieldwork. Telling stories, I was told, is how knowledge is shared, and the ability to "really listen" is a tool that has served people well from time immemorial. Storytelling as an Indigenous method has been on the forefront of the efforts to decolonize Indigenous research (See for example Archibald & Parent, 2019; Corntassel & Chaw-win-is, 2009; Cruikshank, 1990; Kovach, 2009; Regan, 2010; Smith ,2012; Thomas, 1993). Corntassel and Chaw-win-is argue that, in the context of First Nations' relationship with the Canadian state, for example, storytelling as a methodology has the potential to expose blind spots, namely that Indigenous restorying process cannot be disentangled from ongoing relationships to homeland, highlighting relational accountability (2009, p.147). The authors argue that the issue of land cannot be treated as separate from that of the residential school, because doing so would ignore the fact that at its core, the residential school system was about forceful removal of entire families and communities from their homelands and their ways of life. In the story above, the speaker begins by providing in great details (lines 1-33) her personal experience of being violently removed from her family and her homeland, placed in an environment that was completely foreign to her. With each new line, detailing the excruciating journey, the increasing distance becomes more tangible and the crying of the children more haunting. These occasions of truth-telling and the restorying of residential school experiences offer alternatives for resisting contemporary colonial realities in pursuit of justice and freedom for Indigenous people and their communities. It is not an accident that many of the storytellers I have recorded over the years are also fierce advocates for Indigenous rights and justice on local, territorial, and national levels. For residential school survivors, homeland, family, restitution, and restorying are all connected (Corntassel & Chaw-win-is 2009, p.155). The strength of these connections is laid bare by this Kaska speaker, a residential school survivor.

Stories similar to the one above represent a particular type of narratives, frequently told not only during structured, more formalized language documentation events such as the one I have presented above; or other formal gatherings of truth-telling about the

history and legacy of the IRS system, but also in ordinary, everyday interactions, while sharing a cup of tea in an Elder's home, going out berry picking, or venturing for long drives on the land, just to look around. These memories linger, resurface, sometimes unexpectedly, seemingly located never too far below the surface. Sometimes it would surprise me, but always, I had to admire the courage of those who shared these deeply moving and incredibly personal stories. I also saw this seemingly sudden emergence of these types of narratives as a part of a process, both personal as well as collective, to reconcile this difficult history and to begin moving forward, towards a more just future.

Of course, this kind of personal sharing during everyday interactions didn't happen all at once and certainly not right away. For a story to surface, there must be trust, Margaret Kovach (2009), a scholar of Plains Cree and Saulteaux ancestry, asserts. Further, Kovach argues that story as a methodology is fundamentally decolonizing, providing spaces and openings for narratives to emerge. Trust develops gradually, through time, and one must wait for the right moment for a story to be shared. Robina Thomas, a Coast Salish researcher focusing on collecting stories of residential school survivors acknowledged that storytelling as a methodology requires a deep personal response and demands that the researcher to be flexible, available when the tellers are prepared to share their truths. Unstructured, community-based, dialogic interactions with her research participants enhanced the collection of stories and allowed for gradual filling in of detail as they emerged in the survivor's memory (1993, p.26). The relationship between the researcher and the participant then is a significant part of the research story, especially in research involving deeply personal and often painful storytelling. Kovach employed listening to people's narratives as her primary knowledge seeking research method, putting the story at the centre, seeking to elevate the voices of her research participants, voices which have too often been marginalized or suppressed. "Within the research relationship, the research participant must feel that the researcher is willing to listen to the story. By listening intently to one another, story as method elevates the research from an extractive exercise serving the fragmentation of knowledge to a holistic endeavour that situates research firmly within the nest of relationship" (2009, p.99). In my work in general and in this chapter in particular, I aim to place narratives and my ongoing conversations with people at the centre of my inquiries. The enduring presence of narratives in the everyday has provided me with a

cultural scaffolding which aided in gaining a locally informed perspective not only on the Kaska language, but also on the Kaska land and history.

How exactly I personally came to be someone who people trust enough to share stories with is hard to put a finger on. Recently, someone from the community inquired whether I could put together a short cultural manual of sort, to guide people from the outside, who come to the community to work with and for the Kaska people. This manual should include some basic information about Kaska history and culture, perhaps some basic Kaska language phrases, and most importantly, he stressed, it should detail what a respectful, culturally informed, and appropriate conduct should look like. "You have clearly figured it out; people are comfortable with you," he said. Before I even had a chance to entertain what was asked of me and what would be involved in this potentially challenging task, a Kaska friend, whose 90-year-old auntie I lived with for a period of time said: "A cultural manual? Martina just cleaned auntie's fridge and helped her with the laundry!" suggesting that developing relationships of trust and respect doesn't require special instructions. Instead, it happens while spending time with people, helping with ordinary tasks, and through genuine acts of kindness and care, such as helping an Elder with limited mobility to do her chores and regularly keeping her company. Making the time to visit with people, sharing food and good stories, helping when it is needed, and finally, having a good sense of humour — people love a good laugh and a healthy dose of teasing! For me, these life-altering relationships which emerged as a result of spending time with people, came about through countless thoughtful dialogues, many of which continue to flourish to this day. These are some of the things that stand out in my mind when I think of my time living in the community, how people got to know me, and how I got know them. Of course, my involvement with various Kaska language projects gave me a sense of clear purpose and a useful structure through which to initially engage with people. In short, not being a random stranger in the community, wandering around with no purpose and no connections really helped, but it was only a start.

2.1 The Persistence of Traditional Oral Narratives

Countless scholars have demonstrated the incredible complexities, layers of meaning and depth of traditional oral narratives (see Cruikshank, 1990, 1998, 2005; Hymes, 1981; Kroskrity, 2012a, 2012b; Martindale et al., 2018; McClellan, 1970; Moore,

2002; Sarris, 1993; Toelken, 1987). Many communities view oral narratives as powerful and utilize them, for example, for moral instruction, socialization of children, healing, as well as constructing culturally relevant and appropriate tribal and social identities (see Basso, 1996; Kroskrity. 2012a; 2012b; Meek, 2009; Rushforth, 1988). The ongoing prominence of storytelling and the high value placed on the practice among the Kaska people attest to the power and durability of these traditional forms of verbal expression. The collaborative work between Dr. Patrick Moore and several Kaska speakers, documenting Kaska traditional and personal narratives, which had culminated in the publication of *Dene Gudeji: Kaska Narratives* (1999), is a prime example of the value Kaska communities place on their storytelling traditions. Nineteen Kaska elders from different regions of the Kaska country contributed to this collection, sharing their personal accounts, traditional stories, and historical narratives. This publication "reflects the increasing desire of Kaska people to use their language and share their traditions" and "show that storytelling is a living part of their culture" (1999, p.i). Kroskrity argues that "In the face of dangers from hegemonic institutions of dominant society that include heritage language death and erasure of Indigenous culture, many Native communities are turning and returning to the power of their own storytelling tradition" (Kroskrity 2012, p. 4). The *Dene Gudeji* publication exemplifies this notion. While Kaska storytelling traditions continue, "few young people now learn stories to the extent that people in the past did" (1999, p. ii). It is through such narratives that cultural values emphasizing knowledge and wisdom of ancestors are imparted on the audience (Kroskrity 2012, p.4). As such, narratives can be thought of as effective pedagogical tools to implicitly teach and reinforce cultural norms and values, providing the audience with examples of possible infractions in case of improper or offensive social conduct. By exposing the main characters' infractions and the consequences in turn suffered, the narratives not only demonstrate what improper behaviour is, but also point to what is thought of as the ideal, proper, and desirable. During one of our Kaska language recording sessions, a group of women sat together to share examples of Kaska traditional restorative justice practices, telling stories about instances when these practices were utilized, both in long-ago times, using traditional narratives as examples, as well as in relatively recent times they themselves lived through. In the process, they explicitly discussed the severity of various infractions and the appropriate ways to deal with them, and how such practices could be brought back into use in contemporary communities. They all

agreed the Canadian criminal justice system is not effective in making individuals truly accountable for their actions and for justice to be served.

In addition, countless ethnographic studies have also demonstrated the diversity of ideologies and related moral stances concerned with narrative performances, including explicitly or implicitly indicating who gets to tell the stories, how and where they tell them, to whom, and when (Kroskrity 2012b, p.179). In my own work with the Shoshone Youth Language Apprentice Program in Utah, the challenges of utilizing traditional narratives in a language classroom setting became apparent almost immediately. In addition to the strict adherence to norms about the timing and audience to which a particular story can be told, the importance of maintaining narrative integrity of the performances – telling the story exactly the way it was originally told to the present narrator — made drawing on traditional narratives for classroom language learning extremely challenging, if not impossible (see Volfova, 2013 for more specific examples). In cases where strict adherence to norms applies, there tends to be "heavy reliance on conventional norms and aesthetic cultural preferences for stylized and established tropes and not for the innovations and explorations that are often valued in Western verbal art" (Kroskrity 2012b, p.165). In the Kaska country, the performance of *Dene Gudeji* - Kaska traditional stories, or legends as some call them, are called upon to deliver important lessons for the community. The knowledge of and the adherence to protocols about the timing of Kaska traditional stories and the ability to tell them well, especially in the Kaska language, is highly valued. In the following chapter 3 I expand my discussion of the stylistic features of Kaska verbal art, by exploring the prolific use of quotes in Kaska storytelling. I argue that directly quoting Elders and ancestors serves to add an elocutionary force and authority to a narrative, as well as its clear alignment with a local ideology related to person's responsibility for the truthfulness and accuracy of their statements. Directly quoting someone, I argue, partly serves this purpose. Additionally, Julie Cruikshank (1990) in her work with Tagish and Southern Tutchone Elders saw the use of direct quoting in narratives as a creative and skillful way to create a dialogue, putting diverse voices and different, sometimes opposing, perspectives into a conversation with one another.

For many Indigenous groups, such as Kaska, telling stories often takes on the role of a pedagogical method for the socialization of children and youth, highlighting

preferred behaviour in accordance with Kaska laws. Such lessons should for the most part be inferred by the audience from the story, rather than directly articulated by the narrator. However, in many contemporary situations, as Barbra Meek observed, when small children and youth are a part of the storyteller's audience, "the narrative often addressed more explicitly the ways in which children and youth should behave, especially towards elders" (2010, p.62). I have witnessed such explicitness employed with high school students at the local school, for example, where an Elder shared a story, followed by explicitly highlighting not only the infractions and the inappropriate conduct, but also the contrasting proper behaviour. As Meek noted, in local metadiscursive talk about the Kaska language, two predominant themes emerged: First, "language as socializing practice" and second, "language as history" (2010, p.145). Narrative performances, especially those dealing with contemporary issues and topics, often highlighted the loss of Kaska language as one of the reasons people don't know how to properly behave. By extension, the use of the Kaska language is seen as one of the guiding principles for a proper personal conduct, a principle that is fundamentally rooted in Kaska laws.

Julie Cruikshank demonstrated the contemporary relevance of long-ago stories in the Yukon, and their ability to effectively "do work" in the present. Skillful narrators mobilize voices that 'speak the past' while at the same time, producing performances that are innovatively designed to address contemporary circumstances, fulfilling important social and communicative goals (Cruikshank, 1997). In the story above, in lines 80-83, the speaker highlights the use of traditional stories as an effective tool, employing a customary cognitive model (Cruikshank 1998, p.78) to help make sense of the speaker's seemingly incomprehensible circumstances, utilizing "stories about people long ago" as an anchor and an interpretive frame for the hardships she and her sister were facing at the time — "*Łą̄́ sā́h dene yąh yḗdé dets'į̄́' gūdzededéh gūdzedich, kḗdzedíhī yéh. Gūdzedejī tedze gūdéhī́*" — "We would tell stories to each other about people long ago, we knew it. We would tell stories until it was night." These were the stories that nourished and sustained them as they longed to return home to their families. As Cruikshank notes, the enduring tradition of storytelling in the Yukon, despite the dramatic changes and upheaval, which have taken place in the Territory in the last

century, suggests the ongoing relevance of traditional stories for people in contemporary times.

2.2 Contemporary Storytelling

Bauman and Briggs remind us that "the illocutionary force of an utterance often emerges not simply from its placement within a particular genre and social setting, but also from the indexical relations between the performance and other speech events" (1990, p.64). In this context, performance is to be understood as "the enactment of the poetic function" and as "a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood" (1990, p.73). This is an important concept. Frames tell us how specific discourse or a performance is to be understood in the larger context (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974). As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, to be able to effectively set up a recognizable interpretive frame is especially important in the context of Kaska contemporary storytelling. During narrative performances, speakers mobilize specific poetic forms and structures to create intertextual linkages to traditional stories, distinguishing these performances from everyday forms of talk, placing them in turn on a long continuum of local narrative tradition. Building upon the insights of past performance analysis, Bauman and Briggs further suggest a framework through which to investigate the interrelated process of entextualization, decontextualization (decentring), and recontextualization (recentring). Such an approach, Bauman and Briggs argue, has the potential to construct histories of performance, linking, series of speech events into historical systems of interrelationships in discourse-centred terms. The use of this framework provides a critical perspective on the social use of language, facilitating insights into language ideology, historicity, the nature of cultural authority, and in this case, it helps to situate contemporary Kaska storytelling as a continuation of the Kaska narrative tradition.

Contemporary narratives such as the one above, are frequently framed and structured in a way that is evocative of "journey narratives", a particular genre of traditional storytelling, commonly performed by northern Dene storytellers, including the Kaska. Here I use the concept of genre as "relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterance" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.64). Many people are familiar with these stories, including the Elder who told the story above and who undoubtably heard

them growing up. These types of stories involve the main protagonist's journey from the familiar human world to another, often vastly different, supernatural world, and then back again to the human world. As Cruikshank notes, the two realities are marked off in some physical way such as passing under a log, entering a cave, or even going beyond a horizon. The characteristics of the new domain are often reverse of the familiar reality (1990, p.340). In "The Girl Who Lived with the Salmon" story, for example, the salmon people perceive humans as being really smelly and their camps along the river as dangerous (Moore, 1999). In a Tagish version of this story, the situation of reality reversal is more elaborately developed – the main character, who is a boy, tells people that the fish refer to their family fish camp as "war house" and fish eggs (which he frequently eats) are excrements in the eyes of the fish (Cruikshank, 1983, p.8).

The journeys as well as the passage from one world to the other are often arduous and always dangerous. In the traditional narratives, typically, the protagonists embark on the journeys either by choice, as a consequence of an improper behaviour, or because of kidnapping (Cruikshank, 1983). Ultimately, the journey has transformative effects on the protagonist, although as Cruikshank points out, the effects are at times markedly different, depending on the protagonist's gender. Male protagonists generally acquire a spiritual helper and in turn power, which then helps them not only to return to the human world, but also become powerful and influential once there. As Moore notes, traditionally, the Kaska achieved status through their knowledge of supernatural powers and many, but not all, of the best-known medicine people and prophets were men (Moore, 2002, p.141). Women, on the other hand, rarely have spiritual helpers and rarely acquire special powers, Cruikshank observed. Cruikshank further notes that many of the journey narratives depict women concentrating their energy and wit instead, on trying to escape, cleverly tricking their captors, and being resourceful, using practical knowledge and skills they mastered earlier in life to help them return to the human world (1983, p.16). The ability to be resourceful, stay on task and focused, are some of the key features of the female protagonists' survival strategies. Ultimately, the female characters rely on their powers of reasoning and critical thinking, rather than supernatural assistance. However, there are also examples of women acquiring supernatural powers through these journeys and utilizing them upon their return among people. One such example is the story "The Woman Who Lived with the Grizzly Bear"

(Mc McClellan, 1970; Moore, 1999), where a female character gains and retains supernatural powers after marrying a bear. However, from his experience working with the Kaskas in Ross River as well as the Dene Tha in Alberta, Patrick Moore noted that women too often acquire supernatural powers, which were parallel to those of men (P. Moore, personal communication 2022). In Cruikshank's 1990 analysis of the common themes of what she calls the "stolen woman" narratives, she argues that the typical survival strategies of the female protagonists of these types of narratives exemplify the cultural ideal of Dene female resourcefulness. However, Cruikshank also cautions us that the distinction between the male and female skills and knowledge might be a Western one, since there is no evidence Dene storytellers distinguish between the two. "A narrator would see nothing inherently more 'practical' in such a woman's behaviour than in the entirely practical male vision quest that, if successful, could result in a mutually supportive relationship between hunters and game" (1990, p.344). For more detailed descriptions of traditional roles and responsibilities of Kaska Dene women, see Wheelock and Moore's 1997 publication.

While the story recounted at the beginning of this chapter fits the general pattern of the female journey narrative, it exhibits some parallels with one particular story, namely the story of "The Sisters Who Married Stars." There are many different versions to this story, in fact, it is one of the more widely distributed traditional stories in North America (Young, 1970). The summary I give here is based on a version told by a Kaska Elder Clara Donnessey. Her version of the story is included in the 1999 *Dene Gudeji*: Kaska Naratives collection. I have heard other, slightly different versions of the story, with various number of details from others in the community as well, but the general theme remains the same. In the story*,* two sisters make a journey into the world of stars. Despite being warned by their parents, night after night, the sisters continue to point to the sky, dreaming about marrying the stars. One day, they find themselves kidnapped, in a vastly different world, the world of the stars, having stars as their husbands. To transition back into human world, the girls used a set of practical skills, typically acquired by women in their youth, like tanning hides, sewing, and making ropes. In another version of this story told by a Tagish Elder Angela Sidney, and recorded by Julie Cruikshank, the girls also make several thick moose skin mittens and leggings, to make the sliding on the rope easier (Cruikshank, 1990, p.106). Patrick Moore has heard

similar details to be included in stories told by Kaska storytellers in the Ross River area as well (P. Moore, personal communication, 2020). Secretly they began digging a deep hole through which they planned to lower themselves back onto Earth. They tied the rope pieces together and began lowering themselves down to reach a tall tree. Eventually they solicit help from a wolverine and a crane before making it back to their home camp. While the sisters who married stars didn't seem to return with any spiritual powers acquired by their encounters, relying on their earthly skills and clear thinking, they managed to successfully return unharmed.

Connecting back to the opening story, I will outline some notable parallels between this residential school narrative, female journey narratives in general, and "The Sisters Who Married Stars" story in particular. First, in lines 1 to 3, the narrator begins with what Sacks et al. (1974) call "preface sequence", signaling to the audience the type of story they are about to hear, in this case, a residential school narrative. "*Ī déh sa'ā́ 1949 gūjáī. School guts'ī́ nākṓdílā'*." "It happened in 1949. They took us to school." Next, in lines 4 to 11, the children board a plane and travel from Pelly Lakes to Jackfish Lake. The physical boarding of the plane invites an image of a portal of sort, taking the children into another reality, and it marks the beginning of the journey for the narrator. According to Kaska Elder Leda Jules, who remembered this event well, it might have been the first time most people in the Pelly Lakes region saw an airplane (L. Jules, personal communication, 2019). The children were then brought to Jackfish Lake, a place located on the Kaska territory, near Ross River, but unfamiliar to the narrator at the time. In lines 13 to 28 the narrator then shares, in detail, the excruciating journey from Jackfish Lake to the school in Whitehorse. Many residential school survivors described their experience being removed from their homes and placed in the school as nothing short of kidnapping. Elder Leda Jules described the scene in the village after the children boarded and the airplane left in the following manner: "Everybody left behind was crying, the parents were crying, the Elders were crying, even the dogs cried for the children" (L. Jules, personal communication, 2019). The transition through another portal and travelling even deeper into the strange new reality is notably marked in lines 33 and 34. "*Gedī kū́hyigé gūyéh truck łáhkósī́. Kwī́dzī́dētl*" – "The truck with us in it arrived there, they say. We walked in."

In lines 38 to 56, the narrator describes the forced bodily transformation once they'd walked through the door of the school building. All the children were subjected to unnecessary delousing, cutting of hair, removal of their home clothing, forced to group bathe, and finally, forced into the school uniforms. "*Kéฬdzent'ēdé géฬndzīht'ē*" – "We all looked the same", she concludes in line 56. It is not uncommon for the protagonists of journey stories to take on different physical forms once they find themselves in another, non-human reality. For example, in "The Girl Who Lived with Salmon" story, the main character becomes a salmon, travelling around with the salmon people, as a punishment for not listening to her parents and playing with fish.

In the following lines 58 to 84 the narrator details the ways she and her younger sister survived residential school. Despite the physical distance, they figured out a way to stay intimately connected to their homeland and family. Night after night, gazing above, letting the wood grain guide their imagination, they told stories. In this context, the ability to tell and re-tell stories they had learned earlier in life became an invaluable resource that would help them overcome these troubled times.

In lines 71 and 72, perhaps not unlike in any child's play, the present time and space fuses with memories of personally significant places on the land. "*Men jahyigé lēt'ē yéฬdé,*" "Here is the lake and all." "*Kúฬhyigé ejínjdzedéł yéฬdé lā*" "Right here we're hunting and all." While the use of direct quotations is generally prolific in Kaska narrations, here the mobilization of the girls' voices becomes a particularly effective invitation to truly imagine. Just like the sisters who married the stars, they too eventually returned home. In lines 85–87, the speaker suddenly shifts into the present moment, to our recording room, and explicitly identifies this nightly practice as playing a key role in keeping her language, metadiscusively connecting Kaska language practices in the boarding school with her ability to retain the language until this day.

Next, very briefly, I want to reflect on the social life of these performances, beyond the moment of utterance. In the case of the story above and all the others which were told during this particular session, the performances were both audio and video recorded. The willingness to tell such a deeply personal story and having it recorded and later circulated suggests, not only the individual's trust in the documentation and digital production process, but also, perhaps, the storyteller's intentionality in ceasing on

an opportunity to strategically place their narratives in technologically mediated contexts as another way to amplify their voices and reclaim their authority over the accounts of residential school history. Martindale et al. (2018) suggest that there is a deep compatibility between traditional oral memory and the digital recording with all its capabilities and potentials for record keeping and wider circulation to much larger audiences. Technology, such as video or audio recordings, subsequently shared with others, helps the "traditional" past converge with the practices of the present, producing cultural forms of memory that rely on hybrid technological repertoires (2018, p. 200). The authors suggest that within shared cultural knowledge systems, technologies can foster co-creative, participatory, and ever-emergent experiences, helping to create or strengthen cultural coherence across space and time (p. 204). Richard Bauman reminds us of the special nature of oral narratives, namely that of being doubly anchored in human events. Narratives are keyed not only to the events they recount, the residential school experience in this case, but also to the events in which they are performed (1986, p.2), in this case the recording session. Through the production and distribution of the video recordings, much larger and more diverse audiences could potentially be reached. As I have previously suggested, I understand the storytellers' interest and desire to record the telling of such intimate stories as a restorying effort, where the purpose of speaking is to not only to tell a personal story of a traumatic event, but primarily to set the record straight, and to claim control over the representation of the residential school survivors' experiences.

This collection of Kaska recordings has gradually been undergoing the process of translation and transcription, and some have been published on the UBC Kaska Language Website (University of British Columbia, n.d.), where they can be viewed publicly, by unrestricted audiences. Additionally, the Language Department copied the recordings on memory sticks and DVDs to ensure local circulation of these materials for people without internet access. The subsequent offline and online circulation of these recordings has the potential to facilitate opportunities for the performances to have social life beyond the moment of speaking, beyond our recording space, beyond the community level, capable of "doing work" on multiple territorial, national, and potentially perhaps even international levels and scales. In short, the use of technology allows for these narratives to easily move from familial into other contexts. Through the use of

technology, these stories are just one example of how local performances contribute to a much larger project of national and international Indigenous restorying and resurgence as a way to counter the ongoing colonial legacies in general, and the legacies of the IRS system in particular.

2.3 Conclusion

Briggs and Bauman, among others, have pointed to "the way that intertextual relationships between a particular text and prior discourse (real or imagined) play a crucial role in shaping form, function, discourse structure, and meaning; in permitting speakers (and authors) to create multiple modes of inserting themselves into the discourse; and building competing perspectives on what is taking place" (1992, p.147). Similarly, Nevins argues for attending to intertextuality, the notion that any given text is accorded meaning through its relations to other texts, paying attention to semiotic configurations such as words, reported speech, sayings, stories, etc. that extend across successive contexts of use (Nevins, 2010, p.1). In this chapter, I have demonstrated the vital role Kaska traditional stories continue to play, not only as an important narrative practice, but also as an essential element of contemporary storytelling, shaping its structure, function, and meaning, contributing to its rhetorical force and narrative authority. In the process of recounting deeply personal life stories, storytellers work to establish and maintain intertextual linkages between traditional stories and their own lived experiences. In this way, contemporary storytellers put themselves in a conversation with long-ago people, who similarly faced difficult circumstances, and who found creative and culturally appropriate remedies to better their situations and survive. As such, traditional stories function as a roadmap to deal with and overcome challenging circumstances. Cruikshank argued that "because narratives follow a culturally specific sequence moving through a series of conflicts to some resolution, they are structurally equipped to address dilemmas accompanying change" (1990, p. 344).

The removal of children from families and their placement into residential schools was only one of many changes happening simultaneously in the Kaska territory in the 1940s, when the speaker was a child. Undoubtably, what is recounted here was traumatic to her personally and to the children that were taken, changing not only the trajectory of their childhoods, but of their entire lives. Mirroring series of recognizable,

culturally constituted sequences, the narrator framed her own experience of being taken to residential school within the female journey narrative genre. As the narrator entered the unfamiliar, hostile reality, she and her sister mobilized a set of skills they had learned as children to not only survive, but also to eventually return home with their language skills intact. Sharing this heartbreaking story of survival and resilience during this recording session, fulfilled several roles. The ability to speak her language and to recall memories and stories her people have told and re-told for generations became her roadmap to overcoming these unimaginable hardships and eventually find her way back home. These were the tools of her survival, a lesson she shared with her audience. Her choice to tell this story during a community recording session suggests that she sees utility in having this and stories like it recorded, creating a lasting memory, which can be shared with a much wider audience for a variety of purposes.

Anthony Webster illustrated that as residential school gets further removed from the lived experiences of the younger generation of Indigenous people, literary representations of residential school experience take on a greater resonance, which is compounded by the fact that fewer and fewer people are learning their ancestral languages. Further, he argues the understanding of the deeply affective bond between the language and its users, expressed and circulated through literary and narrative representations of residential school, becomes crucial in the younger generations' ability to imagine themselves not only as residential school students, but also as users of their ancestral languages with deeply felt emotional attachments to the language (2015, p.59-60). A deeply felt attachment to language clearly comes through in this story, but it is also a common feature of other stories about residential school experiences which I have heard and recorded over the years.

Martindale et al. (2018) suggested that technologies, such as video and audio recording, which was employed to record this particular performance, have the potential to aid in memory keeping and transmission, connecting people across space and time. The resulting artifacts, such as recordings of oral narrative performances, are highly compatible with traditional modes of record keeping. These records can become a part of the ongoing efforts to overcome effects of cultural genocide of residential schools. On a larger scale, these counter-narrative performances are effective and powerful tools with which it is possible to restory the settler version of history, and make abstract

historical facts come alive, connected to human experience. By creating spaces and occasions such as the recording session described above, it is possible to create safe openings for truth-telling to occur, for Indigenous history to be told (Regan, 2010). The technological mediation of such narratives makes a wider circulation possible, facilitating new, exciting, and no doubt surprising social lives in the vast virtual space.

Chapter 3

Converging the There and Then with the Here and Now in Kaska Conversations

An Excerpt from Field Notes Week 1:

While I was giving a ride home to one of the Kaska Elders I worked with today, seemingly out of the blue, after minutes of sitting in silence, looking out the window, she told me: "kid, you'd better be careful, or you will have a boyfriend before you even know it". I expected her to continue, clarifying what she meant and letting me know how one would end up in such predicament, but she offered no such advice. In silence, we drove for several more kilometres to her house. She got out of the car, said the familiar "*sṓgā sinlā, tācha nagā́nūstą́ sį̃*" (thank you, see you tomorrow) and that was that.

The moment-by moment unfolding of a conversation has been conceptualized as simultaneously constructing, appropriating, and transforming both language activities and the sociocultural structures they index (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995; Moore and Tlen, 2007; Urban, 2001; White, 1997, 1999). Scholars in contemporary anthropology have observed that meaning is never fixed, but rather, people make sense of and create the world they live in dialogically, through everyday interactions with others (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Goodwin, 2006; Hill, 1995; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Ochs & Taylor, 2009). In this chapter, I discuss a particularly visible aspect of Kaska communicative practices, illustrating how Kaska speakers use the knowledge of their cultural values, norms, and laws in their everyday social interactions. In particular, how Kaska people perform directives - the use of language to get hearers to do something, including acting on an advice and suggestion (Searle, 1979). The examination of how people perform directives to elicit cooperation or compliance from others is especially interesting, because it reveals how ordinary communicative interactions adhere to *áʔī̃, —* the all-encompassing moral underpinning guiding proper Kaska conduct — and, adhering to a fundamental Kaska value of respect for individual autonomy.

In analyzing a specific, but highly illustrative excerpt from a recorded natural conversation between two Kaska speakers, I illustrate not only how Kaska speakers perform what is perceived and understood as culturally appropriate directives, but I also discuss how recordings such as these fit into the larger context of language documentation and revitalization. I suggest that such recordings have the potential to be a valuable resource for learners and teachers alike, because they not only show how the language works grammatically, but importantly, they illustrate what speakers do with the language to accomplish many social and communicative goals in a culturally appropriate manner. In other words, showing not only what is linguistically possible, but also what is culturally appropriate. Observations about local patters of communication, including the poetic structuring of performances such as these, are critical in the context of language documentation for language revitalization. Local patterns of culturally appropriate communication must be reflected in the production of language learning materials, and the structuring of language learning activities in the classrooms, in the homes, and on the land to ensure both linguistic and cultural competencies are achieved.

During natural conversation recording sessions, Kaska speakers impart Kaska worldview and shared cultural values in their communicative practices by skillfully balancing levels of indirectness, articulating not only their own life experiences and memories, but crucially, mobilizing the voices of others, most notably long-ago Elders, to add authority and moral force to their performance of directives and requests for correction of behaviours incompatible with Kaska values. In these performances, multiple voices coexist and interact to produce a voice system, discussed by Jane Hill in her 1995 detailed analysis of an interview with a Mexicano speaker, through which the speaker mobilizes socially significant meanings, whose interpretation relies on the participants' recognition of indexical references to common moral principles, which in the Kaska context refers to *á7*. During my time living in the community, I observed that the adherence to *á7* persist in people's patterns of communicative behaviour, both in Kaska and English, despite the ongoing shifting of social, political, and linguistic landscapes in which Kaska people find themselves now. In the context of a community, where the shift from Kaska to English has been nearly completed, these texts demonstrate that certain aspects of language use may be more resistant to change,

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even such a monumental change as the change in language code. Margaret Field in her work with Navajo has shown that aspects of a speech community's interaction that are tacitly taken for granted are also the most basic, pervasive, and resistant to change (Field, 2001, p.250). Phillips (1983) observed a similar pattern in her work at Warm Springs. The performance of directives in Kaska I present in this chapter provides another example of the durability and persistence of certain linguistic and cultural practices.

Linguistic anthropologists view language practice in its entirety as a meaningful social behaviour and a process through which meaning emerges in interaction. This was my motivation for initiating the recording of speakers' conversational interactions, first casually in people's homes, and later co-organizing more structured events with the explicit goal of recording speakers as they converse with one another. Linguistic anthropologists have turned their attention to studying language-in-use and across a variety of genres to examine how speakers use language to accomplish their goals. I build on this scholarship, taking a discourse-centred approach to understanding language and culture, treating language as a semiotic practice, a form of social action, and a cultural resource utilized by speakers to accomplish various communicative and social goals (Ahearn, 2001; Goodwin, 1990).

I continue to draw on Bauman and Briggs' concept of performance as "the enactment of poetic function, that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood" (1990, p.73). Analyzing the use of directives as a dialogic performance provides a frame, which invites critical reflection on the communicative processes involved. The illocutionary force of an utterance often emerges not simply from its placement within a particular genre and social setting, but also from the indexical relations between the performance and other speech events that precede and succeed it (p.64). In the case of the performance I analyse in this chapter, it is not only the setting in which the recording was taking place that needs to be considered, but additionally, since the conversations were both audio and video recorded, the speakers were acutely aware of the fact that these recordings will provide a lasting digital record for generations to come. It is therefore crucial to consider the role of future audiences not only in the recording process of events such as this one, in terms of what topics speakers chose to talk about and how they individually as well as

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collectively mediated their communicative responsibilities, but also in the language documentation process more generally.

Lastly, I build on previous research, which examines values and norms that are widely spread among northern Dene people (Lovick 2016; McClellan 1970; Rushforth 1988; Rushford & Chisholm 1991). Specifically, the importance which Dene people attach to not only individual autonomy and self-reliance, but also the respect for the rights of others, coupled with valuing generosity, reciprocity, and willingness to provide help whenever necessary. Cooperation, mutual aid, and hospitality remain important symbols of solidarity among all people. Associated with these values and norms are expectations of proper behaviour, guiding not only actual physical behaviours and actions, but also, unsurprisingly, communicative practices. Failure to conduct oneself properly, both in physical actions and in utterances, generally results in negative consequences of varied severity.

3.1 Performing Directives in Dene Contexts

Olga Lovick (2016) examined requests of positive and negative formations in Upper Tanana, a Dene language spoken in western Yukon and Alaska, and concluded that choices of requests forms depend on speakers' evaluation of their entitlement to make such requests, as well as various contingencies involved in granting the request. While both positive (do X) and negative (don't do X) requests are possible, negative requests are relatively uncommon. Additionally, she found that cultural concept of "*iijih*" – roughly the equivalent of Kaska *"áɬ"* - influences not only the form of a directive chosen, but even whether a directive is uttered at all. Rushforth (1985) working with the Bearlake people in Northwest Territories, found that indirect strategies are vastly preferred over direct ones and while both positive and negative directives are available, they are avoided whenever possible as not to interfere with individual's autonomy. In his work, Rushforth showed how Bearlakers skillfully negotiate these types of situations, avoiding appearing bossy, as well as not giving the impression that the speaker is inappropriately dependent on the addressee, and not putting the addressee in a position where saying no (even for legitimate reasons) might have them look as stingy and uncooperative. See also Rushforth & Chisholm (1991).

In societies where the autonomy and individual choices are so highly valued, how exactly do people go about telling one another when they need or want others to do or not do something? How do they offer well-meaning advice? If one offers advice or assistance too forcefully, one might be seen as pushy and too aggressive – a behaviour attributed to outsiders or a person who is not acting in proper Kaska ways. If one asks for help, one might be seen as imposing on others, forcing them to act, perhaps against their wishes or interests. Clearly, the ability to skillfully navigate these types of situations is an important function that is needed in everyday interactions and having the skills to manage it successfully is a marker of both Kaska cultural and linguistic competency.

The short vignette with which I opened this chapter illustrates the point I am hoping to make well, in this case, on a more personal level. It demonstrates the proliferation of Kaska cultural norms into English discourses and interactions with a newcomer such as me. At the time, I was not sure what "being careful" involved, but I realized that the Elder did have a model behaviour in mind for me when she made this comment. By acting a certain way that could be seen as ambiguous at best and inappropriate at worst, I could invite unwanted attention to myself, resulting in male advances and rumors that would surely be unpleasant to me. She was looking out for me, someone who was new to the community, but she was not about to tell me what to do. I was left to figure it out on my own. Sometime later after we got to know each other better, casually in conversation, this same Elder noted how good it was for me to be spending so much time around Kaska women, because that is the Kaska way – women learn from other women. This clearly was a much more explicit evaluation and reinforcement of my conduct up to that point, perhaps a praise of my taking her earlier suggestion to heart, conducting myself in accordance with Kaska norms, even if I only had a vague idea what they actually were. Carefully, following Kaska cultural and communicative norms in which indirectness is vastly preferred, I was being socialized into how to conduct myself and how to interact and not interact with others.

It didn't take long for me to notice the frequency with which people in the community would say things like: "I can't tell her what do" or "I don't want to be bossy", or negative evaluation of others such as "he sure is acting smart". Likewise, people's widespread preference for the use of direct quotations, as opposed to the more common use of clauses in standard English, was something I had noticed almost

immediately upon my arrival in the community. For example, it is far more common to hear "I saw Mary and she told me: 'I've been really busy with sewing" than hearing "I saw Mary and she told me that she's been really busy with sewing." As I will discuss in more detail below, the practice of using direct quotations is prolific in Kaska language use and I suggest that it is linked to a specific local ideology having to do with person's responsibility for the truthfulness and accuracy of their statements. Direct quotations are preferred as a way of stating directly what someone else had said, rather than using one's own words reporting on other people's statements, risking being inaccurate and attributing untrue statements to others. This Kaska ideology of responsibility and accountability for one's statements carries over linguistic boundaries and manifests itself in the local variety of English. These are only a few examples to illustrate the ongoing persistence, or continuance of Kaska communicative norms in English interactions, not only among Kaskas who are bilingual in Kaska and English, but also among Kaskas who don't speak or have limited ability to speak the Kaska language.

My observations of people's interactions as well as my own interactions with others suggest that lessons about the principles of proper Kaska behaviour guided by *á'ī* must themselves be conducted in adherence to *á'ī,* modeling these principles in terms of the speaker's assessment of his or her right to provide such lessons and advice, including requests for correction of improper behaviour. Such assessment takes into consideration the speaker's social status – for example, being an Elder or relative to the addressee, the ages of the addressor and the addressee, and the addressee's expected level of familiarity with the principles of *á'ī.* In their work on child socialization practices across cultures, Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) similarly argued, that tacit knowledge about communicative practices includes expectations about participant roles and relationships. For example, small children are often told directly, when they are not acting properly and requests for correction of a behaviour can be relatively direct as well. Meek (2010) documents how in a Kaska Aboriginal Head Start program, Elders' narratives were a preferred mode of children's instruction. A Kaska Elder told a story about what it was like when she was a child, emphasizing sitting and listening to adults when they were talking, not playing around (p.62-69). Indirectly, through the narrative, the Elder articulated a model Kaska behaviour, emphasizing respect for others, especially Elders. As Meek points out, while the narrative did not directly give instruction

to children how to behave, it enhanced the overall instruction at the daycare. The daycare workers used directives such as *"senda!"* (sit down!) and *"ēdénts'ek!"* (listen!) mediated by the ideology of respect articulated by the Elder's narrative (p.69). Meek's example illustrates that learning about respect includes learning about interaction and that a respectful interaction between younger and older interlocutors is an interaction arbitrated by the older or oldest interlocutor (p.70). Additionally, the Elders' preference for instructing children through narrative rather than through direct commands is yet another example of how conveying the principles of proper Kaska behaviour guided by *áī* must itself be conducted in adherence to *áī*. Modeling behaviour through narrative is an effective way to avoid more directly addressing improper behaviour and directing others what not to do.

As children grow older, they are expected to gradually gain more knowledge and start making their own decisions about how to behave properly. Once entering teen years, young people are guided much more indirectly and are expected to take responsibility for their decisions based on what they have learned so far. For example, to illustrate this principle, an Elder shared with me how her daughter, when she was in her last year of high school, decided to drop out a few months before graduation. The Elder told me that she was worried about her, but ultimately, she decided to let her daughter make her own decision and deal with the consequences, because at that age, it would not be proper to tell her what to do. Her daughter dropped out but returned to school a year later and completed her diploma. She then went on to get an associate degree in accounting and now has a well-paying job she enjoys. This story was told to illustrate a proper Kaska conduct as it pertains to the non-interference with other people's autonomy, including interactions between a parent and a teenage daughter.

In contrast, consider the following example, where another Elder recounted her interaction with a young man in the community. This Elder has occasionally shared some of her grievances regarding young people in the community and what she viewed as disrespectful behaviours. She told me that earlier that day, she ran into a young man from the community, who have recently acted disrespectfully towards his older brother – actions she highly disapproved of. The Elder said:

I saw him there, and I was just going to let it go, but then I decided to tell him anyway. I told him: 'what are you doing? You cannot act like that!'. And he just looked at

me and then I thought to myself: 'what am I thinking? Who am I to question him about this?' We are not even related! Then I thought: 'well, nobody is teaching the young people, somebody's got to tell them! They don't know anything.'

This example illustrates the out of the ordinary nature of a direct confrontation and a personal critique of a culturally undesirable behaviour. The Elder was quite conflicted about what she had done but was ultimately able to justify it by thinking of it as providing the much-needed feedback for the young man, who clearly has not been taught proper Kaska ways. She wanted to make sure he had the cultural knowledge to correct his behaviour in the future, convinced that he acted inappropriately because he just didn't know better, and this was one way to help him to correct his course.

3.2 Performing Directives – A Kaska Language Example

The main text I analyse in this chapter was recorded at a Kaska language documentation gathering in the community of Watson Lake in 2017, where multiple speakers came together to converse with one another, in pairs, on topics of their choice. Overwhelmingly the speakers chose to speak about "long ago times" a locally recognized register performed nearly exclusively by Elders, with the purpose of informing about past events, and as I demonstrate, indirectly instructing and reinforcing proper Kaska behaviour. During their performances, the speakers skillfully told long-ago stories in a manner relevant for today, presenting them as lessons to learn from and be guided by. I demonstrate how while performing this speech genre, speakers utilize multiplicity of indexical connections to *áɁ* it offers, with the intent to not just simply reflect social life, but actually transform it.

To signal a genre shift, speakers use a well-recognized rhetorical device *"sa'ä́"* – "long ago" to key into the performance. It is from these long-ago times speakers retrieve moral directives relevant for today, by recounting how things used to be either before they were born or when they, the speakers, were younger. A crucial feature of this genre is the mobilization of voices of Elders who have long passed, as a way to legitimize and add force to these narratives. Speakers put into opposition the morally ordered past, when people strictly adhered to Kaska laws in their everyday lives and the morally troubled present, where people violate these laws, both willingly, choosing to not live by them because it is too difficult, or unwillingly, because they have not been properly socialized into living by these principles. In this manner, speakers contrast the

moral and spiritual power associated with life in the bush, and the lifestyle people have now, living in towns, seen as places where people struggle to live well, a life aligned with Kaska laws and values.

The text is a part of a more extensive conversation between two Elders, Leda Jules and Maggie Dick. In this session, they took turns conversing on a variety of topics, ranging from childhood memories of life on the land, memories of relatives who have passed on, and the recounting of experiences from attending the Lower Post Residential School. The topic of this excerpt concerns the Kaska customs associated with maintaining social relationships and community coherence through the practice of sharing meat and helping each other. This was the last topic they discussed in this recording session, which lasted in total about 25 minutes.

To help me think through this text, I have identified eight distinct sequences, each building the stage for the next, eventually culminating in the peak of the performance, where the voices of people long gone help deliver a cogent directive for people to return to living in accordance with Kaska laws. The sequences are separated based on shifts in time frames. The beginning of sequence 1 is marked by the rhetorical device *"sa'ā́"* – (long ago) to key into the performance. Sequence 2 shifts back into the present marked by "*sék'ādé,' jahyiga dḗhk'ah sậ*?" - (yet, when did it last happened?), lamenting at the general state of current affairs. In sequence 3 and 4 the speaker returns to talking about the present, giving a more personal account of her and her family's experience in the changing times. In sequence 5, the speaker engages in comparing the long-ago times, how things used to be and how, in general, things happen now. In sequence 6, the speaker talks exclusively about long-ago times. In sequence 7, the speaker returns to the present and offers a direct solution. In sequence 8, the last and the shortest sequence, following the delivery of a powerful and daring message, the speaker quickly diverts attention from herself by ending the recording session.

Sequence 1

(Long-Ago)

1. Leda: *Sa'ā́*
                    Long ago

2.   *ī meghąh negūgedédéh*
                  when they speak it

3.   *sa'ǻ gūchō'*
                  long ago our elders

4.   *gūts'įh negūgedédéh*
                  when they speak to us

5.   *ejīngedélí*
                  when they are all hunting

6.   *mā kedā dēhhī kēdzént'ēdé etsén kéndzehdéh lā, eh?*
                  whoever killed a moose we all go get meat, eh?

Sequence 2

(Now - General)

7.   *sék'ādé'*
                  yet

8. Maggie: *hmm*

9. Leda: *jahyiga déhk'ah są*
                  when did it last happen

10.   *Dídū dūłǻ kēgūt'e' no*
                  Now, it doesn't happen that way.

11.   *dene kedā dehhē*
                  now, whenever a person kills a moose,

12.   *łáné no, dūłǻ yēdé angede'ǻ*
                  they don't give anything to anybody

13.   *kēneszen ghóli lā*
                  I think about that

14.   *łáhtādé k'í*
                  Sometimes

Sequence 3

(Now – Personal)

15.   *łáhtādé gūts'ídāné' zelé' etsén yīdzelé' dūłą́ mādī ts'ị̄'*
            we only give meat to our children, and nobody else

16.   *kedze'ą́zī yéh k'ī́ dūłą́*
            we don't get meat from anyone

17.   *kę́gūht'e' lā*
            It is like that

18. Maggie: *hmm*

19. Leda: *Ī Robert kedā wḗde dzehhē ị̂ medă' łą́ sedı́ht'ē eją́ yéh dūłą́ ejíneyā ejá'lā*
            Robert used always kill a moose, but since his eyes got bad, he doesn't hunt
            anymore.

20. Maggie: *hmm*

21. Leda: *last time kedā dzeh'īnī 2005 lā*
            the last time he killed a moose was in 2005

22. Maggie: *hmm*

23. Leda: *ī ts'īdé dūłą́ yḗde dehhé łáhtādé those boys zelé' egedehhē dídū*
            now it's only those boys that sometime kill a moose

24.   *ī yéh*
            And

Sequence 4

(Now - Personal)

25.   *dūłą́ dene ts'ị̄' k'ī́ etsén gha gūdesdéh*
            I don't ask people for meat

26.   *estūé' gets'ị̄' zelé'*
            only to my daughters

27. Maggie: *hmm*

28. Leda: *ī yéh*
            And

29.   *dene gídą́nesdī yéh*
            I am too respectful of people to ask

30.   *łą́ kḗdessīn lā*
                  I say that

31.Maggie: (inaudible)

32. Leda: *yeah łáht'ādé echidle gets'į́' zelé' kḗdessīnī*
                  sometimes I ask my younger brother's family

33. Maggie: *hmm*

34. Leda: *ī es'áné elsę̂ sed'ā' ī k'į́ łaht'ādé*
                  sometimes I ask my sister-in-law, that's sitting over there

35. Maggie: *hmm*

36. Leda: *ī ts'į́h łą́ dene tsḗslī lā dūłą́ dene*
                  from there, I don't bother anybody

Sequence 5

(Alternating Long-Ago and Now – General)

37.   *dūłą́ dene detą́h gíngedéł*
                  people nowadays, they don't visit around anymore.

38.   *sa'ą́ k'éh hį́*
                  like in the old ways

39. Maggie: *hmm*

40. Leda: *didū łą́ sų́gų́dį́ht'ē gūją́ déndī-ā*
                  now it really turned bad

41. Maggie: *hmm*

42. Leda: *Kēdzént'ēdé' dene ełígé' kedā dehhēī kēdzént'ēdé' the whole village*
                  when one person killed a moose, all go to get it, the whole village,

43.   *ts'ídāne etsén kengededéhla, ts'ídāne yḗdé, eh?*
                  even the children, even the children, eh?

44. Maggie: *hmm*

45. Leda: *dídū łą́ nedų́é*
                  now it's really not like that

46.   *dūłą́ ande'ąh ī łą́ sūgūdĭ́ht'ē gedī lā gūchō' k'éh*
            it's not good if you don't give away anything, that's what our elders used to say

47. Maggie: *hmm*

48. Leda: you know

49. Maggie: *hmm*

Sequence 6

(Long-Ago – voicing ancestors)

50. Leda: *essų̄*
            my grandma

51.   *John lā gedūgūdejī*
            when John tells us these stories

52.   *dūłą́, dūłą́ nede'į̄n déh*
            before he passed

53.   *gee, last time gūts'į̆́' gūdedéh*
            gee, last time he spoke to us about this

54.   *ī kě́t'ē ghąh gūdedéh lā*
            he spoke about things like that

55. Maggie: *hmm*

56. Leda: *"hĭ́h déh*
            Even the animals

57.   *dene dege łą́né déh hĭ́h déh dene dene de'etséné' yéléh" éhdī lā*
            even animals they offer themselves to people, she said that

58.   *ī metsų́n zelé' heaven ts'į̆́' de... dedě́lī éhdī, hĭ́h déh kēnget'en lā*
            only their spirit goes to heaven, even the animals do that, she said

59.   *"dūłā only dene" he said, éhdī la*
            "not only people" he said, she said that

60. Maggie: *hmm*

61. Leda: grandma *mōmā*

Mother

62.   *"Esmōmą́ kę́séhdī lā" dendī, eh?*
"My mom told me that" he said, eh?

63. Maggie: hmm

64. Leda: *"ī yéh lā etsén dene yę́dé' etsén dene yéga'ą".*
"that's why people share meat"

65.   *"dene"*
"people"

66.   *"denetīe ghą́dé ledzet'enī" éhdī dídū*
"we are doing it like the creator would do" she said.

Sequence 7

(Now - Directive Conclusion)

67.   *dūłą́ dene kę́nédē*
now people don't do that anymore

68.   *gūchō' yę́dé łą́ nendų́é nesejā' yéh gūhwanī*
As of now, all our elders are gone, that's why it's like that

69.   *gūhwanī worse déndī-ā Maggie?*
we are worse off, what do you say Maggie?

70. Maggie: *hmm*

71. Leda: *gūchō' łą́ déh ełígé zelé' gūt'sį́ ī lā*
We have no elders, except one, who is still alive to us

72. Maggie: *hmm hmm*

73. Leda: *Ī neauntie Minnie zelé'*
Only your auntie Minnie

74. Maggie: *hmm*

75. Leda: *gūchō' łą́ nendų́é lā gūhwanī*
us, in our immediate family, we don't have any elders at all

76.   *Łą́sį́ lādzīht' ā ninī yę́dé sinī yę́dé*
Now we are all alone, even you, and even me

77. Maggie: *hmm*

78. Leda: *Gūk'éh negū'ą́ gūtīe negū'ą́ kḗndzedē nā, eh?*
    We should continue to do this, so our ways continue
    to be good, eh?

79. Maggie: *hmm*

Sequence 8

(Ending)

80. Leda: *Kolā łą́ gūdesdéh*
    I talked enough

81. *Kolā méh*
    That's enough

Sequence 1

The speaker signals a genre shift by the use of a rhetorical device *"sa'ą́"* – long ago (line 1). In lines 2 through 6 the speaker sets the stage, describing long-ago times as the time, when people lived in accordance with Kaska laws, a time associated almost exclusively with life in the bush, with only minimal interactions with outsiders. This staging act serves as a mechanism for reproducing and reinforcing ideology of a morally ordered geography (Sicoli, 2016), where the bush is understood as the moral and spiritual centre of Kaska society. Fundamental principles of proper Kaska conduct such as reciprocity, generosity, working together, and having respect for everything and everyone, the pillars of living life according to *ą́ī,* are introduced here.

Sequence 2

In line 7, the speaker shifts into lamenting about changing times and begins contrasting life in the bush, introduced in sequence 1 and the town, where most people live now. The contrast between the bush and town is reinforced in this genre and becomes vitally important for performing directives in this context. Now, people live in towns, and they don't live properly — they don't follow Kaska laws, as they should.

Sequence 3

Keeping in mind the audience here – beyond her conversational partner, the speaker is being heard by a group of other Elders sitting in the room, listening and watching. They all know each other well, and she must take care to not make anyone feel directly confronted, which would be highly improper and disrespectful. She is well-aware that the audience's evaluation of her competence as a performer and a knowledge holder is a crucial dimension of the transformational potential of her performance. Also, worth reflecting on are the future, imagined, audiences here, for which these recordings are being produced. This recording not only exemplifies her mastery of the Kaska language, but also the Kaska cultural and communicative norms. She speaks about how her family fares in these changing times. Since people don't give meat to her family anymore, she scaled down her own sharing, and only shares meat within her own immediate family. The family has fallen on hard times — in lines 19 through 21 the speaker shares that her husband, once a highly successful hunter, cannot hunt anymore, because of serious eye problems he has developed. The system of reciprocity and mutual aid, essential to Kaska society functioning well and encoded in *á̱ɫ,* has gradually deteriorated, she maintains. The impact of this deterioration is especially noticeable in situations when people are unable to hunt for themselves anymore due to an old age or illness and must, as a result, rely on store-bought foods.

Sequence 4

In lines 25, 29, and 30, the speaker demonstrates her acute cultural awareness and her Kaska cultural competence. It is *á̱ɫ,* or improper, to ask people directly for anything, especially meat. Such actions have the potential to cause pressure on those being asked, forcing them to act in a way they might not choose otherwise – perhaps giving out meat they, for a variety of reasons, might not be able to afford to give. It could also be a source for a potential embarrassment to her if her request is turned down. In lines 32 and 34, she expands the circle of people she might be able to ask for meat if she needs to, based on her kinship ties – her sister-in-law and her younger brother. Ideas about who one can ask for things without taking a risk is guided by *á̱ɫ* as well, and she makes sure to follow the protocol. In line 36 she concludes: "from there, I don't bother anybody".

Sequence 5

In this section, the speaker sets up contrasts to contextualize and add force to what is coming next – a firmer and daring directive to correct inappropriate behaviour and to return to living according to *áʔ.* She sets up a pattern of alternating descriptions of how people did things in the past and how they live now. This poetically patterned contextualization is highlighted in her performance. People used to visit and helped each other out, but that is not the case anymore. In line 46, the speaker offers a more direct critique, while at the same time skillfully deflecting responsibility for it, stating that it is what the Elders used to say, to avoid being seen as too authoritative and too direct she says: "it's not good if you don't give away anything, that's what our Elders used to say." This line sets up the next section, where she directly mobilizes the voices of some of these Elders, in order to back up her claim and strengthen her message.

Sequence 6

This sequence is the peak of the speaker's performance, where she delivers her directive with maximum force and efficacy and her mastery as a narrative performer is on full display. The speaker uses not only her own voice but brings to life the voices of two other people, both of whom have long passed on. This direct voicing adds legitimacy and authority to her claim and is in line with local ideologies of speaking, specifically, concerning people's responsibility for the truthfulness and accuracy of their statements. People are cautioned not to speak about things they don't have personal knowledge of or cannot vouch for. In this short section (lines 50 to 66) the speaker animates three voices, her own, she uses reported speech and finally, she uses multilayered direct quotations. In line 50, Leda begins by recalling her grandmother *"essu̱"* as if she was about to reach directly to her and retrieve her knowledge about the practice of sharing meat. However, immediately after, in line 51, she changes her course and brings in uncle John, to convey his mother's insight on the topic instead. During the translation process of this segment, Leda commented that the reason for her hesitation here was that she remembered that she had not heard directly from her grandmother on this particular topic, and only knows about it through what her uncle, her grandmother's son, told her. Through her, uncle John becomes the vehicle to convey her grandma's words. In lines 51–54, she remembers how John used to speak about what his mother told him. In line 56, the speaker begins quoting her uncle, who in turn is directly quoting his mother.

This complex patterning and layering of direct quotations is prolific throughout all the Kaska material I have been working on so far. The added complexity in translating this material lies in the fact that Kaska does not mark for gender, for example, and since the use of third person pronouns, in addition to verbs marked for third person subjects is so widespread in quoting, it is challenging to sometimes make sense of who is speaking. The speaker's insight is necessary in uncovering and correctly identifying individual voices to avoid collapsing them into one and erasing the texture and the depth of these performances through translation. In line 57 she quotes John who again quotes his mother, conveying a fundamental principle of how Kaska people understand the animals they hunt. When a hunter goes out, he is not looking to outsmart the animals. Instead, if he is respectful, the animal will come to him or her and offer itself to feed the people. *"hîh déh dene dege łä́né déh hîh déh dene dene de'etséné' yéléh" éhdī la ī metsûn zelé' heaven ts'î' de... dedélī éhdī, hîh déh kēnget'en lā "dūłā only dene" he said, éhdī la.* ("even animals they offer themselves to people", she said that, "only their spirit goes to heaven, even the animals do that", she said "not only people" he said, she said that. "My mom told me that" he said, eh?). In lines 64 through 66 it is revealed that people must share meat to mirror the Creator. With each animal that offers itself to people comes a responsibility for them to share with others who might be in need. Not following this protocol shows profound disrespect to the animal and to the people.

Sequence 7

In the following section, the focus shifts back onto the present and Leda's voice dominates. Leda laments that things are bad because there are no more Elders to keep people on the right path. *"gūchō' yédé łä́ nendúé nesejā' yéh gūhwani"* ("As of now, all our Elders are gone, that's why it's like that") she states on line 68. Starting on line 69, Leda begins eliciting active involvement from her interlocutor, calling to her "we are worse off, what do you say Maggie?" "We have no Elders, except one, who is still alive to us" she continues on line 71. In line 76 she continues on "Now we are all alone, even you, and even me". Here the speaker sets up the final part of claiming authority in speaking to how things should be. There are no more Elders before them who could take on to the responsibility to teach people how things ought to be, now it's up to people of her generation to take over. In line 78 she does just that – she finally delivers

a more overt directive *Gūk'éh negū'ą́ gūtīe negū'ą́ kẻ́ndzedē nā, eh?* ("We should continue to do this, so our ways continue to be good, eh?"), highlighting the need for following these protocols, so people live well with each other and the animals, on which they rely.

Sequence 8

And finally, perhaps to divert attention from herself and maintaining humility, the speaker ends her performance by concluding that she said enough and quickly begins to clear the space for the next pair of speakers to get ready for their turn to record. The directive used on line 78 is perhaps the most forceful one she used in her performance, one that only an Elder of her skill and position in the community can get away with.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I hope to have demonstrated how Kaska speakers impart shared Kaska cultural values in their daily communicative practices in general, and the performance of directives in particular. In these performances, multiple voices coexist and interact to produce socially significant meanings whose interpretation relies on the participants' recognition of indexical references to the principles of *á'ī*. In case of directives, the performances are themselves guided by the principles of *á'ī* and speakers must take care not to violate these principles. The evaluation of one's cultural and communicative competence and the efficacy of one's performance relies on their ability to successfully navigate and utilize these norms, while always maintaining respect for a person's autonomy and a capacity to make informed choices for oneself. Additionally, while language shift in the community has been ongoing, certain practices, such as the performance of directives, endure and continue to be relevant not only in Kaska language interactions, but also in English interactions among both Kaska individuals who are speakers and those don't speak the language fluently. This example provides yet another example of linguistic and cultural continuance and survivance. Deeply rooted protocols related to proper behaviour, including proper communicative behaviour, seamlessly crossing linguistic boundaries, to guide interactions which have shifted into English.

Last, a large part of the focus of my work in the community has been on language documentation for revitalization, and therefore, ensuring the materials produced are

adequate and appropriate to support the First Nation's Kaska language and cultural programming. In the course of this work, I have spent time thinking about not only what is being collected and how to make the best use of it in the most practical and culturally appropriate ways, but also, what might be neglected by our efforts. An important part of the documentation process has involved ongoing conversations with both speakers and learners about the type of materials they would like to see documented, keeping a running list of things we have yet to research and record. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I discuss how a formal language planning session revealed the need for an extensive community research to support a number specific programming the participants wanted to see. This research would involve not only eliciting the appropriate vocabulary associated with a specific domain of language use, but more importantly, the protocols and laws of conduct, which would undoubtably also be reflected in patterns of communication associated with the said domains.

While this list to inquire about has become quite extensive in recent years, I and many others, worry about our possible blind spots - the materials we might inadvertently be neglecting to record and document. While the documentary focus of the many of the activities, by design, often turns our immediate attention to language structures and lists of lexical items to keep track of, there are important revelations and texts that emerge, often unexpectedly, alongside the documentation process. Frequently, these insights have to do with the patterns of communicative behaviour and poetic structuring of performances in diverse genres of speech – insights into what people actually do with the language in various contexts. These sometimes present themselves in a form of metapragmatic talk, where a speaker offers an insight on a particular issue. For example, during one of my earlier elicitation sessions with a fluent speaker, I was asking for verb forms to express directives such as "*entsets*!" - (you [sing.] eat!), or "*endān*!" - (you [sing.] drink!), or "*ēch dényā!*" - (you [sing.] put on your shirt!). The speaker offered the forms I was looking for with ease, but later commented, "You have to be careful when you say these," highlighting that while these direct forms are linguistically possible, but one has to use culturally informed discretion when using them. Additionally, as I've demonstrated in this chapter, valuable insights can also emerge during different types of recording events, such as the recording of natural

conversations, and in the subsequent analysis of the poetic structuring of these conversations.

At this point, it should be obvious that in the context of language revitalization, an important part of the language learning process involves learning a proper way of speaking and behaving, including paying attention to such things as directives and the level of force that can be applied in certain situations based on a variety of factors, including the age and relationship of the interlocutors. I am not suggesting that there are no other ways to perform directives, there most certainly are, but to know where and how to use them must clearly be a part of the language teaching and learning process. Recordings such as the one I analysed above have the potential to become a valuable resource for learners and teachers alike. The recording is imbued with both pedagogical as well as cultural power which transcends the immediate context of what is being conveyed.

Chapter 4

"Often Confused As:" Contestations of Colonial Place Making in the Yukon
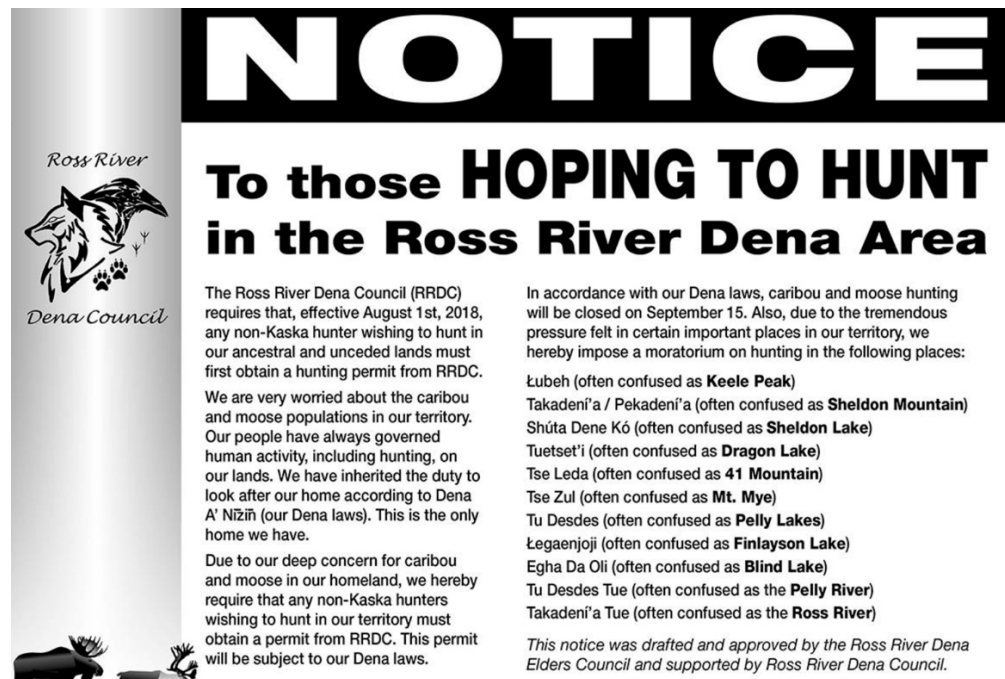

Figure 3. 2018 Ross River Dena Council Hunting Notice

In the summer of 2018, just as the hunting season in the Yukon was about to begin, the Ross River Dena Council (RRDC), one of the two Kaska First Nations in the Yukon, took out a full-page ad in the two Yukon newspapers, the *Yukon News* and the *Whitehorse Star*, to inform the public about the new hunting rules they were planning to implement in the upcoming hunting season. The notice declared that all non-Kaska hunters, wishing to hunt on RRDC traditional territory, must first receive a hunting permit from RRDC (Figure 3).

Without providing many additional details, the notice asserted that "this permit will be subject to Dena Laws," establishing a public record of the RRDC's inherited duty to care for their ancestral homelands, implying what Coulthard (2014) calls "place-based ethics," fundamentally challenging the assumed legitimacy of Canadian colonial

sovereignty. Further, RRDC informed the public that they were imposing a hunting moratorium for some of the most frequented areas on their territory, places which have experienced tremendous pressures due to hunting and resource extraction activities in recent years. These activities, RRDC asserted, have contributed to the decline of the moose and caribou populations in the areas in question. For the Kaskas, moose and caribou are the two most important sources of food, and both animals play a vital role in the Kaska cultural and spiritual practices and ways of life. The well-being and survival of the animals and their habitat is directly linked to the well-being and survival of the Kaska people, and many Kaskas maintain that one does not exist without the other.

Needless to say, this seemingly out of the blue notice caused quite a stir in the Yukon, especially among the non-Indigenous Yukon hunting community, including numerous hunting outfitters, wildlife managers, and the governing Liberal Party politicians. The publication of the ad managed to work on multiple political levels, since it also provided an opportunity for the conservative Yukon Party to criticize the Liberal government and accuse the Liberal Premier of lacking leadership skills and creating uncertainty for all Yukoners by not containing this situation earlier. The Premier was blamed for essentially allowing the First Nation to impose their own restrictions devoid of "clear scientific evidence" and without having the authority to actually do so. Under the current Yukon hunting laws and regulations, First Nations' ability to exert control over their traditional territories has been significantly curtailed.

However, the need for hunters to obtain direct permission from Yukon First Nations to hunt on their traditional territories is not unheard of. Currently, Yukon hunters are required to get a written permission from Yukon First Nations governments to hunt on Category A Settlement Lands, which applies to those First Nations who have signed land claims agreements. For example, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation require non-member hunters to obtain their permission to hunt bison on their settlement lands. However, not all Yukon First Nations have signed land claims settlement agreements, and RRDC is one such First Nation. The act of publishing the ad created a contentious, politically charged situation for the Liberal Party and their handling of the issue was without a doubt watched closely by many who had a stake in its outcome.

While all the buzz was primarily about the legality of this notice and its implications for the upcoming hunting season, I was intrigued by the strategy RRDC chose to assert their rights and to issue this notice – namely, the mobilization of Kaska place names and contrasting them with the "confused" or mistaken colonial names, routinely used by all Yukoners, including many of the Kaskas. Anthony Webster and Leighton Petersen (2011) argue for paying attention to the counter discourses, constructing and transforming language practices and sociocultural structures as a means of disrupting expectations of power and inequality, which have the potential to reframe the social and political dynamics on a larger scale. It was clear that the purpose of using Kaska place names in this context was not to necessarily fulfill a referential meaning, especially since these names are not widely known or used, even among the Kaskas. Instead, it seemed to function as a tool to authenticate the Kaskas as the original inhabitants of the land, with legitimate claims to it and intimate knowledge of it long before European explorers began renaming and claiming the land as their own. The use of Indigenous place names also has the potential to function as the demarcation of land use and occupancy boundaries with neighbouring groups, which became particularly relevant in the process of negotiating land claims in the Yukon, an issue discussed later in this chapter.

Kearney & Bradley remind us that "place names are more than remnants of earlier time; they deny any notion of innocent or arbitrary history" (2008, p. 81). The phrase "often confused as" used on the RRDC hunting notice underscores this lack of historical innocence and complicates the everyday taken-for-granted use of English names for Indigenous places. It indexes the ongoing tensions that are present in settler nations such as Canada, where the common colonial practice of renaming what has already been named and known is used as a strategy to erase the history of genocide, theft, and disposition. The phrase "often confused as" also flips the script and openly challenges the validity and the privileging of western knowledge, while highlighting the systematic and ongoing disregard for Indigenous history and ways of knowing, including the use of local Indigenous languages and Indigenous place names. The choice of the phrase "often confused as" as opposed to other common formulations such as "also known as," for example, is revealing of the categorical refusal to even consider the colonial names as legitimate and authoritative, clearing any possible confusion about

whose voices matter in this context. These important places do not have two names. This assertion was made highly visible, impossible to ignore via the notice's publication in the newspapers that Yukoners regularly read.

Additionally, the use of the Kaska place names in the context of current struggles to revitalize and reinvigorate the Kaska language highlights the ongoing bilingualism of the Kaskas (at least among some), despite the systematic and ongoing attempts to make the language disappear. It highlights the historical and ongoing contemporary causes of language decline and Kaska people's resilience and resistance to these forces. It challenges the common racist expectation of Indigenous peoples' "linguistic incompetence" in terms of their inability to maintain their Indigenous languages or speak multiple languages (Webster & Petersen 2011). The Kaska language, particularly in this context, becomes an effective tool, uniquely capable of accomplishing a host of social and political tasks. In other words, Indigenous place names, particularly when expressed in Indigenous languages, have a semantic depth that extends well beyond the concern with simple reference to a location (Kerns & Berg 2002, p. 287). They can be and frequently do become mobilized in struggles over sovereignty and self-determination.

The act of colonial renaming therefore must be seen as an attempt at silencing, displacement, and erasure, while at the same time, providing an opening, a space for resistance and contestation, such as the publication of the RRDC notice. "I don't know why white people always have to rename everything…" an Elder I have been working with for several years told me once as we worked through some Kaska genealogical documents she had collected over the years. What she was referring to was the common practice of the missionaries and government officials giving people, often children, but also adults, random English names, while trivializing or dismissing their existing Kaska names. She frequently elaborated on this topic to include the renaming of places as well, noting that white people should have talked to the people who know the land to learn the history of the area: to know the stories. Stories, as Julie Cruikshank (1990, 1998, 2000, 2005) and Keith Basso (1996), among others, beautifully demonstrated, intrinsically link human history to place.

At the same time, the decision to put the language on public display, especially in a politically charged context such as this one, carries the risk of the language becoming an object of scrutiny through what Webster calls "ordeals of language" (Webster, 2012). These arise from tensions found in the basic and ongoing inequalities of languages and their speakers, for languages are not equal because their speakers are not equal. It is the tension between self-suppression and expressive genres where what he calls "intimate grammar" is found. Intimate grammar, Webster explains, is "an emotionally saturated language that runs the risk of negative evaluation by outsiders, but one that can create a common bond of solidarity and an intimate sociality (2012, p. 406). As I discuss later in this chapter, RRDC's invoking of Dene laws as the reason for instituting the hunting moratorium, for example, invited scrutiny from outsiders, who questioned how in line contemporary Kaskas are with these laws, which the outsiders clearly perceived as inconsistent with the use of technologies such as guns and gas-powered vehicles.

Additionally, the publication of the notice, with Kaska place names included, certainly renewed and brought about a common bond of solidarity among the Kaskas, extending likely beyond to other First Nations people in the Yukon. As for the non-Indigenous public, the language and the associated meanings were likely largely inaccessible, underscoring even firmer boundary between the relatively recently settled population with limited knowledge of the place, and the Indigenous lineages, which for thousands of years have been rooted in the local landscape.

At the time this notice was published, I was already living in Watson Lake, working for Liard First Nation as the Kaska Language Department Director. There, informal conversations revolved about the possibility of Liard First Nation issuing their own notice too, to curb the seasonal influx of non-Kaska hunters into their territory. They too have been experiencing the effects of what they saw as overhunting and a general wildlife mismanagement by the Government of Yukon (YTG). In addition, people were also discussing the meanings of the place names used on the notice – some, primarily those with family ties to the area in question, were familiar with at least some of them, others whose families historically never used the areas were not. The discussions brought up a lot of memories for those familiar with the area and as a result, many stories were shared. Cruikshank (1998) eloquently documents how among Yukon First

Nations' people, meanings associated with place names are embodied in the very performance of naming places and the telling and re-telling of the intimate stories associated with them. Place names carry a strong sense of belonging and capture people's deeply felt relationship to the land. Cruikshank further notes that Yukon Elders often speak of land in terms of travel and mobility, constructing live stories as travel narratives, woven into the familiar landscapes (1998, p. 16). Among the members of Liard First Nation, there has been a general interest in the work of reclaiming Kaska place names in the surrounding area for some time. The RRDC's notice renewed and energized these discussions, including the possibility of working on having all the local place names changed to their original Kaska names and "correcting the mistakes" on the official maps.

RRDC is no stranger to challenging the territorial government in various areas, including the so called "management of wildlife resources" in its territory. In August 2014 RRDC filed a lawsuit, alleging that the YTG failed to properly consult them about big game hunting permits for the Ross River area, which the government issues each year to Yukon resident hunters and big game hunting outfitters. Among other demands, RRDC sought a declaration that the failure to consult is inconsistent with the honour of the Crown. In the 2015 response, YTG agreed that it has a general duty to consult the First Nation and does so regularly on hunting, trapping and related matters as a part of its overall management of wildlife and wildlife habitat strategy. However, YTG opposed a declaration, which would specifically require it to consult before issuing hunting licenses and seals, an activity which occurs on an annual basis. YTG further argued that the First Nation applied for a major constitutional declaration without a basis in law; or alternatively the declaration sought required evidence of hardship or some breach of YTG's duty to consult, for which RRDC has not provided enough evidence. Additionally, YTG blamed RRDC for refusing to participate in the consultation process. A number of scholars have argued that the general framework of negotiating various land agreements, including agreements to co-manage wildlife and other land-based resources, is based on a variety of commonplace assumptions, which are frequently incompatible with many First Nations' practices, experiences, and understandings of their homelands (Coulthard, 2014; Cruikshank, 1997; Johnson, 2010; Nadasdy, 2002 and 2017).

The 2018 publication of the hunting notice was a clear and direct contestation of the ongoing disagreements over the wildlife management issues culminating in the court battle, as well as an act of resistance towards the general process through which decisions about hunting activities on RDDC territory are made. In RRDC's view, YTG failed to recognize the Ross River Kaska as the legitimate and knowledgeable stakeholders and decision makers when it comes to the issues of wildlife management in the RRDC traditional territory. The notice also sent a signal that RRDC is not giving up this fight, and fully intends to continue challenging the system in a variety of ways, including unorthodox ones. After all, as the notice states, Kaska people have inherited the duty to look after their home according to *Dena A' Nīzīn* (Dene laws), this is the only home they have.

It became clear later in the summer of 2018 that in fact, RRDC had very limited financial resources and human capacity to administer the issuing of their own hunting licenses and could not handle the enforcement of their proposed moratoriums on their own. Ultimately, to accommodate and respond to the RRDC notice, the Yukon Liberal Government cancelled the 2018 permits for hunting Finlayson caribou and announced that moose and caribou hunting season on the entire RRDC territory would close September 15, as requested by RRDC, instead of October 31, a date that follows the usual territorial regulation. As for the rest of the RRDC demands, the Yukon Government chose a less confrontational way to address it, announcing that while the existing Yukon regulations still stand, hunters are asked to voluntarily comply with the RRDC requests, checking with the RRDC Band Office prior to venturing out on a hunt. As a response to the Liberal government's solution, the conservative Yukon Party issued an official statement. In the statement, the Yukon Party complained that the Liberals failed to consult with Yukon hunters and the Yukon Fish and Game Association, a party with an intervenor status in the ongoing RRDC vs. YTG lawsuit, prior to this last-minute announcement, nor did the Liberals provide any clear scientific evidence suggesting that this move was required.

The privileging of western scientific evidence over Kaska knowledge of their territory was a frequent feature of various public discussions and the many comments in the comment sections of the newspaper articles which kept reporting on the story

throughout the summer. The following comment responding to a June 22 article in the *Yukon News* (Hong, 2018) exemplifies this sentiment:

BF: I have a question. The RRDC says, "We are very worried about the caribou and   moose populations in our territory." Is their concern justified? Is it based upon animal counts? Or is this really about the Kaska nation exerting its power?

I am a non-indiginous [sic] hunter who hunts to provide quality food for my family. As such, I feel like a second-class citizen in the Yukon. The indigninous [sic] have major advantages over us on the hunt, yet they use equipment that we provided for them (guns, vehicles etc.) to do their hunt. Lets [sic] not make it even more unfair.

Unsurprisingly, hostile, racially charged comments were rampant on these comment boards, as evident in the second part of the comment above. A number of readers questioned the fairness of restrictions such as those issued by RRDC and insisted that underreporting by First Nations hunters is the main reason why animals are declining. They also argued that First Nations hunters already have significant advantages over non-First Nations hunters, because in addition to the ability to restrict hunting activities in their traditional territories for outsiders, the Yukon hunting regulations do not apply to them. Racist tropes such as the First Nations hunters' use of modern technology such as gas-powered vehicles and guns, for example, were used to question their ways of life and how in-line they are with the mentioned Dene laws and traditions. In essence, their authenticity as Indigenous people was questioned, unless they aligned with antiquated ideas and expectations of what Indigenous ways of life looks like, namely life arrested in earlier, pre-colonial times, devoid of contemporary technology. The following comment under the same article exemplifies this sentiment:

SA: Here is the solution: Take the ferrie (sic) out and stop maintaining the n.canol [sic] road. I bet moose & caribou population would come up in no time. Stop delivering fuel to ross river [sic] to give the Kaska the opportunity to go back to there [sic] traditional livestyle [sic].

Later in the year, I talked with a few people from Ross River about the effects of the notice on the fall hunting activities of non-Kaska hunters in the Ross River area. They reported significantly less hunter traffic on the North Canol Road, the main access road to the many areas mentioned on the notice, and some had also personally

witnessed hunters voluntarily coming in the RRDC Band Office to consult about their hunting plans and discuss RRDC's concerns. It seemed, despite many of the negative reactions in the hunting community, many hunters have decided to voluntarily comply with RRDC's demands. It is hard to know exactly whether what seemed like a compliance was due to many hunters' choosing to respect the Kaskas' concerns, or whether they stayed clear of the area that year, simply to avoid potential altercations and hassles.

In May 2019, after several years of litigation, the Yukon Supreme Court issued a decision in which it declined to issue any declarations requested by RRDC, finding that YTG had done what is required of it by law in terms of its duty to consult. In its latest move in June 2019, RRDC filed a Notice of Appeal, requesting two declarations nevertheless to be granted, one declaration about consultation and accommodation, and another stating that YTG failed to consult and accommodate RRDC in the 2016/2017, 2017/2018, and 2018/2019 hunting seasons. Since the summer of 2018 and the issue of the above notice, RRDC issued other notices, continuing to assert that Yukon hunters must respect Kaska laws and obtain hunting permits from RRDC prior to their hunting trips.

Since issuing their hunting notices, and despite the repeated courtroom losses, RRDC has been working on putting up large information signs in strategic locations on their territory, including in many of the places named on their 2018 hunting notice. These signs include various information about respectful hunting practices as well as traditional Kaska place names, creating an orthographic representation of the Ross River people's claim to the territory. Ahearn reminds us that all communicative practices, whether spoken, written, or embodied are "inextricably embedded in networks of sociocultural relationships" where communication, culture, and society are mutually constituting (2001, p.10). This type of emplacement disrupts the oversimplified, one-directional narrative of the place, providing means of discursively challenging the status quo and claiming the place as Indigenous, as Kaska. The placement of the sign itself, situated in a disputed location, then becomes a vehicle through which RDDC's struggle over their hunting rights is entextualized, inviting a critical reflection by the passersby, disrupting the ordinary, taken-for-granted flow of things. However, this strategic emplacement also generated a much stronger reaction than just a mere reflection by

some. Shortly after the signs were installed in some of the disputed locations, at least one of them was vandalized with spray-paint and had to be removed. To my knowledge, this occurrence was never reported on in the local newspapers, and likewise, no official statements were made neither from RRDC nor YTG addressing this act of vandalism.

4.1 Land Claims Agreements in the Yukon – A Brief Overview

At this point in the discussion, to gain a better understanding of the territorial and federal political context in which the Kaska people exist today, it is imperative to offer some context about the Yukon Territory in terms of modern-day land claim agreements and their implications for the fourteen federally recognized Yukon First Nations.

The history of land claim negotiations is quite recent in the Yukon. Unlike in other parts of Canada, the Canadian government never negotiated any land cession treaties in the Yukon, while at the same time, maintaining a position that Yukon First Nations' people had no legal entitlement to the land, apart from small parcels the government set aside for them. It wasn't until the early 1970s and the subsequent 1973 publication of *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow* (Yukon Native Brotherhood, 1973) that Yukon Indigenous people began a collective effort to assert their rights within the Yukon Territory to negotiate a more just relationship with the Federal Government. This publication, written by Yukon First Nations' people, contained not only a statement of grievances, but also outlined possible approach and pathway towards settlement.

To facilitate negotiations, the government provided funding for Yukon land claims research and the documentation of historic land use, including traditional place names. This was the time the boundaries of traditional territories of the individual First Nations were worked out and ultimately drawn (Cruikshank, 1998; Nadasdy, 2017). The formation of boundaries delineating individual First Nations' territories was needed for the land claims process to proceed. This process led to what Nadasdy calls "the territorialization of resource control" in the Yukon, where Yukon people were required to construct firm political boundaries between themselves and their neighbours, many of whom were relatives. This created an us-versus-them dynamic, which is deeply inconsistent with important cultural values of kinship and reciprocity, guiding the ways in which First Nation social relations are and historically have been structured in the

Yukon. Cruikshank too observed that during the land claims research phase, named places were transformed from sites of historical and often relational significance to authorized boundary markers and that some of these sites that were formally seen as assertions of multilingualism, mobility, and sites of exchange and travel, came to divide people who were formerly connected (1998, p. 20).

Indeed, Moore (2018) examined extensive place name data sets, many of which have been recorded for the purpose of land claims research, in Tlingit and Tagish, both regional languages from southwestern Yukon. Through this work, Moore was able to trace a relatively recent shift from the widespread use of Tagish to the predominance of Tlingit in the region, concluding that place names reflect people's occupancy patterns and, in some cases, can provide important evidence of regional shifts in language use and affiliations. What this work also demonstrates are the complexities associated with place names research and the need for serious contextualization of this type of data to clarify its meaning.

This type of work also challenges the common colonial monoglot-centric views of Indigenous people, connecting a group with one language and a firmly bounded territory. Such views are often expressed in archival records and on contemporary territorial and language maps, for example (Webster & Petersen, 2011). While the boundaries between languages are perhaps purposely left fuzzy, the Council of Yukon First Nations' map of Yukon First Nations' languages (Figure 4) exemplifies a narrow view of the local linguistic landscape that links one people with one language, bounded to a firmly delineated territory.

The Council of Yukon First Nations is a non-profit society whose mandate is to work and politically advocate for the 11 Yukon First Nations with self-government agreements, so it is perhaps not an accident that this language map also corresponds to the territorial boundaries established during the land claims process, although the further subdivision of the language areas into individual First Nations' territories is not visible here. The Kaska area, for example, includes two officially recognized First Nations – Ross River Dena Council in Ross River and Liard First Nation in Watson Lake. The Northern Tutchone area, for example, includes Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation in Carmacks, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation in Mayo, and Selkirk First Nation in

Pelly Crossing. This map avoids the use English place names, providing instead place names, albeit limited, in the regional Indigenous languages. Notably, the map uses English names and western linguistic classification of the languages and by extension of the people, as opposed to using the way people refer to themselves and to their languages in their languages. I suspect that using Indigenous language names and locally based language classifications might reveal a different, more nuanced view of the regional linguistic landscape.
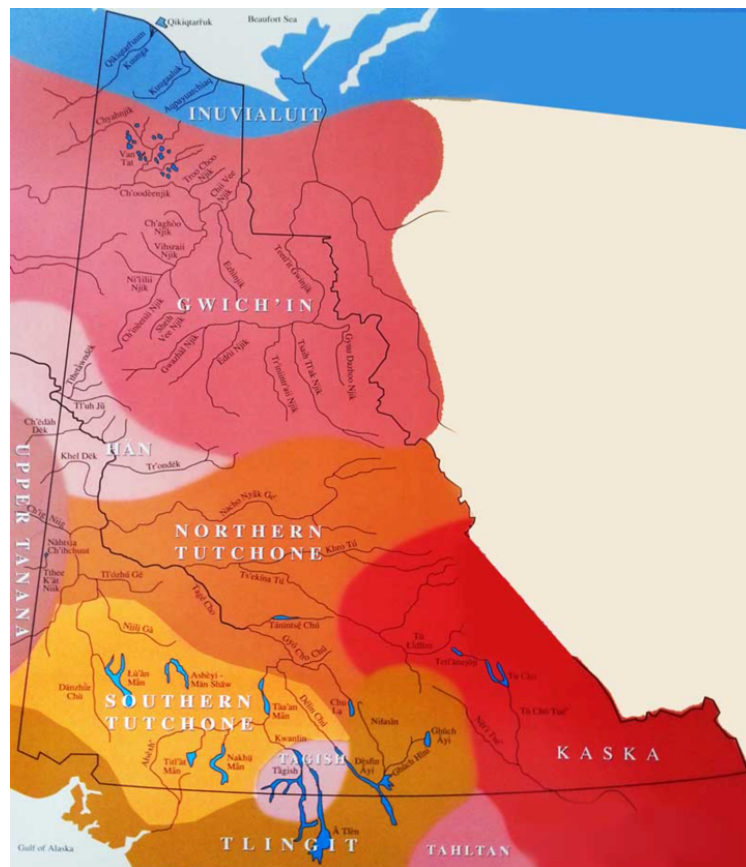

Figure 4. Yukon Indigenous Language Map

Nadasdy (2017) argues that the final agreements had a profound transformative effect on how Yukon Indigenous people can relate to not only to the land and animals in their territories, but also to one another. While undoubtedly the land claims negotiations were rooted in colonial administrative practices, the Yukon internal territorial system it ultimately produced should also be seen as a product of Indigenous resistance to

colonial incorporation, as Nadasdy (2017) also argues. The records and stories collected during the land claims research phase "served to counter the rhetoric of land claims negotiations, which were steeped in Western concepts of property (Nadasdy, 2003), and which placed power (including rights to lands and resources) with the Federal and Territorial Governments" (Moore & Tlen, 2007, p. 269). Carefully examining the materials collected during this phase of the Yukon Land Claims process, Moore and Tlen demonstrated how fluent Dene speakers used various grammatical resources of their languages, such as deictic directionals, for example, to promote and to index cultural knowledge of place. Julie Cruikshank has demonstrated how intercultural public storytelling performances by Yukon Dene elders should be seen as tangible forms of social action, rather than just conveying referential meanings (Cruikshank, 1990, 1997, 2000). Storytellers structure their narratives to convey themes of identity by linking social institutions, land, language, and social history, often working on multiple levels of indexicality and intertextuality, reflecting not only their intimate knowledge of places, but also the background of their diverse audiences and the contexts in which these performances take place.

The collective land claims negotiations went on until the 1990s, ultimately leading to the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) in 1990, some 20 years from the start of the negotiations. The UFA is not a land claim agreement but is meant to be used as a framework or a template for negotiating individual agreements between the Federal Government and each of the fourteen Yukon First Nations recognized by the government. The UFA was signed in 1993; the first four First Nations ratified their land claims agreements in 1995, and the negotiations of the individual claims continued until 2004. However, to date, only eleven of the fourteen First Nations have signed and ratified their agreements and are designated as "self-governing." The other three remaining, White River First Nation, Liard First Nation, and Ross River Dena Council, have not signed any agreements, making the decision to leave the land claims negotiation table. In practice, the result is that in the eyes of the Canadian government, their status remains as Indian Bands, non-self-governing, run under the federal *Indian Act*. This of course has a host of implications in terms of how the First Nations are funded and how they can assert their rights, govern themselves, and negotiate not only with the various governmental agencies, but also with private companies interested in

doing business in their territories. Two of the three First Nations remaining outside of the UFA today – Liard First Nation and Ross River Dena Council – are both Kaska Nations. While the government's duty to consult with the First Nations still stands, these First Nations do not have direct control over their territories, and as far as the government is concerned, they have no official power to issue their own moratoriums on hunting or enforce their own resource laws (Thomson, 2015), for example. For many of the Kaskas, the fact that they have never signed the UFA or any other agreements with the government and therefore never gave up any of their land carries a deep sense of pride and is an important part of Kaska identity. At a recent land-based language and culture camp, I have witnessed an Elder and a Kaska speaker including a basic history lesson of the Yukon land claims negotiations in her language lesson for children as young as 5 years old, highlighting the reasons why the Kaskas never signed, including direct quotations from prominent Kaska Elders, who participated in the process at the time. As far as the Kaskas are concerned, they themselves have the sole responsibility and a right to control what happens to their land. Furthermore, I have heard multiple individuals, including the above mentioned elder, proclaim that the Kaska are and have always been self-governing and don't need the government's blessing, in essence, rejecting what Coulthard (2014) called "the colonial politics of recognition". In the Canadian context, Coulthard argues, colonial relations of power are no longer reproduced primarily through overtly coercive means, but rather through the asymmetrical exchange of mediated forms of state recognition and accommodation (2014, p. 15), which the Kaskas have undeniably rejected by choosing to walk away from the negotiations. Further, multiple people from the community have linked the Kaskas' withdrawal from the land claims negotiations, not surrendering any of their land, with their ability to keep the Kaska language and culture strong. While Kaska language use has been in decline for some time now, it is true that the Kaskas maintain the most speakers, when compared to other Yukon First Nations language communities.

4.2 Placemaking Through Stories

A number of studies in anthropology, geography, and history, have investigated place making and human connections to place, demonstrating the enduring power of landscape as a point of reference for communicating important knowledge. Cruikshank (2005) argues that natural history is intertwined with social and cultural history and that

in fact, for northern Dene people, such as the Kaskas, land and nature are not separate categories from the social world of people, insisting on the entanglement, mutual dependence, and reciprocal relationships between them. Places are never seen as a backdrop to human activities but are an entity to actively engage with and respond to. Landforms may provide a kind of archive, where memories can be mentally stored. Place names and oral narratives of places are embedded in the fabric of communities and articulating them becomes an important tool for accessing these memories and passing them on from one generation to the next. The performances of Indigenous stories, including the public use of Indigenous place names, have the potential to become important sites of ideological struggle between Indigenous communities and the dominant society (Kroskrity, 2012) and clearly have the capacity to intervene in legal struggles over land and hunting rights.

In the process of working and living with the Kaska people, the land has played an integral role in all activities, including activities related to language, which I have been most involved in. I've spent multiple years living in Watson Lake, working with members of the Liard First Nation on documenting and revitalizing the Kaska language. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to spend time with Elders, going out for long drives, boat rides, and walks, seeing the territory, listening to stories about living on the land, and learning about traditional Kaska place names, most of which are not included on any government issued maps. I became acutely aware of the fundamental connections between the people, their land, and their language – I was often reminded that, "The land is who we are, and our language is a part of the land too…". Like Julie Cruikshank's experience, when Elders speak of language, "they speak of land in terms of travel and mobility, frequently constructing life histories as travel narratives" (1998, p. 16). It was easy to fall in love with the beautiful Kaska territory, but it was only when I personally got to know the stories, that I was able to gain a much deeper understanding of the land and the history that dwells there. Visiting places, I was told about by Elders, then took on a whole new meaning – Kaska stories brought the land to life for me and provided a context and a gentle guidance for how to experience it, how to listen to it. These stories highlighted the relationship Kaska people have with their territory and the importance it plays in ensuring Kaska cultural continuity and survival. Elders often lamented that young people in the community don't spend enough time on the land and

as a result don't know it. "If young people would spend more time in the bush, they would know Kaska ways, they would know our land," one Elder told me, highlighting the undeniable linkage between the land and the people.

Basso (1996) argues that place names and narratives of place are deeply connected not only to spatial and environmental knowledge, but also to other cultural spheres, such as conceptions of wisdom, notions of morality, politeness, and sense of history. Taken together, these conceptions comprise the kinds of knowledge required for individuals to not only survive on their land, but also in their society, providing guidance on how one ought to live in the world. Basso further suggests that place names are "pegs" to hang many types of information on and that was my experience in the Kaska country. Some of the stories shared with me, were from times when the Elders were children or young parents; others were 'long ago' stories, always rooted locations or on travel routes these Elders frequented in the past, capturing the expansive knowledge and history of the Kaska people and their land.

Over the years, I have attended multiple so-called "consultation meetings" or "information sessions" between the Kaska people and various experts from the government and private sectors. These meetings all concerned the planning and approval of activities on Kaska land, such as mining, road construction, hunting and trapping, and most recently, geological mapping. During these meetings, I've witnessed Kaska people's unwavering assertion of their authority over *Dene Kēyeh* – People's Land – Kaska Land. While the industry experts were invested in presenting their flashy PowerPoints, graphs, charts, and maps, the meeting eventually always ended up being "taken over" by the Elders, who began recalling particularly relevant stories and histories rooted in the location in question, directly quoting long-gone ancestors warning of the encroachments of non-Kaskas on their land, often leaving the presenters speechless, unable to respond beyond repeating their prepared talking points, unsure how to connect the stories they were being told with their proposed projects. These moments of discursive "disruptions" uncovered stark ontological divides that were impossible to ignore. One particularly memorable moment occurred at an information session organized by YTG in 2017, with a group of YTG geologists, hoping to embark on a summer mapping project of *Tū Chō*, or Frances Lake as it is called on Yukon maps, a particularly important area for Kaskas. A respected Kaska Elder with strong ties

to the area around *Tū Chō* took the floor, and calmly began explaining her family's history in relation to the area, the numerous camp and village sites, as well as the many grave sites located there. She also explained that the area was sacred to all Kaska people.

While the geologists kept repeating that the purpose of the proposed mapping project was purely scientific, only intended to add to the knowledge base of the Yukon's geology, it wasn't lost on the Elder or anyone else in the room that the information collected during such projects would eventually become valuable and publicly available information and would undoubtedly prompt future resource exploration activities in the area, potentially leading to future mining projects. Stories of significant gold deposits in the *Tū Chō* area have circulated in the community for decades, prompting deep concerns over the protection of the area from exploitation by the outsiders. One of the younger geologists, visibly trying to come up with a compromise, asked, pointing to the large map of *Tū Chō* hanging on the wall: "You say this area is sacred", running his finger along the edges of the lake, "but what about this area over here, a little further away from the lake, would it be acceptable to map there?" To this the Elder calmly, but resolutely answered: "*Tū Chō* … it is all sacred."

4.3 The Naming of Places

For the Kaskas, individual's knowledge of a place is shaped by their personal or family experience on the land. Given the vastness of the Kaska territory, an individual growing up primarily in the southern portion of the territory, for example, would mostly be familiar with the area they and their family traditionally used and travelled through, and would be unfamiliar with other parts of the territory outside of their family seasonal rounds. The knowledge about Kaska traditional territory, including place names, is therefore held collectively by many, as opposed to anyone one single individual having authority to speak holistically about it. Even the most knowledgeable Elders know only a subset of the total inventory of Kaska place names and would often defer to others for areas outside of their own lived experience and family ties. Therefore, work on Kaska place name inventories, for example, requires the contributions from many different people with ties to and knowledge of many different places. Additionally, to gather adequate context which is the key for fully understanding the place names, often requires individuals with a variety of life experiences and societal roles.

In his work on Tlingit place names, Thomas Thornton notes that "even without problems of cultural erasure, language loss, and colonial renaming, aboriginal place-names are fragile linguistic artifacts" (2008, p. 72), because detailed geographic information about locations may be restricted to only those individuals who have material or social ties to them. Thornton's observations are relevant in the Kaska context as well. While discussing the places mentioned on the RRDC hunting notice with fluent Kaska speakers in the community, I was curious about the translations of these place names and what the place names reveal about the places themselves. One of the Elders was able to comfortably translate the place names on the notice, partly because she was personally familiar with most of them through her travels as a child and as a young woman, and partly through stories she had heard from others throughout her life. However, for some of the places, she also noted that I should ask others, because she doesn't know the stories. Another Elder and a fluent speaker struggled with translating many of the names. She explained that she has never been to the area and has never heard some of the placenames before. She was often able to provide a jest of what the placename was capturing but didn't feel comfortable providing the exact translation or meaning behind the placename. For example, for *Egha Da Oli* ("Hair floating on the water"), she knew the name involved something floating, but couldn't quite provide more details than that, deferring to the other Elder's knowledge instead. The other Elder provided more detailed information, recalling that the area around *Egha Da Oli* is known for being rich in moose population and because of this abundance, one could find moose hair floating on the surface of the lake.

As mentioned previously, written forms of Kaska, especially on public display, always run the risk of orthographic scrutiny from others. While the majority of Kaskas are literate in English, very few are literate in the standard YNLC orthographic representations of the Kaska language, resulting in a widespread insecurity around writing the language. This, however, doesn't prevent many individuals from expressing their views on the matter. Whether it is over if Kaska should be written at all, if it should be written "the way it sounds," using English spelling or if the standard YNLC orthography should be used, written Kaska is at times contested. Each critique is associated with its own ideology, reflecting people's educational training histories and associations with or resistance to the institutionalization and standardization of the

Kaska language. While some see writing as a useful tool for language learning in terms one's ability to take accurate notes or in creating various language learning materials, writing has undoubtedly also been used as a tool of symbolic representation of the Kaskas in public places to contest the prominence of English and French. The publication of the RRDC hunting notice is only one such example, among many different and strategic uses of Kaska text. I discuss the use of Kaska orthography in more detail in chapters 3 and 5, where I argue that the Kaskas have been using writing as a part of their innovative language practices and as such, ideologies associated with orthographic representations of the Kaska language have been shifting. These shifts result in favoring the use of the standardized writing system in many different contexts, including the politically charged ones, over the metediscursively expressed ideas of language purism where writing is seen as undesirable or even as an obstacle in language acquisition by some. I am frequently asked to help with spelling of various words and phrases to be used in brochures, handouts, public signs, as well as web-based materials, and print designs for clothing. The orthography used on the RRDC notice doesn't follow the standard YNLC orthography, but neither it is entirely written "the way it sounds," since it uses various diacritics and features of the standard orthography. While my training has been in using the standard orthography, for the purpose of the discussion here, I kept the original notice's text, instead of "correcting" it to reflect the standard.

4.3.1 Kaska Naming of Places

In the Kaska context, geographic knowledge and perception of the land is generally organized through travel routes along the many rivers and lakes in the Kaska territory, connecting and converging at key sites rich in resources, animal or plant, or places which serve as access points for larger hunting areas (Johnson, 2010, p. 98). Examining a relatively limited corpus of Kaska place names, Johnson notes that many of the Kaska place names collected capture the names of lakes and drainage systems, unless these lack fish or are remote from travel routes or sources of harvest. Mountains and ridges appear to be less frequently named and when they are named, might have "considerable regional or cosmological importance" (2010, p. 161). One such example is a mountain located on the East Arm of Frances Lake, which is considered sacred because of a spiritually significant event that had happened there and that had given

the mountain its name. Johnson also found that from the sample she had available, Kaska place names most often include a referent to animals, fish, birds, and animal and fish habitats (2010, p. 163), recognizing places and their significance based on people's intimate knowledge of and connections to animals on which survival is dependent.

Following Johnson's classifications, the place names used on the RRDC notice can be classified in following categories:

Names depicting a feature or a characteristic of a place

Takadení'a (Rock / mountain sticking out of water) – Sheldon Mountain

Tse Leda ("Burned rock" – volcanic rock) – 41 Mountain

Tsē zul ("Rocks on the bottom" / a large scree field at the base of the mountain) – Mt. Mye

Tuetset'I ("Water stretched out" / a long narrow lake) – Dragon Lake

Tu Desdes – ("Clear water") – Pelly Lakes

Names depicting a resource or a habitat

Egha Da Oli ("Hair floating on the water") – Blind Lake

The area around *Egha Da Oli* is known for being rich in moose population and because of this abundance, one could find moose hair floating on the surface of the lake. The fact that this particular location is on the list of places RRDC is compelled to protect from hunters suggests that the moose population in this area has declined to a point where the Kaska place name might no longer reflect the reality on the ground. In this way, the Kaska place name stands as a powerful testament to dramatic changes happening in RRDC' territory and their consequences for the local population.

Łegaenjoji – ("they chase into it") – Finlayson Lake

Not only does this place name reflect habitat, in this case caribou, but also attests to a long history of Kaska activities in the area. This name refers to a place where old caribou fences used for hunting long time ago used to be. These fences are no longer there, and have not been in any living person's memory, but the name and stories

remain. This place name and the long tradition of Kaska caribou hunting history in the area has recently been invoked in community discussions as a piece of evidence in advocating against a proposed mining project near Finlayson Lake, which, if approved, would undoubtably have a devastating effect on the Finlayson Caribou Herd (Barichello & Charlie, 2022; Dick, 2021).

Place names capturing historical occupancy patterns and contact zones

Shutā Dene Kō ("Slavey people's home") – Sheldon Lake

Łūbeh ("Fish swimming") – Keele Peak

Place names reflect people's occupancy patterns as well as, in some cases, contact and interaction with other groups, which, as Moore (2018) demonstrated, can provide important evidence of regional historical linguistic shifts in language use. In this sample of place names, *Shutā Dene Kō* ("Slavey people's home") – Sheldon Lake and *Łūbeh* ("Fish swimming") – Keele Peak – which as the Elder suggested is a word that comes from Slavey and therefore likely signals contact and overlap in occupancy or land usage with the neighbouring Slavey groups. Additionally, of note is a common pattern of naming rivers for the headwater lakes from which they flow. *Takadení'a Tue* – ("Rock (mountain) sticking out of water river") – the headwater lake from which Ross River flows is located at the base of *Takadení'a* **–** (Rock / mountain sticking out of water) – Sheldon Mountain. Similarly, *Tu Desdes Tue* – ("Clear water river") - Pelly River flows out of *Tu Desdes* – ("Clear water") – Pelly Lakes

4.4 Conclusion

The naming of a place and the placing of names is a powerful act, and clearly, the power of this act is not lost on the people of Ross River, who have chosen to strategically use the Kaska language to index both their historical use and occupancy of their traditional territory as well as their contemporary rights and responsibilities to the land. At the core of this chapter lie Kaska people's struggles over knowledge, meaning, and responsibility for the stewardship of their traditional lands. In opposition are fundamentally different claims, articulated by wildlife management officers and other private and governmental agencies, exercising institutional control over the same lands. I have demonstrated that even on such fundamentally politically uneven grounds where the Canadian nation state is able to wield instruments of legitimacy and institutional

power that are categorically denied to the Kaskas, the Kaskas are able to mobilize other resources and instruments of power uniquely and exclusively available to them, namely their language and traditional knowledge. In the context where the Kaskas, just as other Indigenous people in Canada and elsewhere, strive to assert their rights within the context of the settler state, the use of Indigenous languages has become a powerful and compelling tool, capable to taking on these politically asymmetrical conflicts. Indigenous languages can and are routinely mobilized as tools in Indigenous struggles not only over the control of traditional lands, but also fight for the preservation and cultural continuity. I explored some of the strategies through which the Ross River Kaskas articulated and asserted their rights. I discussed instances in which the Kaskas chose to draw on a system of Indigenous linguistic and semiotic resources to publicly and strategically employ the Kaska language to not only contest colonial naming practices, but also categorically deny their legitimacy, and assert their right to manage activities on their traditional territory according to *Dena A' Nīzīn* - Dene laws. Coulthard eloquently argues that "Indigenous struggles against capitalist imperialism are best understood as struggle oriented around the question of land – struggles not only for land, but also deeply informed by land as a mode of reciprocal relationship" (2014, p. 60). Kaska place names embody Kaska historical, ecological, and cultural knowledge, and highlight Kaska people's connections to the territory. Place names and narratives associated with these places continue to guide and inform the way Kaska people relate to the land and everything on it, including fulfilling their responsibilities to care for their homeland for generations to come.

Finally, to conclude, the following are two excerpts from the most recent publication of Yukon First Nations Welcome Guide (*The Guide to Yukon First Nations*, 2018), published by the Yukon First Nations Culture & Tourism Association, a non-profit organization whose mandate is to foster and promote the Yukon First Nations arts, culture, and tourism sectors. This publication is available online as well as for free in Visitors Centres across the Yukon. The explicit focus of this publication is on highlighting the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of Yukon First Nations and encourage another dimension through which a visitor can enhance their travel experience. The publication features a two-page spread profiles of each of the 14 Yukon First Nations communities. I was a part of putting together the two-page profile

spread for Liard First Nation, where in collaboration with Kaska Elders and members of the community, I was asked to write a brief introduction to the Watson Lake area, focusing on the Kaska culture and history. Figure 5 is an excerpt from the Liard First Nation's profile, where Elder Leda Jules chose to speak about her grandmother and her grandmother's stories, which she carries forward to pass onto the younger generations. She encourages the visitors to see the land through her grandmother's eyes. The importance of the land and names of places are highlighted. "My grandmother travelled all over our land and knew everything on our land by name."

Figure 5. Liard First Nation Community Profile

Figure 6 is an excerpt from the Ross River Dena Council's community profile. The explicit focus on setting the record straight and returning to traditional Kaska place names is striking and telling – "we are returning to our Dena language names as quickly

as possible to ensure they survive with all their vibrancy for our children and those yet to come." For the Kaskas, place names have power and are indicative of the ways of knowing and understanding places. Regardless of the powerful forces behind the project of colonial renaming of Indigenous landscapes, the connections between places and its people are durable, not easily broken or erased.

THE PEOPLE of *Tu Łidlini* – which means "where the river meets and people gather" – welcome you to this place we call home, where the Pelly and Ross rivers meet. Our people gathered here for thousands of years and we still do today. Both English river names hearken back to fur trade days when newcomers replaced some of our Dena names with English ones to honour far distant Hudson's Bay Company men. We are returning to our Dena language names as quickly as possible to ensure they survive with all their vibrancy for our children and those yet to come.

As Kaska Dena or *Denek'éh* – Dena means people – we are part of the larger group of the Kaska Nation

We are returning to our Dena language names as quickly as possible

living in southeast Yukon and northern B.C. We often designate groups by the landscape features

in their areas. Though we have community-based governments in B.C. and Yukon, we consider ourselves one Kaska Nation.

Led by our Elders, we retain a strong sense of our traditional spirituality. We fish, hunt and learn from the land as our ancestors have before us. Drumming is the heartbeat of our nation, uniting people in prayer and song as we build toward a new and better future for ourselves as independent self-reliant people in control of our destiny.

Come and meet us at *Tu Łidlini*.

rrdc.ca

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Figure 6. Ross River Dena Council Community Profile

Chapter 5

Language Innovations, Semantic Shifts, and "All the Trails We Have Yet to Go On…"

During a Kaska language classroom activity in the Watson Lake Secondary School, the Grade 9 students were working on their final project for the year. The task was for each student to design and draw a page for a Kaska language booklet that would help learners with their language study – something simple and visually engaging that could be shared with the local elementary school students, for example. Collectively, we came up with an idea to combine various nouns with numbers, colors, and the verb "to see". If these drawings turned out well and if we still had time in the school year, we planned to digitize the pages, scanning the pictures and adding audio to them, creating short flashcard videos. In addition, we discussed recording the students themselves saying their short sentences, making this an opportunity for the voices of the young language learners in the community to be heard and to encourage others to learn.

The goal of this activity was not only to practice language skills, create materials, and perhaps learn some basic and practical skills related to language documentation and material development, but also to increase the students' interactions with the Kaska Elder working in the classroom – the students were encouraged to choose words they didn't not know already and elicit them from the Elder. The students seemed excited about this and started coming up with words they wanted to include. One student made a quick outline of his page: He drew a large apple tree with seven apples in it. The sentence he wanted to include was "I see one green apple tree with seven red apples in it." The Kaska language teacher complimented his drawing, but immediately said that this might not be the best sentence, because there was no Kaska word for apples or apple trees. The Elder agreed and noted that sometimes people used *"dzídze chō"* (big berry) for apples. The student paused for a second and then asked, "but how do we know the difference when people use *"dzídze chō"* to talk about apples and when they use it to talk about big berries? That's confusing", he said. Another student wanted to draw an elf and asked how to say it in Kaska. The Elder wasn't sure what an elf even was, much less to suggest a word for it, so the teacher stepped in and suggested that

perhaps *"dene zǫ́ze"* (small people), could be used instead. But the student was not satisfied, she didn't want to talk about "small people", she wanted to talk about elves! Another student wanted to know the word for a quad, and another the word for silver. In the process of figuring out what to draw, nearly every student ran into some sort of challenge along these lines. In the end, students chose vocabulary they either knew already, or vocabulary they guessed would not be difficult to come up with in Kaska. They drew fish, frogs, knives, birds, and lynx, added basic colors such as blue, red, black, and brown.

While there are many reasons to be satisfied with the students' engagement in this activity, they stayed on task, they worked productively with the teacher and the Elder, I couldn't help but think about what the students' takeaway was from this exercise – there are a lot of things one cannot say in Kaska, and Kaska language translations seem at best ambiguous and at worst imprecise and inaccurate. It would certainly explain their final choices of the more "traditional" words and domains for their booklets.

In this chapter, I reflect the widespread issue of lexical and language domain gaps in Indigenous languages and provide some examples of Kaska language innovations and adaptations as an emergent practice among speakers and learners to respond to the changing social realities of their daily life. I suggest that despite some of the metadiscursive practices fundamentally rooted in conservative ideologies of language purism, careful attention to some of the historical documentation records and more importantly, attention to the contemporary Kaska speakers' everyday communicative practices, reveals that language innovating is and has been widespread, and in many cases, going well beyond the lexical level. Commonplace, everyday linguistic exchanges illustrate Kaska speakers' creativity and ability to attend to the contemporary situations they find themselves in without difficulty. It reveals speakers' complex and multilevel strategies to reconceptualize and claim largely Euro-Canadian domains as Kaska. The vignette above illustrates that dealing with the so-called "lexical gaps" is a common issue for even the most basic of tasks in a classroom context, and certainly for the contemporary everyday lives of learners and speakers. There are ample examples of various lexical innovations in most daily interactions today, some of which I will discuss later in this chapter. Additionally, I will demonstrate some conceptual and system-wide innovating, which goes well beyond the most visible and noticeable lexical

level. My point is that while ideologies of purism and various misconceptions about Kaska's ability to innovate are undoubtedly widespread and have consequences, there is an equally widespread ideology among fluent speakers, which favors adaptability and innovation over ideologies of purism. This, I argue, might prove vital to the Kaska language revitalization efforts going forward and should be a cause for optimism.

Metadiscursive practices such as those in the classroom activity described above frequently coincide with other practices (Meek, 2007; Nevins, 2004). This activity invited a certain amount of language scrutiny and unintentional negative evaluation, since it resulted in highlighting Kaska "deficiencies" and placing the language in opposition to English, which in the eyes of the teens, is elegantly and with ease able to attend to everything in their daily lives. The irony is, of course, that English famously borrows heavily from other languages, including many Indigenous languages. Yet, innovations and borrowings in Indigenous languages, such as Kaska, are scrutinized and treated differently, indexing deficiencies instead of adaptability and opportunities for creativity. As Anthony Webster points out, such negative evaluations are a part of a long-standing history of the dominant society's treatment of Indigenous languages as deficient and targeting them for suppression and/or eradication (2015). In some cases, these negative attitudes might also be internalized western notions of correct and incorrect grammar. These moments also become occasions for scaling of fluency and an opportunity for aligning linguistic difference with social difference (Meek, 2014). These very locally contextualized moments are of course, a part of a much more widespread and ongoing marginalization of First Nation languages, especially in relation to English. Additionally, these moments are indicative of the kind of disjunctures Meek (2010) highlighted, where an activity that was meant to promote and rejuvenate Indigenous language use led to negative evaluation of the language.

Most of the materials and lessons available for studying Kaska reinforce the idea that the language is most suited for the bush – focusing more on traditional activities, domains, and topics and less on contemporary or more urban contexts. Figure 7 below provides a representative sample of a booklet, created by a local Kaska teacher in collaboration with the Yukon Native Language Centre (YNLC) in Whitehorse, as a part of her teacher's training. The illustrated booklet is one of many similar sets available at YNLC, which serve as a template into which any language teacher in the Yukon can

insert their own text in their own language. These booklets clearly exhibit an overt, printed representations of ideologies of language purism (Kroskrity, 1993, 2012), placing the Kaska language in contexts and domains meant to represent a particular view of what a traditional Yukon's First Nations' way of life looks like, while creating little or no opportunity for the language to exist in other, non-bush contexts, such as the store, school, or a sports field, reflecting today's youth's daily realities and less traditional interests.

However, upon a more detailed examination, one notices that while the domain of "going to the bush" has the potential to capture this imagined traditional way of life, somewhat contrived by the illustrations, the story itself covertly represents English concepts, both in the story's plot and the language constructions used in the story. For more extensive discussion on this topic see Meek & Messing (2008).

Figure 7. An example of Yukon Native Language Centre's illustrated Kaska language booklet

Similarly, a University of British Columbia undergraduate student, who is Kaska, shared with me that she took Kaska at the local school in the Yukon, where she grew up, and that she knows a lot of words and phrases having to do with the bush and hunting, but since she doesn't really go out to the bush hunting all that often, especially now, after she has relocated to Vancouver, she was not really sure how to talk in Kaska about things around town or just everyday things around the house. While she appreciated what she had learned so far, she recognized the limited applicability of her language skills on daily basis and wished she could use her language in Vancouver more. She wondered aloud whether it was even possible to attend to everything in her life in Vancouver in Kaska.

In all instances, the underlying message for the learner might be that Kaska perhaps is not really suitable for their contemporary realities and that there is not much to do about that. While the grade 9 students' initial inclination was to venture outside of the more traditional domains, into topics relevant or at least common in their daily lives, they were subsequently discouraged from taking that route and were led back to the more traditional domains for which, words and phrases could be safely and reliably elicited from the Elder. The above-mentioned university student expressed her doubts about how practical the Kaska language is in her daily life in Vancouver, concluding that she was looking forward to her next Yukon visit so she can speak to her relatives in her language.

The type of labour that goes into language innovative practices is often complex and requires more thought and sophisticated language skills than one might initially expect, and certainly, more than most beginner and even intermediate learners can easily handle on their own. As a result, learners generally look to fluent speakers for their creativity and ingenuity to fill lexical gaps and to deal with emerging domains of language use. As Leighton Peterson and Anthony Webster argue, these innovative practices have broader implications for understanding linguistic vitality and agency, indexical of "an unexpected vitality in the face of rapidly shifting linguistic ideologies and practices" (2005, p. 95). I believe Kaska contemporary innovative practices are a continuation of historic innovative and adaptive practices and are demonstrative of ongoing linguistic vitality, in spite of the rapid changes in the Yukon's linguistic landscape as whole.

Jane Hill encourages us to attend to moments when speakers of minority languages "convert the subordination of their community into an unfavorable evaluation of the language" (1993, p. 83), arguing that the evaluation of the language by its speakers, not outsiders, is the pivotal locus of reproductive practice in the new restricted domain to which the substratum retreats. The teacher's comment "we don't have words for that" perpetuates the idea of the Kaska language as outdated, possibly incapable of adapting to new circumstances, and certainly, not always appropriate for contemporary contexts. Unsurprisingly, similar rhetoric was used to justify Canadian government policies geared towards Indigenous people, including actively and aggressively devaluing Indigenous languages and ways of life. The old ways were no longer suitable for modern times, and if people were to properly function in the Euro-Canadian society, they needed to be "modernized", "civilized", and assimilated, giving up on their cultures and languages.

As I have already indicated, the work of language innovating engages, unsurprisingly and crucially, a range of language ideologies – the beliefs and feelings about languages and their social worlds (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 498). Language politics and ideologies of language are powerful forces behind the determination whether to "modernize" (Hinton, 2011) and to what extent. Kaska, just as any other language is perfectly capable of adapting to new circumstances and in fact, it regularly does so, despite the perception of some, most of whom are not fluent speakers. Among the older, Kaska-dominant speakers I have worked with, the common answer to my question about how they would go about saying something contemporary or abstract in *Dene k'éh* (Kaska) often resulted in a standard answer – "that's a white man's way, Kaska didn't have that." While these older people seemed at times hesitant about coining new terms, or simply unsure what certain new things are and what they do, they too usually found a way to deal with these gaps as they arose, by either inventing a new word on the spot, or without hesitation, mid-speech, code-switching into English, while still maintaining the grammatical integrity of their utterance, as yet another perfectly acceptable solution.

A bit more challenging however, was eliciting more abstract concepts and certain new genres from these older, Kaska dominant speakers. For example, a few years back at the local secondary school, we were asked to work with Kaska Elder Mida

Donnessey on translating the slogan "Find your passion" into Kaska. This slogan was used for the Yukon Rural Experiential Model (REM) program designed to connect Yukon high school students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with local First Nation heritage through experiential learning on the land. That year's REM was hosted on the Kaska traditional territory by the Watson Lake Secondary School. The concept of finding and following one's passion was quite foreign to the Kaska-dominant Elder, who was in her 90s, but in the end, with a bit of experimentation, she came up with the phrase "*Yē łǫ́né yēʼínłā nanzanā kehdįhī*" (Learn what you (plural persons) really want to do), which was eventually put on a poster and used to promote the REM program in the Kaska language (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Posters for Rural Experiential Model (REM) Program

At the same time, from my experience, most speakers, especially those who attended residential schools, do not object to the idea of coming up with new words. In fact, there are many speakers in the community who engage in the creation of new terms and expressions quite willingly and playfully, resulting in creations that bring smiles or even laughter to others, who can appreciate the humour and creativity. While for larger languages and programs, the process of language innovation is sometimes formalized, such as the establishment of the Hawaiian Lexicon Committee or the Alutiq New Words Council (Kimura & Counceller, 2009), for example, in smaller communities, this work is more often done informally, on a grassroot level by individual speakers, teachers, and learners, seeking to coin new terms to address lexical and genre gaps as they encounter them. As such, the practice of creating new terminology is informal, strongly context-dependent, and often fleeting, reflective of individual creativity and their linguistic ideology. This informal, individual approach to the creation of neologisms

makes widespread circulation and uptake of new terms relatively challenging, even in a small community. However, with the availability of new technologies and the widespread use of social media platforms, circulating neologisms has become easier.

Recently, an Elder visited our office and upon seeing a number of us busily working on our computers, he chuckled and then asked: "Do you know the word for a computer in Kaska? *Bēzenē dedezidzī,"* he said with laughter. "It means metal that thinks." Everyone laughed, and it prompted a number of us to get our phones out and record this word, so we could learn it. In addition, we used this recording later on to make a "word of the day" post on our Kaska Learners Facebook page. I started this page as a fun side project to go along with our Kaska "talking" dictionary work in 2014, and it has gradually evolved into the non-official Facebook page for the Liard First Nation Language Department, where, besides making "word of the day" posts, we advertise our classes and events, post articles related to Indigenous languages that might be of interest to the community, and advertise language-related employment opportunities. I discuss the use of Facebook to promote the Kaska language in more detail in chapter 6. With nearly 1000 followers, the Facebook platform offers a possibility of a much wider circulation and uptake almost instantly, travelling well beyond the boundaries of our small community, well beyond the confines of the Kaska territory.

At some point later, I was recording Kaska words for contemporary items such as phone, radio, and television with a different Elder speaker. When I asked her how she would go about the word computer, she suggested dene *meyéh gḗgūnegedzī* - literally "people write with it," but then she paused, perhaps because that is a word also used for a pen, adding that computers do more than just write, so that this word is not very good. She wanted to think about it some more. After I shared with her the word the other Elder had provided earlier, she began to laugh, visibly delighted by his creativity. She added, "that's really good, I never thought about it like that," reinforcing the idea that creating new words is not only necessary, but also fun and completely natural for Kaska speakers. Interestingly, Petersen and Webster also documented *béésh t'áá bí nídii nitsékeesígíí* - literally "machine that thinks on its own" – as a term for computer in Navajo (2005, p. 103), a southern member of the large Dene language family. They also note the semantic shifting of the word *"béésh"* which overtime has shifted from meaning "flint" to "metal" to "knife", and most recently, "machine." Similar pattern of shift

has occurred in Kaska as well, since the word for metal, tin, and now also a machine is *bēzenē* and the word for knife is *bēs.*

Another example of semantic shifting resulting from intercultural contact and the introduction of new technology was documented by Keith Basso (1990). Basso provided examples of how anatomical terms for human body semantically shifted into terms for motorized vehicle parts in Western Apache. For example, the word for a "human shoulder" *"biwos"* shifted to mean "front fender" of a vehicle and the word for "stomach" *"bibid"* became the term for a vehicle's "gas tank" (1990, p. 17). While this shift did not occur in Kaska, likely because when motorized vehicle became commonly used among the Kaskas, English was already widely spread, Patrick Moore has observed similar patterns of naming car parts after human body parts in Slavey (P. Moore, personal communication, 2015).

Humour, often heteroglossic, is a frequent feature of many of the Kaska innovations speakers shared. For example, a word for banana *mốgī diế'* as well as for hot dog *tlī' tīhkóné'*. Both terms sound funny not only to bilingual speakers, but also to beginner learners, because they contain very basic, familiar words. In the first case *mốgī* is the English word "monkey" phonologically assimilated into Kaska plus the Kaska word for "someone's food", *diế'* resulting in a playful word for banana meaning "monkey food". The other is a literal translation of the words "dog" and "hot", a compound, which, as one of the learners in our class remarked, "sounds a lot funnier in Kaska than English." Peterson and Webster remind us that rather than seeing new phrases as just words for things or indexical adaptations or acculturation, "we need to understand them as ways of creating common sociality through agency, humour, and speech play that reflect and renew the linguistic forms and ideologies that inform such practice" (2005, p. 95).

Another interesting innovation is the word *elemé' diế',* which is used to mean either "rice" or is used as a general term for "Chinese food." An Elder explained the etymology of this term to me as a product of contact of a particular kind. When the Kaskas encountered Chinese workers, who came north as a part of a large wave of foreign workers seeking employment first in the gold fields, and later on the highway or railroad construction projects, the Kaskas found it really challenging to communicate with them.

It is reasonable to assume that at this time, both the Kaskas as well as the Chinese newcomers struggled with English yet, they were certainly committed to communication. It is also reasonable to assume that they might have taught each other words from their respective languages; however, I have yet to encounter any borrowings in Kaska that might have come from Chinese. According to this Elder, when taught Kaska, most of what the Chinese workers could retain and use reliably were just simple words. One of such word was *emé'* "no", which they used prolifically whenever they didn't understand something. Diế', as I have mentioned above, means "someone's food." Loosely, this translates to "a-person-who-says-no's food" On occasions, whenever I have used *elemé' diế'* with fluent speakers, as in *elemé' diế' yenlīn-am?* – (do you want rice?), they always find it humourous and almost always ask if I am familiar with the etymology. This example clearly indicates that *elemé' diế'* is not just a word for rice or Chinese food, it is also a word that evokes a sense of common sociality, shared history, and contact humour, capturing a specific relational narrative in a particular point in time when the Kaskas came in contact with Chinese migrant workers.

While one might get initially seduced into thinking that Kaska innovations are a relatively recent phenomenon, there is substantial evidence of various innovations and adaptations, including relatively recent language borrowing from English and French, as well as older borrowings from neighbouring languages such as Tlingit and trade languages such as the Chinook Jargon (Moore, 1997), now fully incorporated into daily use. Tracing the history and contexts in which these linguistic adaptations came into use among the Kaskas similarly reveals a long history of contact and successful social and linguistic responses to the changing sociocultural landscapes. It also sheds a light on the various functions of the interactions between the groups in contact. In the case of *elemé' diế'*, it represents not only the Kaska's contact with Chinese migrant workers, but it might also represent the introduction of rice into the Kaska diet. Similarly, a recording session with a Kaska-dominat speaker of the Lower Liard dialect revealed a set of vocabulary items for introduced foods, such as turnip *datsǭ,* carrots *at'ōchō*, and cabbage *dehbốl,* words entirely absent in other, more northernly dialects of Kaska. This might suggest the southern Kaska's much earlier contact interactions with outsiders, prior to gaining a more widespread fluency in English. This contact also resulted in

substantial alterations to their lifestyle and diets, shifting towards more intensive cultivation to supplement hunting, fishing, and foraging.

Similarly, the Kaska word for a gun, *űnē* is a lexical borrowing from the neighbouring Tlingit, attesting to the fact that guns were introduced to the Kaska territory by Tlingit traders, who brought imported European goods from the coast to the interior people, prior to the establishment of regional Hudson's Bay Company trading posts at Lower Post or Frances Lake. In his study of loanwords and contact-induced phonological change in Lachixío Zapotec, Sicoli (2000) argues that a systematic study of loanwords in their historical contexts provides an opportunity for a study of sociocultural change with a linguistic foundation. Similarly, Moore (2007) traced changes in Dene Tha and Kaska personal naming systems, revealing fascinating history of contact and influence, including the evolution of Indigenous language ideologies. In short, Kaska innovating is hardly a new phenomenon, instead, similar to what Peterson & Webster (2013) found in Navajo, it reflects a continuity in the context of language change and shift.

To illustrate this continuity, the following are examples of some of the older innovations in Kaska that have been assimilated to such a degree that many of them are thought of as Kaska (Dene) words, not as innovations or borrowings at all. Such words include the pan-northern-Dene *mahsi* sometimes spelled *masi,* or *massi,* which is the Chinook adaptation of the French word *merci* (thank you); Kaska *ledî'* (tea) phonologically assimilated from the French word *le thé*, also *gúndắn* (horse) a Chinook word likely introduced into Kaska through neighbouring Tlingit; some Tlingit loanwords include *yākāút* (button), *k'úts* (potatoes), *ētl* (salt); English loanwords which have been phonologically assimilated into Kaska such as *got* (coat) and *espắne'* (my partner – the Kaska prefix *es-* marks the first person possessive); and Kaska descriptive innovations such as *dene kegehdĮ kǭ̄ą̄* (people learn house - school), *k'űk négelehī kǭ̄ą̄* (people send paper house – post office), for example.

Heteroglossic practices such as codemixing and borrowings are also common, even among the most fluent speakers (Moore, 2018; Meek, 2010, 2014). While Meek demonstrated how codeswitching often becomes a marginalized practice, especially in an institutionalized, regimented setting such as traditional knowledge and language

revitalization workshops, she encouraged us to examine the creative and esthetic details of such performances. Such details, she argues, have the potential for speakers to evoke sense of comfort and memory, signaling a deep history re-experienced through linguistic practices (2014, p. 74). Rethinking bilingualism, using Bakhtinian concept of simultaneity in language, Woolard argues that a speaker utilizing two language forms should not be analysed as merely wavering between two mutually exclusive possibilities, but instead, should be analysed as a real simultaneity of contrasting elements in tension, including hybridity and code mixing where there are two of more linguistic consciousnesses within a single concrete utterance - speakers don't necessarily select between contrasting elements, but rather, can thrive in their tense intersections (1998, p. 4).

In his analysis of Kaska narrative performances Moore argued that while codeswitching in these performances might at first glance be devalued by some as "less pure" or perhaps "less fluent", such code switches enhance for example, the speakers' authority as prominent Kaska men, indexing their mastery of both Kaska and English, as well as their ability to assume and hold prestigious positions with prominent white men entering the Kaska territory. "Kaska narrators' language switches represent creative innovations that enhance their stories, while they also make use of Kaska lived realities to assert a strongly Indigenous identity" (2018, p. 47). These switches can also be understood as linguistic and political interventions, facilitating the speakers' ability to make sophisticated political commentary on their contemporary realities. For example, Moore points to the storytellers' use of English place names as an index of the contact zones where Indigenous men trapped, travelled, and traded with English speakers (2018, p. 46).

At the same time, I believe, this shift can also be read as an intrusion and imposition of Euro-Canadian mapping and place naming practices and the Kaska men's strategic adoption of these non-indigenous topographic traditions, including the associated geographical nomenclature. This adoption certainly proved useful, especially in the Euro-Canadian contexts these men found themselves operating in. As Monica Heller reminds us, broader context-situated examination of code-switching has the potential to shed a light on language politics and the understanding of language as a symbolic resource. "Code switching is one way in which it is possible to manipulate

valuable resources, and indeed to manipulate the definition of their value" (2007, p. 169). I have illustrated in chapter 4, for example, how Kaska speakers now strategically mobilize their bilingual skills to their advantage in politically charges disputes over land and control of their resources. In this context, the utilization of Kaska language becomes a highly valuable tool with which it is possible to lay claims to their traditional territory and to exert political power in a way only the Kaskas can.

This type of linguistic mobilization as well as Moore's examples are further indicative of a broader Kaska ideology associated with multilingualism as an adaptive strategy, and the relative weakness or perhaps a lack of ideologies of purism, emblematization (Kroskrity, 2018), or iconization (Irvine & Gal, 2000) of the Kaska language. Indeed, Kaska people's history of contact with other non-regional populations and regional Indigenous groups, including the practice of intermarrying as a way of creating and maintaining important regional social and economic alliances, has left lasting linguistic traces, providing a window into the complexities of the local linguistic landscape. Through a comparative study of two ideologically different Indigenous communities, Kroskrity (2018) demonstrated that longstanding tradition of multilingualism is a formative factor in contemporary and future linguistic adaptations of Indigenous communities. Even if the ideology which favours multilingual adaptation over purism potentially exposes the group to more rapid language shift and change, somewhat ironically, it might also play a key role in devising successful strategies for language revitalization and maintenance. This, I believe is highly relevant in the Kaska context.

Willingness or perhaps even eagerness to innovate in a form of coining new lexical terms, adopting loan words, genre innovations, or the expansion of domains of use is indeed an advantageous strategy for revitalizing and maintaining one's minority language in contexts dominated by majority languages. Over the last several decades, many individuals have become invested in various projects to expand domains of Kaska language use in various ways. Some of these projects include the translation the Canadian National Anthem into Kaska. Notable is also the creation of a 12-month Kaska calendar. The names for each month were invented to reflect observations from the land that typify the particular period of the year. April, for example is *Tēhtené' Sā* – Crusted Snow Moon, and February is *Gah gwahhádzī' Sā* – Rabbits Gnawing Moon.

While in the past, prior to the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, Kaska people clearly had awareness of seasons and various important periods of the year, there was no standardized way this manifested in people's everyday lives. Additionally, given the vast size of the Kaska territory, what was happening on the land varied depending on the geography and the available resources in a given place. Nevertheless, the *sāk'ū̃gé* – month/moon book - calendar was eventually developed and to a certain extend standardized. Today, it is used mostly in language classroom contexts, although official community *sāk'ū̃gé* were printed in the past and distributed to people's homes.

Figures 9, 10, and 11 illustrate another new form of Kaska language use, aiming to orthographically represent and index Kaska presence in public places. Figure 9 shows welcome posters, in Kaska and English, displayed below a large mural in the lobby of the Watson Lake Secondary School. These posters are illustrative of both lexical as well as genre innovations. The expression *"Sṍgā Nahgā̃nestān"* – literally "it is good to see you all", is provided as a way to say "welcome" and *"Ts'édāne Kedʃhī Kǫ̂"* – literally "children learning house" is a descriptive innovation for the word "school". Figure 10 shows Kaska Street signs, located in Two Mile village, a majority Kaska subdivision, just outside of Watson Lake. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in renaming streets in the community from English into Kaska, including the First Nation holding a street naming contest for members to participate in. Figure 11 shows a wooden sign located on the Alaska Highway, just outside of Upper Liard Village, a majority Kaska settlement about 10 km north of Watson Lake, thanking passersby for visiting the area. Here, *"Souga Sīnlā"* – literally "it is pleasing to me" is provided to say, "thank you."

The community's desire to make the Kaska language more visible and recognized in public places in and around the town of Watson Lake came through clearly during the Liard First Nation's Kaska Language Strategy Planning Session I discuss in chapter 6. The design of the *Dene Kūgītset* "people are coming to realize" Watson Lake Community Program is guided by feedback received from the session's participants, who wanted to see the First Nation working with local agencies, businesses, and the municipal, the Yukon, and the Federal governments to have the Kaska language and the Kaska homeland recognized, respected, and honoured in the community of Watson Lake. Currently, talks are on the way with the Watson Lake municipal government to name the newly constructed municipal building in the Kaska language.

Figure 9. Welcome posters in Watson Lake Secondary School

Figure 10. Street signs in Two Mile Village

Figure 11. A highway sign near Upper Liard Village

The examples I have provided so far largely concern lexical innovations, the deliberate filling of "lexical gaps" through creating innovations or adopting loan words in contact and post-contact situations. Additionally, I have also provided several examples of genre innovations to illustrate how speakers and learners use language to claim new contexts and domains. At the same time, while all these examples are positive and significant, they are only a relatively small aspect of a much larger and more complex enterprise of language reclamation and maintenance.

What I will focus on for the remaining of this chapter are some interesting examples of conceptual innovations and semiotic shifts, that have occurred as a result of major sociocultural and linguistic changes experienced by the Kaska people in the last century. More specifically, I will focus on the shifting and semantic expansion of the Kaska directional term system, which facilitates and signals the speaker's spatial location, orientation, and deictic reference to themselves, to one another, and to other living things and objects, including landscape features. In particular, I will show how in the process of recording scripted curriculum conversations for the Kaska Language website, when faced with contemporary town-based contexts, Kaska speakers imposed the Kaska directional system, including general land-based spatial organization onto this largely Euro-Canadian constructed environment, including references to the highways and modes of transportation by vehicles.

While some might argue that these kinds of scripted elicitations are less authentic than for example, naturally occurring conversational language, I argue that they are

illustrative of genuine linguistic innovation practice, nevertheless. When faced with the task of describing how one gets from a point A to a point B, the speaker quickly, with minimal difficulty, and consistently demonstrated her ability to provide such description. This is indicative of the fact that such use of directionals has been fully incorporated into Kaska daily communicative practices, as opposed to being merely fleeting improvisations at the time of the elicitation sessions. Careful attention to the use of Kaska directional terms in this context reveals important processes by which Kaska speakers reconceptualize and claim these urban constructed environments as their own. This is significant, because it illustrates how in response to the massive sociocultural transformations taken place relatively recently and during a very short and intense period, Kaska speakers managed to expand and recalibrate the existing Kaska deictic system to accommodate their new realities, as opposed to simply shifting into English and adopting its deictic system.

Shifting contexts are integral to semantic shifts as new material goods and technologies come into use (Peterson & Webster, 2013). To fully appreciate the extent and the dramatic nature of the contextual shifts in the Kaska country and how they might have facilitated the semantic shift of Kaska directional system, it is pertinent to provide a more detailed account of some of the historical episodes directly affecting the Kaska homeland, the people, and ultimately, the language. Directly relevant to the semantic shifts of the Kaska directional system are not only intensified contacts with outsiders, Europeans and Euro-Canadians in particular, but more significantly, the massive rupture of the Kaska way of life as a result of the construction of major roadways intersecting the Kaska territory, the Alaska Highway, the Robert Campbell Highway, the Stewart-Cassiar Highway, and the North and South Canol Roads. With the construction of these major roadways came the inevitable shift in the way moved around from going mostly on foot following bush trails or by a boat following waterways, to driving gas powered vehicles on highways.

5.1 Kaska Contact History – A Brief Overview

Unlike other Indigenous people in the western part of the Yukon Territory, who experienced the Klondike Gold Rush between 1896 and 1899 on their territories, prior to the 1940s most Kaskas had very little contact with outsiders. These early contacts were nearly exclusively tied to the context of the fur trade. First, prior to the 1840s with

the Tlingits, and later, after the 1840s with Hudson Bay fur traders (Moore, 2002). The 1940s constructions of both the Alaska Highway and the Canol Roads were a part of the join US - Canadian World War II defense efforts. While both roadways had lasting impacts on the Kaska territory, the Alaska Highway in particular became an important instrument of the Canadian state, since it connected the region with the southern Canadian cities and therefore provided an easier access for the government agents to enact the government's aggressive campaign to incorporate and assimilate the Kaskas and other Yukon Indigenous peoples into the Euro-Canadian society. These efforts involved, among others, aggressive measures to change people's way of life from living on the land, following seasonal rounds, to a more sedentary life in towns established along the newly constructed highways. The ultimate goal was to create a population fully incorporated into the cash-economy of the state (Coates, 1991, 1992; Cruikshank, 2000; Meek, 2010).

The establishment of Residential Boarding Schools and the subsequent removal of Indigenous children from families was yet another project made easier in the north by the new road access. In fact, one of the most infamous residential schools in the north, the Lower Post Residential School, was located on the Kaska territory, on the Alaska Highway in northern British Columbia, about 20 km south of Watson Lake. The availability of a relatively well- maintained, year-round roadway also facilitated a steady and permanent flow of outsiders, foreign ideas and goods into the Kaska country and the Yukon Territory as a whole. Julie Cruikshank writes that, "Although the Alaska Highway was not the only factor involved in altering old ways, its construction and use can be seen as a central thread in changes which began to take place after 1942" (1985, p. 172). See Figure 12.

Figure 12. The intersection of the Alaska Highway (Hwy 1) and the Robert Campbell Highway (Hwy 4) in the centre of Watson Lake

The construction of the highway system also facilitated an easier access for many resource extraction operations, which in turn led to the construction of more access roads to the many mining projects that followed. Figure 13 below shows the "Roads to Resources" road sign located north of Watson Lake on the Robert Campbell Highway (Hwy 4) at the Nahanni Range Road (Hwy 10) turnoff. This map captures a large and important part of the Kaska country and clearly demonstrates the significant and ongoing impacts of resource extraction industry on the territory made easier by the availability of roads. Watson Lake and the Alaska Highway are not visible on the map, but the Robert Campbell Highway – named after Robert Campbell, a Hudson's Bay Company fur trader, who entered the Kaska territory in the 1840, is visible.
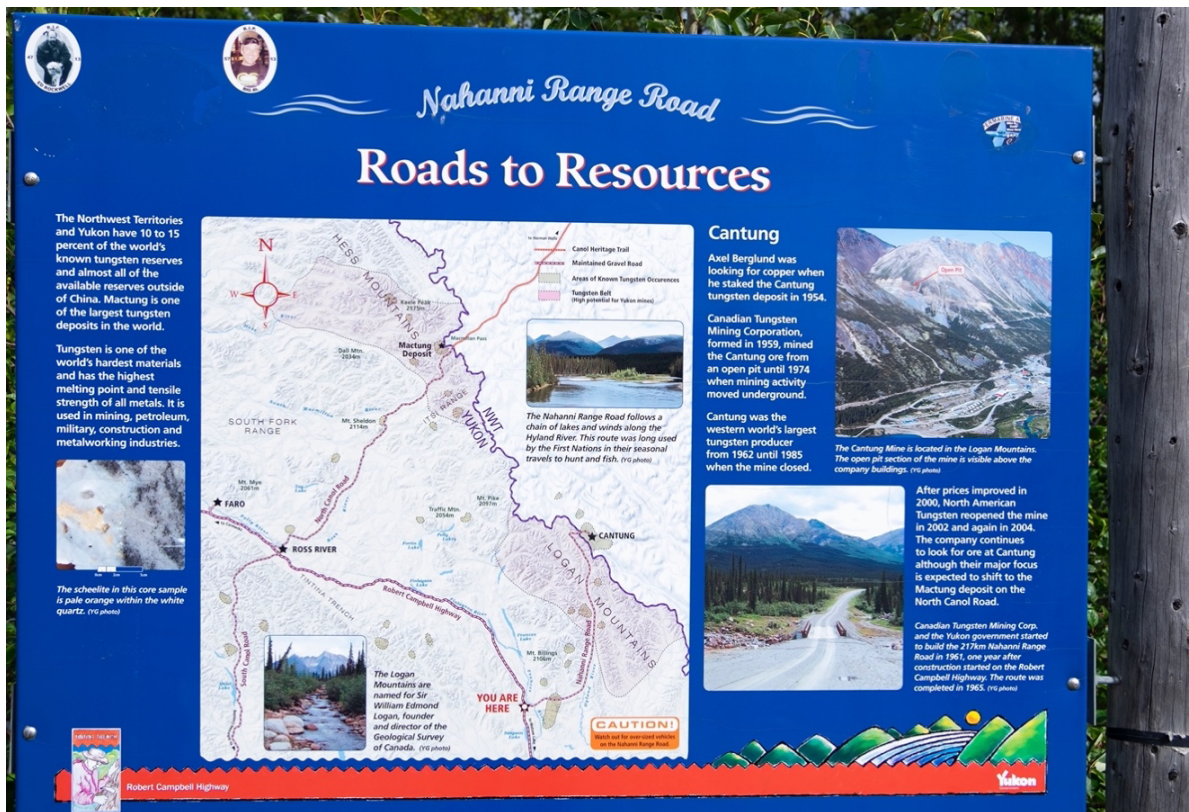
Figure 13. Road sign at the intersection of the Robert Campbell Highway and the Nahanni Range Road

The Robert Campbell Highway was completed in 1968, connecting the communities of Watson Lake, Ross River and the newly established community of Faro, built near the site of one of the largest open pit lead-zinc mines in the world. The Faro mine operated between 1969 and 1998 and is currently undergoing costly remediation led by the Federal Government. The Nahanni Range Road (Hwy 10) was constructed in the 1960s as well, to service and access now abandoned Cantung company town, and the associated Tungsten mine. The North and South Canol Roads were built in 1944 as a supply road for the Canol Pipeline Project, aiming to connect Camp Canol near Norman Wells, NWT and Whitehorse, YT. The construction of the Alaska Highway and the expansion of the Northwest Staging Route required a reliable, domestic source of fuel, and since high-grade oil was available in Norman Wells, the project seemed as a viable, logical option (Coates, 1992). The pipeline was completed in 1944 but was shut down in 1945 due to poor performance. Currently, there are several mining and exploration projects undergoing through the Government of Yukon approval process. All these projects are located along these roads are likely to be eventually approved,

despite ongoing controversies and limited support from the Kaskas due to their concerns over environmental and social impacts.

Incidentally, the funding of the Yukon Resource Gateway Program was recently announced promising to provide a better road access to resource-rich areas in the Territory. The program has three funding contributors: the Government of Canada with the financial commitment of up to $248 million; the Government of Yukon with up to $112 million; and the mining industry with up to $109 million. Four out of the six planned construction and road improvement projects are located on the Kaska territory, all aiming to improve accessibility to resource extraction sites (Crawford, 2021).

The gradual intensification of resource-based industry developments and the ongoing influx of non-Native population seeking employment opportunities in this lucrative developing sector, continue to make the region vulnerable to not only to environmental degradation and lasting toxic pollution, but also to vulnerabilities such as the commodity boom and bust cycles, leading to the unpredictability of employment opportunities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. All resource development activities have historically caused severe disruptions to people's ways of life, with lasting environmental and social impacts on the region, including severe alterations to the regional linguistic landscape (Cruikshank, 2000, p.23). This trend continues as evidenced by the recent and significant financial investments into the road access improvements.

Direct effects of the Alaska Highway project were felt not only after, but also before and during its eventual completion and opening for public use. A Kaska Elder, who grew up around the small settlement of Fireside, located on the Alaska Highway in northern British Columbia, about 130 km south of Watson Lake, shared a powerful family memory with me. He said that he remembers as a little boy, staying at a seasonal camp around Fireside with his family, when they began to hear loud unfamiliar sounds coming from the south, some distance away. Of course, at that time they did not know that what they were hearing were the sounds of heavy equipment engines, cutting their way through the boreal forest to make a trail that would eventually become the Alaska Highway, but they could tell something dangerous and unstoppable was coming their way. As the equipment moved closer and the sounds became louder, out of fear, they

packed up their camp and retrieved deeper into the mountains, away from the area of Fireside, where the highway was eventually pushed through. Another Kaska Elder, whose family was settled near Watson Lake, just north of where the current town of Watson Lake is located, recalled a day in 1939, when a work crew showed up and began clearing and leveling the area along the shore of the lake to build an air strip there. The Watson Lake airfield was one of the links in a chain of airfields across the northwest under the Northwest Staging Route Program. The location of the string of airfields that were a part of this program had a considerable impact of the eventual location of the Alaska Highway (Coates, 1992), making the area around the Watson Lake airstrip an inevitable location for the eventual town. In the airstrip construction process, the crew leveled and burnt the Elder's family fish camp, including a fully furnished and equipped cabin. The family was never compensated for the damage.

5.2 Kaska Conceptual Innovations and Semantic Shift

Keeping the history of these infrastructure projects in mind, in the following pages, I will discuss some examples of Kaska conceptual innovations and semiotic shifts, that have occurred as a result of the relatively recent changes and disruptions described above. Specifically, I discuss the linguistic responses to the shift from living on the land, following seasonal rounds on foot or with a dog team, to the contemporary reality of a largely town-based life, utilizing vehicles to travel the roadways. I will show that Kaska linguistic practices demonstrate not only creative and innovative linguistic adaptations, but also demonstrate sophisticated linguistic recalibrations of the system of directional terms. Careful examination of the linguistic overlay of the Kaska deictic directional system onto a largely Euro-Canadian constructed town-based environment reveals not only the language's adaptability and the Kaska speakers' creativity with it, but just as importantly, it reveals progressive Kaska language ideologies, which make such overlay productive and even possible in the first place.

Morphologically, Kaska directionals consist of a stem and a prefix. The directional prefixes convey information about, for example, the relative distance from the perspective of the person speaking or whether or not the speaker and/or the addressee know the exact location being referred to. However, in many cases, whether something is considered near or far must be determined from the context in which a directional is used (Moore, 2002, p. 405). The directional stems indicate the relationship between the

speaker (or the focal character in case of a narrative) and the location in space or time. Some examples of Kaska directional terms include words such as *kų́hyegá* (there-general), *kų́hdegé (*up ahead and also upstream), *kų́htsā* (down that way) – in all three examples the prefix *kų́h-* indicates a location that is both know to the speaker and to the addressee. All three examples contain "going toward" (allative) stems, implying movement and in some cases, indicating time. The stem *-yegá* signals down, below, or downstream and also marks past (time); the stem *-degé* signals ahead, above, or upstream, and also marks future (time); and finally, the stem *-tsā* signals down*.* In the word *ahnā́né'* (across), the prefix *ah-* indicates a location at a distance that is not known to either the speaker or the addressee and the stem *nā́né'* signals across or other side. Besides allatives (going forward), other related stem forms include ablative (coming from), areal locative (circling towards), and punctual locatives (location at a point). For more detailed discussion and examples directional as they are utilized within Kaska narrative texts, see Moore's 2002 unpublished PhD dissertation.

Directional terms serve as a basic system of coordinates to facilitate the interpretation of an utterance (Hanks, 2005). In Kaska narratives, Moore argues that directionals not only spatially orient actors and their actions, but also mark the social roles of actors as, for example, as a main or minor character, or as a group's insider or outsider. Careful examination of Kaska directionals, Moore argues, has the potential to show how Kaska speakers establish not only a spatial, but also social point of view (2002, p. 50). Additionally, directionals might be utilized to index intimate knowledge of a place, including water flow direction and habitat and movement patterns of animals (Moore & Tlen, 2007). Moore and Tlen demonstrated how in the context of Yukon land claims negotiations, this intimate knowledge and strategic use of directional terms by Yukon elders translated into powerful indexes of Indigenous knowledge and claims to their Indigenous territories. Kaska directionals can also be considered deictic, because they index movement relative to the participants or actors in a narrative (Moore, 2002, p. 52). Deictic terms are found in all languages, yet, research has shown that there is a significant cross-linguistic variation in the kinds of distinctions encoded in different languages (Hanks, 2005). Dene languages in general are known for large, well-developed sets of deictic directional terms, forming a distinct lexical class within the language (Leer, 1989; Moore, 2002; Moore & Tlen, 2007).

In the following section I analyse one of the over 100 conversational curriculum lessons that were recorded over a period of several months in 2016 and 2017 for the UBC Kaska Language Website. I chose this lesson because it is particularly relevant to the topic at hand, illustrating how speakers creatively apply the well-developed, land-based system of Kaska directional terms to built-in environments, such as the town of Watson Lake.

Within the website, each lesson contains a scripted conversation with a particular topic theme, for example berry picking, cutting meat, sewing, handgames, shopping, getting dressed, etc. In addition to the thematic topics, each lesson focuses on a particular grammatical feature of the language. For example, verbs for handling objects, possessive prefixes, and Kaska directionals. The general English scripts for each conversation were prepared in advance of working with the speaker. Before recording, the speaker and I would review the conversation to make sure the topic was not only culturally appropriate, but also useful and worth working on. Whenever necessary, the script was modified to reflect the insight provided. Personal names used in these scripted conversations were inspired by actual local people, some of them students from the local high school, other children and adults from the community. All conversations are set in the local contexts, either at the school, around town, or out on the Kaska territory. In these scripted situations, people engage in typical activities such as going to school, watching TV, driving to Whitehorse for a shopping trip, and also going hunting and sewing traditional garments.

5.3 Giving and Receiving Directions in Contemporary Contexts

To begin, the speaker sets the stage for giving a set of directions. *Kų́hyegá* (there – a general location) is used to identify or establish the initial point of departure, while not yet committing to any specific orientation or movement forward. Here, in addition to marking a point of departure, *kų́hyegá* marks the location of speaking to begin to orient the addressee's in relation to the destination in question. In addition, the initial section (lines 1-6) attempts to elicit any possible details along the way the addressee might know already - *Dä́nekǭā gāgáh, kų́hyegá meyę́ndíh-am?* (It's beside the bank, do you know where that is?) - this type of elicitation uncovers any potential spatial anchors the speaker might utilize for the directions that will follow. It gets the addressee locally situated and spatially oriented. Notable here is also the use of descriptive language

innovations, such as the words for post office *Denets'į́' k'ŭ́k négelehīkǫ́ą* (people-from paper they-send-building – people send paper from there) and bank *Dǎnekǫ́ā* (money-building). The word *"dǎne"* is another innovation, derived from the word "dollar."

1. Jimmy: *Denets'į́' k'ŭ́k négelehīkǫ́ą endį̂?*
   (1a) People-from paper they-send-building/ house where-is-it?
   (1b) Where is the post office?

2. Seth: *Dǎnekǫ́ā **gāgáh, kŭ́hyegá** meyḗndį́h-am?*
   (2a) Money- building / house **beside- there** do-you-know-it-yes /no question?
   (2b) It's by the bank, do you know where that is?

3. Jimmy: *Endŭ́é, **kŭ́hyegá** dūɫǎ meyḗsdį́h.*
   (3a) No **there** not I-know.
   (3b) No, I don't know where that is.

4. Jimmy: *Dēsgŭ́h **kŭ́hyegǎ** ɫédūsyǎ́-ā?*
   (4a) How there I-will-arrive-information question?
   (4b) How can I get **there**?

5. Seth: *Dūɫǎ́ dŭ́gŭ́dédlah **kŭ́hyegá** ts'į́' dūnyǎ dé'.*
   (5a) Not difficult **there** to you-go-then.
   (5b) It's not hard to get there.

6. Seth: *Hwǎ̧' lāgūht'ā.*
   (6a) Close it is.
   (6b) It's close by.

With the starting point well established in lines 1 through 6, the addressee is now prepared to begin moving towards his destination. *Ahdǎ́* and *kŭ́hdǎ́* in line 8, both index specific orientation in reference to the point of departure – in this case, moving away

from it, committed to heading "downstream" direction on the Alaska Highway. Here in *ahdā́,* the prefix *ah-* is used when a location is at a distance, and when only a general direction is known – here a general, unspecified path to get to the highway itself. The prefix *kū́h-* in *kū́hdā́,* on the other hand, is used to reference a distant location known to both the speaker and the addressee, a point where the addressee reaches the highway, turns left, and begin following it downstream. In this particular context, downstream happens to correspond to the southbound direction of the highway, but more importantly, it corresponds to the downstream flow of the Liard River, a major waterway in the vicinity of Watson Lake. In the context of this structured conversation, the Alaska Highway becomes a central reference point, with assigned properties typically observed in rivers and other bodies of moving water. In this way, the highway takes on roles, typically fulfilled by land-based features, a river in this case, to attend to the details of the built-in environment of the town. The section of the Alaska Highway around Watson Lake runs north and south along the Liard River, although the river is not visible from town, and is located several kilometres away from it.

Close tracking of one's surroundings, including careful observations pertaining to directions of moving bodies of water and other land-based features, rather than fixed cardinal directions, become essential features of how people to orient themselves. Throughout the rest of the conversation, the speaker continues to instruct the hearer to keep heading downstream, giving a set of waypoints along the way to ensure the addressee arrives at the destination.

7. Seth: *Kéhseh dedī denekegehdı̨kǭ́ā ts'ı̨́h kedīnyā dé'.*
            (7a) First- this- people they teach building - from- you go- then.
            (7b) First, walk out of the school.

8. Seth: **Ahdā́ etene** *dī́nyā dé, gūsts'ęsī dī́nyā dé'* **kū́hdā́** *īnyāl.*
            (8a) **Downstream-road** you-go-then, left you-go then **downstream-there**- you-go/walk.
            (8b) Then go down the road (towards town),and go left there.

9. Jimmy: *Ī etene* Campbell Highway *etā-ā?*

(9a) That road Campbell Highway it-is-information-question?

(9b) Is that the Campbell Highway?

10. Seth: *Ham, **kū́hyegá** etene ts'į̄h **dá̋** dīnyāł.*

(10a) Yes, **there** road from **down** you-go/walk.

(10b) Yes, go down from the road there.

11. Seth: ***Ah'áné** hwą̋' Band Office se'ān,*

(11a) **Off-to-the-side** close Band Office is-positioned,

(11b) Off to the side is the Band Office,

12. Seth: *Ī̄ **gūts'į̄h metahnâ** Rec Centre se'ān.*

(12a) that **from- just across** Rec Centre-is-positioned.

(12b) and across from there is the Rec Centre.

13. Seth: *Signs néstlōni gā́nenhtānī dé' **megādegá** etene gūlīnī,*

(13a) Signs lots you-see then **a-little-further-ahead** trail exists,

(13b) When you see lots of signs, then a little further ahead is a trail,

14. Seth: ***kū́hdá̋** īnyāl.*

(14a) **downstream-there** you-go/walk.

(14b) go down that.

5.4 Conclusion

I began this chapter by describing a Kaska language activity in the local secondary school, where the youth encountered an extremely common issue facing Indigenous languages, namely, the so-called lexical gaps. Together, they contemplated the possibilities and also limitations which arose from this activity. While they initially approached this somewhat innocently, they soon experienced more intimately and personally the complexities of what is involved in reclaiming their ancestral language, including some of the ideological struggles at play.

I laid out an argument that despite the disruptions and alterations of the local linguistic landscape, Kaska speakers continue carrying their language forward with determination and creativity. The speakers' everyday communicative practices not only make the survival of the language possible, but its future promising. Paying close attention to the everyday language practices reveals that language innovating is hardly an anomaly, but instead, it currently is and historically has been a common feature of everyday language interactions. The examples discussed above provide convincing evidence of linguistic continuity in the face of dramatic and on many levels devastating changes. Be it in terms of language borrowing and innovating on the lexical level, or on a deeper, systemic level in form of recalibrations of the Kaska system of directionals, these moves reflect important Kaska language ideologies which favour language innovating as a vital, adaptive strategy over ideologies which aspire to remain true to an imagined, linguistically purer past.

In her article, "Blasted Landscapes," Anna Tsing proclaims: "ruins are now our gardens." The author explores the natural history of disturbances, the life of degraded landscapes, including the life-giving potential of some disturbances. Tsing reminds us that some, though not all, disturbances can be life-giving and that to truly understand a disturbance requires "immersion in the history of places" (2017: p.93). While the impacts of European settlers in the Yukon has been a dramatic and, in many ways, a tragic disturbance with enormous and ongoing human and environmental costs, nevertheless, I believe it is productive and hopeful to also explore the life-giving potential of disturbances and the resilience of both people and the environment. While metadiscursive practices concerning language innovating invites scrutiny and at times negative evaluation from some, most speakers engage in innovating willingly and often with good humour. Reconfiguring how community members, and especially youth, think about their ancestral language is crucial and linked directly to how they imagine the language's future and its capacity and potential for fulfilling their daily communicative needs.

Understanding language as a resource available to speakers, invites a reflection on how speakers utilize the resources available to them in the contexts, including the disturbed ones, they find themselves in. Monica Heller points out that "Individuals can use the resources they have available to them strategically, to play the game, but more

importantly, to use the rules, and, indeed, even to change them. Social process is thus both constraint and possibility, obstacle and opportunity" (2007, p. 167). In the context of a community dealing with an advanced language shift and where, for now, language resources necessary for more complex language innovating are mostly available to older fluent speakers, what does language innovation look like going forward and where exactly does it take place? Gary Holton (2009) suggests that the process of reclaiming an Indigenous language might perhaps be better viewed as one that creates a new form of the language, rather than insisting on maintaining static, historical forms. The process must eventually go beyond developing new vocabulary however, and as I have illustrated, might also involve the development of new genres and styles of speech, facilitating the expansion and creation of contemporary domains of Indigenous language use. Kroskrity (2018) similarly reminds us that any thriving language cannot only speak the past, it must be able to attend to the ever-changing communicative needs of its speakers, developing new forms and contexts of use (p. 134). In other words, normalizing the use of Kaska language in all situations and contexts.

During a recent community meeting, a respected Kaska Elder took the floor and began speaking about her concerns for the future of the Kaska people. She spoke about the urgent need to protect and look after the Kaska territory and all the animals on the land. She spoke about the importance of maintaining the Kaska way of life, making sure all children know how to live properly, including speaking and learning the Kaska language. "My family has traveled all over our country. I often think about that, we have trails all over, I have been all over. I think about all that and then I also think about all those coming up behind us. I think about all the trails we have yet to go on. We have to think about that."

Chapter 6

"Our Language is Our Responsibility:" The Imagined Futures of the Kaska Language

In this chapter I focus more broadly on the complex and multifaceted task of planning for a more desirable future of Indigenous languages, whose daily use is in decline. In the Kaska context, I reflect on how this task has been understood and taken on by different actors and stakeholders over time and what effects it has had up to now. I weave together perspectives and insights gained through my involvement in a number of community based Kaska language projects in the last seven years, first as a visiting graduate student and later in the capacity of my ongoing employment at the Liard First Nation's Language Department. I consider some of the locally held language ideologies and visible ideological tensions I have observed during this work, and which have had a considerable impact on the local language revitalization efforts. Additionally, I also examine several important ideological recalibrations and reorientations, which have occurred over time as well, and which have been similarly impactful.

To provide a more detailed context of the current Kaska language work dynamics, with a particular focus on envisioning and planning the language's future, I turn attention to the activities and discussions which took place during a formal, week-long Liard First Nation Community Language Planning Session in November 2018, and how what unfolded during this session fits into the overall efforts of Kaska language revitalization, past and present. Additionally, I examine the process that went into the production of the Liard First Nation Kaska Language Strategy, informed by the planning session and a community language survey that followed it. And finally, I describe some of the steps the Liard First Nation Language Department begun to take to not only confront the harmful colonial legacies that endure and that are at the root of the ongoing decline, but also the steps the Language Department has taken to support and nurture the community's journey forward, reclaiming and revitalizing the language, so it is carried into the future. A thoughtful engagement with this community-based strategic language planning and related activities is important, I believe, because it provides yet another insight into Kaska people's post-rupture reckoning, this time in a more formal setting of a community language planning session, where together the participants contemplated

possibilities and viable solutions, ultimately forging a collective and strategic pathway forward, towards a future, where the Kaska language not only survives, but thrives for generations to come.

I suggest that community-based Indigenous language practices in the context of language renewal activities, including speaking in and speaking about language, are a form of place affirming and place making, both physically and emotionally, because it is through these practices the language's rightful place in people's lives and in the community is collectively acknowledged and affirmed. Additionally, and crucially, while undoubtedly informed by the past, these practices and activities are inherently future-focused, where the language's future is creatively and collectively imagined, and steps are taken to shape the language's and in turn the community's futures. In this sense, community-initiated and community-based language reclamation and revitalization work, including strategic planning, is both confronting and intervening. It confronts the current trajectory of shift and decline in Indigenous language use, and it intervenes to shape the unknown in a positive way, towards the community's preferred futures, while working to avoid the undesired ones (Razak, 2000). Through this work, stakeholders not only diagnose the causes and the amount of loss, but they also identify ways forward, setting priorities to guide present and future activities and directions, including decisions about how to prioritize the allocation of various resources, which are limited and chronically insufficient.

6.1 The entanglements of language work

In the process of planning for the future, various language documentation objects and materials are produced to respond to not only the current needs, but also those anticipated and imagined in the future. An important feature of these community-initiated and community-based efforts is that they are nearly always multigenerational, and their focus is the creation of favourable conditions for language and cultural life going forward, ensuring the continuation of connections and relationships between the people and their language. People gathering to speak in and about their language together not only has the potential to strengthen intergenerational connections, but also to create new ones, as it unites people of different ages and affiliations around a common goal. These types of networks of relationships and connections are foundational for language revitalization efforts to be successful, often generating lifelong

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supports of various kinds for all involved. Be it relationships between learners and Elders, learners, Elders, and linguists and other academics, and relationships among the cohort of learners, languages have a way to create durable bonds for those who truly and deeply care about them.

Artifacts of various documentation efforts such as recordings, transcripts, elicitation lists and notes, alphabet charts, lesson plans, genealogy resources, place name research materials, as well as language strategy and language policy drafts and documents, are only some of the modes through which the visions of possible futures become materially realized in the present. The production of these objects and materials is inevitably guided by each participant's knowledge, history, experience, and ideas about language, which all come into conversation and at times in tension with one another during language revitalization activities. Maliseet scholar Bernard Perley (2013) reminds us that language documentation and revitalization must always *remember* Indigenous ancestral voices as timeless resources for all the meaningful relations that integrate stories, landscapes, spirituality, and relationships as living Indigenous worlds. Perley engages with the meaning of the word "remember" as the opposite or the reversal of "dismember" to critique the strictly linguistic lens through which languages have often been approached in the process of language documentation, extracted and severed from community and personal lives in which languages are inherently embedded. What Perley had in mind in contrasting these two meanings was to highlight the different processes through which people might become further separated from their languages, namely through linguistic documentation materials and strictly western approaches to language.

Those familiar with applied language revitalization work are aware of these often-differing orientations towards language among those in academia and those in the communities and the tensions these differences can generate. Several scholars have examined the potentially harmful effect of non-Indigenous ideas and approaches to language, often brought to the table in language documentation and revitalization situations. For more detailed examples and discussions of various types of tensions and even failures in approaches to collaborative language work and the use of problematic research models see John, 2018; Leonard, 2017; Leonard & Haynes, 2010; Meek, 2016b; Perley, 2012, 2013; Speas, 2009, among others. In their discussion, Leonard

and Haynes (2010) suggest that it is possible to create an environment in which productive and empowering collaborations between academically trained individuals and Indigenous communities can flourish to the benefit of all involved. One of the important features of all collaborations, as Leonard and Haynes and others have pointed out, is that collaborations between university-based researchers and Indigenous communities must always entail the sharing of responsibility and authority for projects from their inception. Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) reminds us that linguistic research takes many forms and is never simply just an isolated intellectual exercise. It is a social act where language becomes the focal point around which community members and academics coalesce, and that this work has the potential to bring about life-long working relationships and friendships.

Some scholars have critiqued the common, yet problematic rhetoric frequently utilized to advocate for Indigenous languages, framing the issues in ways that might actually harm and undermine the cause, leading to further disconnections. Especially problematic, many argue, is the approach which uses biological metaphors associated with decline in language use, framing languages as endangered, variously distant from total extinction, and in some cases as dead. To avoid and remedy this problematic framing, Hill (2002), suggested reframing it in terms of human and Indigenous rights instead of the prevalent biological arguments of endangerment. Hinton (2022) elaborated further and suggested an alternative to describing languages without speakers as "dead" or "extinct" as "sleeping", to avoid the impression of finality of the language's state and to highlight the potential for intervention, an awakening, and reconnection. The erasure of colonial agency in this type of rhetoric is evident. It at best minimizes and at worst omits historical and contemporary ongoing causes of language decline, and sadly, sometimes misattributes agency onto Indigenous communities themselves, as if somehow, a community decides to abandon their language, spontaneously, voluntarily, out of the blue, for no knowable reason (Davis, 2018). For more detailed discussion of this problematic rhetoric, see Davis, 2018; Hill, 2002; Hinton, 2002; Muehlmann, 2007, 2012 for example.

While in his critique Perley (2013) was thinking primarily about materials produced by linguists which are subsequently mobilized by communities as means of reconnecting with ancestral voices (see also Leonard, 2020; Baldwin, 2017), I want to

expand this thinking to include the production of language objects by speakers and learners on the community level, for the community's own needs, informed by the participants lived experiences and emotional and spiritual connections with their language and their community. What power do such material have and what type of connections can they facilitate? What kind of stories do they reveal?

The collective process of developing and producing language objects is sometimes fully community based, carried out by local experts, Elders, and learners, and at times co-developed with academic experts with ties to the community, working in collaboration. Sarah Pink suggests that gaining a sense of a "collective imagination" might involve "thinking about entangled individual imaginations, inspired by the same verbal discourses, written texts, phenomenological contexts and material reality" (2008, p.183). Imagining and actively planning a language's and by extension a community's futures, where the language that is currently in limited use by predominantly older generation, is vibrant and widely spoken is complex and multilayered, especially considering the different stakeholders and types and sites of practice directly and indirectly involved. Given the complexity and the scales of this work, there is much to consider ensuring successful outcomes. For instance, in addition to the various ideological tensions that surface in these contexts, the availability of adequate and consistent funding, robust political, administrative, and infrastructure supports, and local capacity building through training, all play crucial and interconnected roles in re-shaping the future of a language. Additionally, Davis (2018) demonstrated how language revitalization movements and direct support and policy changes can make a difference in elevating the language's and speakers' prestige, which too is essential for ensuring a positive change a language's trajectory from precarity to stability.

The various language materials and documents generated over decades can reveal more than just language data itself. In the Liard First Nation's context, a careful examination of language records and materials, developed over the last several decades by various community members, either working independently or in collaboration with other stakeholders, revealed not only the evolving recalibrations of language priorities, but also through these records, the general trajectory of Kaska language vitality and reclamation efforts can be traced. For example, in audiotape recordings of community meetings from the early 1980s, it was not unusual for the

meetings to be carried out nearly entirely in the Kaska language. In comparison, recordings of similar meetings only ten to fifteen years later reveal that the Kaska language use was largely reduced to opening and closing prayers, and if used more extensively, simultaneous interpretation was provided for those in attendance. While various factors might be at play, it seems to suggest that a widespread community fluency in the Kaska language had decreased significantly within a decade or so between the 1980s and 1990s. While in the 1990s a significant number of speakers might have continued to participate in the local meetings, the new generation of Kaskas becoming increasingly more engaged in the local political process likely had much more limited understanding and fluency in the language. This language accommodation was made to reflect the community's emerging reality, capturing the ongoing shifting of the Kaska language from its previously prominent position of everyday communication to an increasingly more ceremonial, symbolic position.

The tracking of language projects and the associated records produced over the years can provide an interesting insight in terms of the ebbs and flows in funding levels and availability, and the effects these fluctuations have had on community-based language work. Further, examining the types of projects, gives us an idea about what types of projects were prioritized at different times and by whom. Sadly, these often matched more accurately with institutional goals and priorities, rather than those which might have been more preferred by communities. In some instances, however, we can see that these priorities aligned, even if the interests in the projects' outcomes might have been quite different. For example, as I've discussed in Chapter 4, during the land claims process period in the Yukon, substantial financial resources were provided by the federal government to each First Nation to conduct an extensive place name and land-based traditional knowledge research. The federal government was deeply invested in the outcome of this research, since the outcomes were to support the establishment of firm national boundaries, imposing a new territorial political order in the Yukon (Nadasdy, 2017). In another example, Meek (2016a) described how through various administrative diagnostic tools and approaches to assessment of language endangerment levels, Indigenous languages in the Yukon became scaled differently, as different metrics were applied to measure the languages' vitality throughout the years. Meek further showed how the outcomes of these assessments effected not only

financial investments by various government funding agencies, but also their general commitments to Indigenous language revitalization. Periodic reports by the Aboriginal Language Services, detailing the state of Yukon languages, informed not only the funding levels available, but also the focus of the funded projects and activities, directly impacting different sections of the Indigenous population.

The bureaucratic nature of how language funding is allocated and administered to First Nations, especially those operating under the *Indian Act*, as is the case with Liard First Nation, calls for a consistent handling of complex grant applications, budgets, and projects' reporting, which puts an enormous strain on the First Nation's administrative responsibilities. This work can be time consuming, requiring persistent follow- ups over long periods of time, for which a dedicated, well-trained staff is often not readily available. Many First Nations struggle keeping up with this complex and demanding funding model, not only for funding language programing, and at times, they lose their funding as a result, or are unable to access funding because there simply isn't the type of capacity needed to submit a proposal and to look after the application. I believe the importance of administrative and funding aspect of language revitalization work has been largely neglected in academic literature. Likewise, the social, cultural, and economic impacts of grant funding that is brought in by outside academics working with communities has been underexamined. Academic stakeholders have access and the ability to tap into various research funds, which if properly planned and carried out can potentially have positive impacts on the community's language. However, long-term, stable, and adequate funding is clearly needed to make language work not only possible, but also impactful and sustainable! Language work takes time, resources, and people with highly specialized training.

The examples above are only a small sample, underscoring that while there must always be locally initiated and locally informed solutions to Indigenous language revitalization, these local efforts are inevitably intertwined with regional and national politics, interests, and governmental priorities that are routinely outside of the First Nation's control. In addition to all the complexity and hard work on the ground that goes into bringing a declining language back into daily use, countless structural and systemic hurdles must regularly be negotiated and overcome. The impressive amount of language documentation and other language related work which has taken place in the

community over the years certainly reflects the sentiment of one of the participants in the language planning session who stated that "our language is our responsibility." However, for communities to engage in larger-scale language documentation and revitalization inevitably involves highly bureaucratic engagements with the local, regional, and national governments. The ability to successfully navigate these complex terrains is directly tied to whether language programming is successful or whether it can even take place.

6.2 Language ideologies and opportunities for ideological reorientation –
A Brief Overview

Contemporary scholarship in anthropology, concerned with various dimensions and issues of language shift, loss, and language revitalization, has recognized the importance of the sociolinguistic practices and beliefs about language. These scholars have been interested in investigating how these practices and beliefs might be contributing to language changes, including not only language loss, but also growth, and survival. The beliefs, or language ideologies as they have been referred to, can be defined, for example as "cultural systems of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine, 1989, p. 255). Silverstein (1998) identified language renewal activities as "sites" of profound ideological struggles where differences in beliefs about language are often on dramatic display. Woolard points out that language ideologies are not only about language, but rather, they "enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology. Through such linkages, these ideologies underpin not only linguistic form and use, but also the very notion of the person and the social group" (1998, p.3). "Our language lives in our hearts, souls, and bodies," "language connects us to our ancestors and to our culture," and "our language helps us to be proud of who we are" are only some of the statements the participants in the Liard First Nation's Language Planning Session shared with each other during a group discussion about why the Kaska language is important and why it should continue. Statements such as these connect a person's emotional, spiritual, and physical life directly to their ancestral language and highlights the sense of grief and loss many feel because they are unable to understand and speak Kaska well.

In the introduction to their edited volume, Kroskrity & Field (2009) noted that to understand Indigenous languages and the contexts in which they exist, including contexts in which they are being revitalized, we must attend to the multifaceted language ideologies that exist and how they become salient in practice. The volume's contributors provide a revealing analysis of multiple Indigenous contexts, offering insights into the ideological diversity found in Indigenous communities in North America, underscoring the importance of locally informed responses. Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer (1998) turned our attention to the emotional complexities surrounding Indigenous language work, stemming from experiences of historical oppression, including residential school attendance. The authors observed a "broad gap between verbally expressed goals, on one hand (generally advocating for language and cultural preservation) and the unstated but deeply felt emotions and anxieties on the other (generally advocating or contributing to abandonment)" (1998, p. 62–63). In her research in the Kaska community I now call home, Barbra Meek (2010) identified what she calls "disjunctures" —moments when an activity that was meant to promote and rejuvenate Indigenous language use ultimately leads to negative evaluation of the language, its use, and sometimes even of its speakers. Throughout this dissertation I pointed to instances when various ideologies of language became visible, at times in counterproductive ways, as manifestations of such disjunctures. However, it is important to note that such dynamics can and do shift over time, an important topic I attend to in more detail below.

Perley (2009) turns our attention to not only the widely held, existing, at times tension-inducing language ideologies in communities, but also to the ideologies which emerge in the process of language revitalization and related practices as a way to mitigate some of these tensions. Perley postulates that the emergence of language ideologies is contingent on those who initiate changes from sites of opportunities and that it is possible to achieve ideological reorientation, potentially effecting trajectories of language to cultivate growth. I believe Perley's observation to be an important one, because it contemplates not only the complex, multifaceted tensions associated with language renewal activities in general, but more importantly, it highlights the opportunities for transformation and new directions that can take place in these contexts as well. After all, the task of revitalizing languages is a relatively new one for most

communities, and to my knowledge, no Indigenous community has existing, traditional responses how to address it... If language renewal activities can become sites of profound ideological struggles, as Silverstein (1998) and others suggest, they can also potentially become sites of opportunity for reorientation and commitment to productive solutions in favour of revitalization. This type of ideological reworking, I believe, is an important component of language revitalization (see also Loether, 2009).

6.3 Examples of Ideological Reorientations in the Kaska Context

Ideological shifts and transformations are rarely, if ever, observable over a short period of time. In the more than seven years of my involvement with the Kaska language renewal efforts, together with my familiarity with the local and regional contexts over the last several decades, it is obvious that several changes and ideological shifts have occurred or are currently in progress. Some of these changes have resulted from the necessity and willingness to adapt to new circumstances, seizing various emerging opportunities and technological possibilities, and some, at least in part, from people's participation in various formal language activities and language training opportunities. In the following section, I will discuss some of the ideological shifts and reorientations which have been unfolding in recent years.

In chapter 5, for example, I discussed how some Kaskas, most often the younger generation who have limited knowledge and understanding of the language, erroneously underestimate the language's ability to attend to contemporary circumstances and domains of use. Statements such as "our ancestors never had words for that" and other metadiscursive assertions rooted in conservative ideologies of language purism, exemplify this sentiment. On the other hand, the older generation of Kaska speakers favour much more progressive ideologies, putting high value on individual creativity and the language's capability to innovate. These speakers are not only able to linguistically attend to all contemporary contexts, they also fully enjoy it and do it often. I further demonstrated how language change, including language innovations, borrowings, and other forms of adaptations, have historically occurred as natural responses to people's changing realities, including contacts with others. These responses are fully consistent with long-standing Kaska-informed conduct and tradition,

reflecting widely held progressive language ideologies, disfavouring linguistically conservative stances.

The recent increase in requests for translations of words and concepts similar to those I have described in chapter 5 indicates that the interest in attending to contemporary contexts in the Kaska language is growing and becoming more common. With each request for translation also comes the requester's assumption and expectation that the language is not only capable of such tasks, but that attending to these new contexts in Kaska is entirely appropriate and necessary. The incorporation of these innovations into curriculum materials for the Language Department's courses, for example, have become relatively routine as well. These materials aim to capture not only some of the more traditional topics associated with bush activities such as hunting, berry picking, and sewing, but also topics having to do with typical life in town, such as the use of technology, going shopping, and dressing up for Halloween, for example. Through this the work, I believe, the language is undergoing gradual decompartmentalization, moving away from the long-standing tendency to associate it with more traditional domains of use, which inevitably limits its application within contemporary contexts, and expanding into contemporary domains, relevant and clearly capable of attending to contemporary realities. These are important processes which move the language towards normalization and potential for wider use.

The limited success of language renewal programs in producing speakers over the years, has generated many different types of critiques and ideological conclusions. One particularly harmful one is related to the perceived complexity of the language that according to some, makes it nearly impossible to learn. Because of this complexity, a distinguished mastery of the language, matching that of a fluent speaker, is no longer possible to achieve by even the most diligent of students. It's easy to see how this ideology might lead to the mystification of the language and to the scaling down of expectations of what is possible to achieve by learners. I believe this is one of the contributing factors in the enduring association of Elders as the exclusive speakers and knowledge keepers, which, as Meek (2010) noted, has historically led to heavy focus on language and traditional knowledge documentation, rather than in investing into learners and emerging speakers. With such view, language and knowledge documentation becomes at best a practice to potentially benefit some future imagined

generation of learners, not the current ones, or at worst, it's a type of salvage documentation project, aiming to document as much as possible before the inevitable loss.

While undoubtedly this scaling down of expectations and potentials for local language revitalization efforts has occurred and to some degree is still occurring, I believe this dynamic is changing, both locally and regionally, as increasing number of young people are becoming more actively involved in serious language leaning and beginning to assert themselves as the emerging cohort of new knowledge keepers. As this cohort is becoming more publicly visible and audible, often featured on local news, invested in by the respective First Nations and other organizations, winning various regional awards and earning institutional recognitions, for example, the expectations about what is possible are being seriously challenged and reconsidered.

Another slow, but I believe a significant ideological shift is unfolding in relation to the Kaska writing system. This system was first developed in the 1980s by Jeff Leer, a linguist who came to the Yukon Native Language Centre for series of workshops with both speakers of Kaska and the closely related Tahltan. The reports that came out of these sessions made a set of recommendations for both Kaska and Tahltan orthography (Leer, 1985). The current Kaska writing system is based on these recommendations with later modifications made by other linguists, including my PhD supervisor Patrick Moore. A number of individuals, mostly Kaska teachers and other Kaska language professionals who have gone through countless literacy trainings at the Language Centre in the 1980s and 1990s subscribe to this standardized writing system and most were able to achieve a high level of proficiency in it. These same individuals take pride in their ability to write the language and have long advocated for the use of writing as a useful and practical tool. In addition to language learning booklets published through the Yukon Native Language Centre, several other Kaska language publications have been put out over the years, utilizing this writing system. These include *Dene Gudeji:* Kaska Narratives (1999), and the Guzāgi k'űgé': Our Language Book: Nouns Kaska, Mountain Slavey, and Sekani (1997).

While these publications have been welcomed, writing the Kaska language has not been uncontroversial. Two common types of arguments against writing surface

regularly, usually made by older individuals who have not been involved in the above-mentioned literacy training or any formal language documentation work and to my knowledge, have not tried to learn the writing system. One common argument is for keeping the Kaska language "the way it has always been," an oral language only, and the other argues for abandoning the standardized writing system and "writing Kaska the way it sounds" following the English language writing system. While the first view is likely a manifestation of a conservative ideology, often held by people who are not fluent speakers and see writing as inconsistent with the Kaska way, the other view results from limited understanding of the Kaska sound system and its incompatibility with English. In addition to English being probably the worst system to follow due to its irregularities and inconsistencies in representing sounds, the Kaska language has four tones and a number of sounds that the English orthography simply cannot accommodate. Writing the Kaska language "the way it sounds" may at first glance seem like a good, useful solution, but it would actually be more complicated and confusing than it sounds.

As more individuals are engaging in various language and linguistic training discussed later in this chapter, more are gaining writing skills and appreciate its utility. With the local popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, for example, I have noticed a number of our current and former students posting various updates, increasingly incorporating the Kaska language, using the standardized writing system they have been learning in the classes. The following post was made recently by one of our former language students on Facebook, accompanying a set of photos from her recent hunting trip: "Went hunting this weekend, no *kedā* - yet, but lots of *dahbă'!"* (*kedā* means moose and *dahbă'* means blueberries in Kaska). Similarly, one of our current students and a well-known Yukon artist and jewelry maker has been using the Kaska language to name her collections and jewelry pieces on her social media platforms and her website. For example, recently, she named her spring collection the "*Ededắlet* Collection" (*ededắlet* means spring) and one of her pieces *"Gēs dzídze"* (strawberry) earrings. In many of her posts, she shares openly about the joys of reclaiming her ancestral language, inviting her followers to post about their language journeys in the comment section.

While community members, especially Elders, often advocate that an essential component of Kaska language learning and teaching must be in-person interactions between speakers and learners, ideally in an on-the-land setting, unfortunately, this has not always been feasible to accomplish, at least not on a consistent basis. Classroom-style teaching in schools and in community halls has for the most part replaced hands-on-language learning on the land for most of the year, and although it is never seen as an ideal solution, it is a solution that arose from the reality that people are bound to their jobs and other responsibilities in town and are unable take extensive time off to participate in on-the land camp opportunities year-round. Additionally, while cultural learning during land-based programs is always strong among the Kaskas, an effective model for serious language learning such as Kaska language immersion, resulting in substantial, significant fluency gains, for example, has not yet been implemented.

The availability of various new technologies has not only facilitated opportunities for a greater visibility of Indigenous languages, but also has transformed the ways we can work together, teaching classes and making long-distance documentation collaborations a regular part of our work. In her master's thesis examining the role of videoconferencing in Kaska language work, Victoria Sear (2018) explored the role of videoconferencing as a multi-sited tool of collaboration in language documentation, revitalization, and education. Traditionally, language work involving academic stakeholders, who often live far away from the communities they collaborate with, has generally involved planned visits, where intensive, in-person elicitation sessions take place over a period of a few weeks once or twice a year. Beginning in 2015, our Kaska team (consisting of me and my PhD supervisor Patrick Moore connecting from Vancouver, a local Kaska teacher Linda McDonald and a local Kaska Elder Mida Donnessey, connecting from Watson Lake) began taking advantage of videoconferencing technology to meet and work productively throughout the year, without the relying on planned travel. Additionally, for two Kaska undergraduate students at UBC, who joined these sessions, these regular interactions became a unique opportunity to connect with their communities back home while learning their language and basics of language documentation. Sear noted that these regular videoconferencing sessions provided "sites of stability and continuity in which sociolinguistic conjunctures could emerge and shared practices and ideas about

language were able to productively converge" (2018, p.46). Sear observed that videoconferencing offers new and meaningful opportunities for change in the way various stakeholders work together, despite not being situated in the same place. It is important to note however, that these new ways of working together can only be possible if the stakeholders are willing to embrace the technology and have the capabilities and the necessary skills to be able to do so.

Our Kaska team was already well-accustomed to connecting and working together using videoconferencing technology when the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic forced so many around the world to adapt and learn to work, study, and collaborate with others remotely through videoconferencing. Our familiarity with interacting regularly in this way, made the transition from teaching in-person Kaska classes in the community to online Kaska classes relatively seamless. Additionally, the technology-mediated format enabled the participation of other Kaskas learners, who don't live in Watson Lake, and would otherwise not be able to take part in a community in-person Kaska language class. With the creation of this virtual classroom, defying geographical boundaries and divides, a virtual community of practice emerged, enabling regular interaction between Kaska speakers, teachers, and Kaska learners, regardless of how distant they might be from the Kaska territory. This was a solution which enabled us to continue our language teaching and learning, even though in-person gatherings were not safely possible. While undoubtably this form of interaction and language learning is even further removed from the much-preferred land-based teaching, it provided opportunities for creating and maintaining connections in times that felt incredibly isolating for so many of us, because we were unable to be physically together. We often discussed how good it felt to regularly connect with each other and how much we looked forward to these classes each week. In this way, the Kaska language became an intimate bond connecting us all, a way to check on each other, making sure everyone was doing well. I will return to the topic of these classes later in this chapter.

The examples above are only some of the ways in which the Kaskas have not only willingly, but eagerly embraced new ideas and new technologies to promote and work on their language, increasing its chances of survival going forward. The willingness to recalibrate and adopt these new solutions extended the sense of stability, continuity, and community. From our documentation work as described by Sear (2018) to the work

of remote language learning, a more resilient and sustainable model of how communities and other stakeholders can continue working together emerged, creating a site of opportunities and new possibilities. While some communities have been hesitant to embrace new technologies and media, which exposes language content to outside eyes, (Debenport, 2015; Volfova, 2013), the Kaska Elders and other community members embrace these relatively new ways of doing seemingly without controversies. In fact, one Elder told me that she believes we need to make sure "to have the Kaska language out there as much as possible" and available for anyone to see and to learn, because that is the one way it will survive. In other words, having the Kaska language "out there as much as possible," normalized, in all aspects of life, will ensure its place and its relevance in the future.

6.4 "It is for generations to come" — Planning for the Future

The Liard First Nation Language Planning Session took place in November 2018 in Watson Lake. The session was advertised in the weeks prior through posters on numerous local message boards, on social media, and on the Liard First Nation's website. This session was advertised as a public, community meeting and all community members were invited to come and share their perspectives. Additionally, the Language Department sent out personalized invitation letters to several key Elders and speakers, the local Kaska school teachers, and the Chief and Council.

This session was organized by the Liard First Nation Language Department in collaboration with the Yukon Native Language Centre (YNLC). All activities related to this session were facilitated by me, working in the capacity of the LFN Language Department Director, and the YNLC Director Tina Jules, who is Tlingit and has both Tlingit and Kaska ancestry. Tina and I worked together to plan and prepare various presentations and activities ahead of time, and we took turns facilitating discussions throughout the week.

The purpose of the Liard First Nation's Community Language Planning Session was to gather detailed input from the community, which would in turn inform the creation of a comprehensive Kaska language strategy, outlining language goals and priorities for the next 10 years. While many language gatherings and workshops took place in the community over the years, this particular meeting was unique, because it was the first

time the community came together to formalize a strategic way forward, constituting a long-range strategy where their priorities, goals, and locally informed solutions were at the centre. The goal was for the language strategy to guide the LFN Language Department's activities and programming, including strategic allocation of resources. Having a plan with well-articulated community goals and priorities, including a detailed workplan, would make planning our programming and securing the necessary funding less burdensome and more efficient. Additionally, our aim was to also develop an official mandate for the Language Department and a set of procedures and policies related to language for the First Nation to adopt and follow.

Further, a part of the session was devoted to presentations and demonstration of best practices and lessons learned from language revitalization efforts in other communities, where various models of language teaching and learning were successfully implemented. This, we hoped, would give the participants more ideas to consider and to inspire more productive conversations about what could potentially work well in the Kaska context. Many of the presentations included videos of language teaching methods, tools, and learning activities to implement, as well as videos outlining various types of community programming from around the world. Additionally, we also facilitated hands-on and group activities such as community resource mapping, for example, where the participants were encouraged to identify the community's strengths and existing resources we could draw on and utilize immediately. At the end of each day, we closed with Kaska storytelling time, where different speakers shared a traditional story to send us all home on a good note.

The sessions took place over a five-day period and were attended by individuals of all ages and language abilities. On average, the session had a full-day participation of about 30 people, with another 20 people dropping by, staying as long as they could throughout the week. In addition, Kaska language surveys were distributed to gather input from people who were not able to attend in person. The surveys were available in paper form at the First Nation's administrative building, and they were also available electronically through SurveyMonkey. A link to the survey was posted on the First Nation's website and Facebook page. Approximately 60 individuals responded to the survey.

Following this week-long session, both Tina Jules and I worked together on compiling our observations, notes, and data collected through the survey, ultimately creating a draft, which included detailed workplan for each focus area identified by the participants. This draft was then presented to the Liard First Nation Chief and Council for consideration and feedback. The presentation and the draft were well received by the leadership, and we were encouraged to continue in this work toward a completed strategy document that would be ratified by the leadership, and ultimately would be ready for implementation.

6.5 Reclaiming Domains of Kaska Language Use

Language revitalization as a practice, while firmly rooted in the present, often looks to the past for guidance and understanding, it is predominantly future oriented, with future speakers and future domains of language use in the position of prominence. "I don't have my language, but I want all our babies to hear and know our language from birth," one participant shared. Similar remarks, expressing the desire for younger generations to experience a different reality, have been a common feature during most language gatherings I have been part of, including this planning session. A wider engagement of community members in activities, such as language planning and language workshops and literacy sessions, allows for the exploration of the transformative potential of such endeavours when people come together and begin engaging in thinking about what the future could and should look like. "Not having one's ancestral language" is a reality that is painful and emotional for many. Reclaiming one's language can be a healing experience and acknowledging and speaking about painful legacies of residential schools, for example, is an important component of decolonising language reclamation work.

Providing a space for acknowledging and speaking about the painful history that led to the gradual decline in Kaska language use, and where things stand today and providing space where the enduring inequalities and experiences of linguistic oppression and marginalization can be safely shared is essential. Indeed, most language gatherings I have attended in the Yukon nearly always include participants sharing the violence they've experienced while attending Residential Schools or various other forms of marginalization in other institutional settings. These heartbreaking narratives contextualize revitalization work and remind us all that language

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documentation and revitalization as a practice exists not only because of colonial violence and oppressive governmental policies, but also because of people's resistance to this violence, and desire to keep their languages alive and strong. The revitalization of a language then involves deliberately holding onto and nurturing existing domains of language use, while also creating and claiming new domains and places where the language currently is or could potentially be spoken in the future. Tina Jules reminded me recently that acquiring fluency in an Indigenous language is only one step of many, we must work diligently on imagining and creating conditions and spaces where the language can have a vibrant life, spoken by a community daily and naturally, without thinking of it as an anomaly (T. Jules, personal communication, 2021). In other words, the work of language revitalization fundamentally involves the language's normalization.

It was during the discussions and activities, that ideas and attitudes concerning the language and its speakers became highly visible – some were locally widely held, while others were new and seemingly discursively emerging in the process. The discussion opened up opportunities and possibilities for community members, language workers, and other partners to share, discuss, plan, and publicly promote and encourage the use of the language in a variety of contexts and settings. Occasions such as these also inevitably provided opportunities for contested ideas about language to surface, sometimes in dramatic ways. Meek (2019) among others reminds us that some of the most productive sites for exploring ideologies of language are rituals, and that community meetings in the context of language renewal efforts, such as a language planning meeting, are ritualistic sites where sharing feelings and ideas about language is encouraged and openly discussed. The often taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions about what constitutes language, who is a speaker, and what fluency looks like, for example, became arduous and contested topics of discussion. Discourses about language inevitably coincide with other practices and tensions about language are rarely about just language alone (Meek, 2007; Nevins, 2004). A range of personal and collective language insecurities emerged during this time, especially among individuals who might have grown up with the language, hearing it from parents and family, speaking it as children, but because of their residential school attendance, lost their ability to use the Kaska language comfortably, unable to fully regain it.

I am inspired by Wesley Leonard's thinking in distinguishing between language revitalization and language reclamation as a way to decolonise the way we think about and talk about language (2011, 2012, and 2017). Leonard suggests that language revitalization should be understood as a process which focuses on the language itself, as a system of linguistic codes to understand and master. As a process, it primarily focuses on measurable and enumerable goals such as degrees of language fluency and a number of speakers, for example. In contrast, Leonard suggests that language reclamation captures a much larger and broader community effort to claim its right to speak their language, acknowledging historical and contemporary forces that led and continue to lead to language shift. The process of language reclamation involves setting goals and aspirations based on specific community situations, needs, and understandings of language. "As a broader approach than revitalization, reclamation more strongly links language work with the underlying causes of language shift. Reclamation likewise recognises that in certain worldviews, what in Western science would be considered social factors that are merely associated with language might instead be part of what someone understands 'language' to be" (2017, p.19). Further, Leonard illustrated how perceived usefulness and effectiveness of language work practices emerges through cultural lenses and the understanding and views of language itself. Reframing and reorienting language work in this way, language reclamation has the potential to be a force of decolonization, rather than a process of perpetuating colonial power structures and privileging academic concepts and categories over those of Indigenous communities (2017, p.20).

Given the deeply personal and emotional experience of language loss, many participants expressed a sense of urgency and the need for this work to begin as soon as possible, before it's too late. Unsurprisingly then, the session's participants shared ambitious and hopeful visions of the future ahead. They envisioned bringing the Kaska language back into all aspects of Kaska social life, spoken naturally, everywhere by everyone. In this vision, the Kaska language has a vibrant life, at the centre of each home, integral to schools-based education, visible and audible around the community, and on the land. In this vision, language and cultural learning is to be understood as a life-long, holistic process, enriching people's lives and experiences. The participants envisioned an implementation of language and cultural programming engaging people

in all stages of life from expecting parents, to an immersion daycare, an improved and expanded elementary and high school Kaska language programming, land-based learning, the establishment of various partnerships with institutions of higher learning, as well as diverse community initiatives aiming to increase the visibility and prestige of the language in public places.

Throughout the session, the importance of *Dene ā́' nezen* –a set of land-based, social, moral, and legal protocols, grounded in respect and bounded through reciprocal relationships and obligations, was highlighted frequently as inseparable from community life, including language work. The Elders reminded us that Dene ā́' nezen must be at the core of everything the First Nation does. The restoring of the Kaska language must be embedded in proper protocols of respect and reciprocity. It became clear that in the participants' eyes, the measure of whether the Nation's efforts are successful or not is directly linked with how inline it all is with *Dene ā́' nezen.*

The participants identified seven areas, or domains to focus on and to develop programming and the necessary supports for. These focus areas reflected different stages of life, consistent with the belief that Kaska language and cultural learning is lifelong.

The home, and by extension the family, was identified as the central location of language and cultural learning to ensure the health and well-being of all. The home too was identified as the centre in which all other areas must be anchored. The six remaining areas correspond to different life stages, identified as sites for future language and cultural programs. While at the beginning, not all programs would be able to function, the First Nation would work diligently towards eventually implementing all programs fully, having them nurture and support each other. For example, traditional parenting and home language programs would provide the base education for children entering the immersion language nest program. The adult language immersion program would provide opportunities for staff capacity building. Since all programs require adults with higher levels of language fluency, intensive or immersion adult language programs were given high priority. Having more adults engaged in language learning will promote language use in the home and around the community.

Following are the strategic areas that were identified by the participants, each with a brief description. The Kaska names for the proposed programs were developed with the Elders and speakers who participated in the planning session. The participants reiterated that all language and cultural programming must have a Kaska name.

6.5.1 *Sā Dene K'éh Ts'ídāne Négéyeh* —The Way Our Ancestors Raised Children —Traditional Parenting Language Program

This program would serve as one of the foundational components of the First Nation's efforts to reclaim the Kaska language and culture, bringing it back into people's homes, as a part of their family's life. The planning session's participants envisioned the program's design to support expecting mothers and new parents in cultural and spiritual learning and would provide opportunities for early language exposure for babies in the womb. The participants reiterated the traditional role of the mother in instilling baby's first language, and the importance of storytelling and singing songs in the language as a key component of bonding between a mother and a child. This program would provide opportunities and supports for expecting mothers to hear and learn the Kaska language. Cultural practices and values related to pregnancy, birthing, and motherhood were identified as inseparable from and intertwined with language and would therefore need to be incorporated into this program.

6.5.2 *Gūkǫ̃ą́* — Our home — Home Language Program

The goal of this program would be to support families interested in increasing Kaska language use in their homes. This program would ensure families are provided with useful materials and resources, as well as program support, assisting in implementing effective language learning for the entire family. The planning session's participants highlighted that with the Kaska language thriving in the homes, families will be able to create a sacred space where language, culture, and spirituality help guide every aspect of their lives, and where living according to *Dene Ā' Neze*n becomes a part of everything they do. The participants collectively reiterated that healthy homes, connected to language, culture, and traditional ways of life are at the heart of strong, healthy communities.

6.5.3 Gūts'ídāne Kǫ̃ą́ — Our Children's House — Zero to five/Nest Daycare Program

This program would serve as yet another building block for the foundation of the First Nation's efforts to reclaim the Kaska language and culture, bringing it back into people's homes. The program would provide a safe and culturally informed immersion environment, where young children can learn, play, sing, and drum in the Kaska language. The participants stressed the importance of children growing up taking pride in being Kaska. Early exposure to the language and cultural teaching embedded in the language was seen as a way to cultivate strong Kaska identity and pride in one's history, culture, and language.

6.5.4 Ts'ídāne Kegehdį̄h Kǭą̄ — Children are Learning House — K-12 School Program

This program would ensure that the local Yukon public school programs include quality Kaska language education, respectful of Kaska values and approaches to learning as one of their components. The school programs were identified as an important part of the First Nation's overall efforts to revitalize the Kaska language, however, it cannot be the only programming available to children and youth the community. The language and cultural programming in the Watson Lake schools must be guided by and rooted in Liard First Nation's self-determined goals and priorities for the Kaska language and culture, and not driven by goals identified by the Yukon Department of Education. A strong emphasis was put on providing adequate preparation of teachers, ensuring that they are fluent and well trained in language teaching methods. Teachers must also be provided with comprehensive progressive curriculum, teaching tools, learner materials, and ongoing support, including paid positions for Kaska Elders to work at the school. In other words, this program would involve an extensive and long-term engagement with the Yukon Department of Education to re-envision the public school programs.

6.5.5. *Dene Kegehdį̄h Kǭą̄* — People are Learning House — College/University Kaska Language Program

This program would work towards establishing productive partnerships and working relationships with institutions of higher education to develop opportunities for young Kaska people to get relevant university-level training and accreditation in Kaska language proficiency, language revitalization and linguistics to increase local capacity and ensure long-term sustainability of Kaska language work going forward. The Liard First Nation's current collaborations with the Yukon Native Language Centre's SFU

language proficiency program are a part of the Language Department's efforts to meet the goals of the *Dene Kegehdı̨h Kǫ́ą́* program.

6.5.6 *Gūchō' Tene Sík'ādé Gíndzedéł* — We are Still Walking the Trails of Our Ancestors — Land-based Language Program

This program was envisioned to engage people of all ages, integrating the learning of land-based skills and traditional knowledge in a Kaska language immersion learning environment. Teaching must be designed to follow the seasons and must be true to Kaska values, following Kaska protocols and models of behaviour, including responsibility to the community, and service to others. As previously mentioned, Kaska land-based programming and cultural learning has always been and continues to be strong, however, an effective, land-based language immersion programming has been challenging to implement. This program would seek to remedy this issue, bringing effective language learning back on the land, embedded in land-based activities.

6.5.7 *Dene K'éh Gűs'ān* — People's Way of Being — LFN Government/ Workplace Program

The goal of this program is to prioritize the Kaska language and culture within the Liard First Nation government and all its departments' initiatives by reviewing, revising, and creating new language-related policies. These policies would aim to encourage and create incentives for language learning among the First Nation's employees, providing opportunities for on-the-job language training as a part of employment benefits, rewarding full or emerging language fluency. This program would also be responsible for ensuring greater visibility and audibility of the Kaska language in the First Nation's buildings and in the community in general.

6.5.8 *Dene Kūgı̄tset* — People are Coming to Realize —Watson Lake Community Program

This program would be designed to work with local agencies, businesses, and the Federal and Yukon governments to have the Kaska language and the Kaska homeland recognized, respected, and honoured in the community of Watson Lake and the surrounding area. The participants of the planning session insisted that this initiative must be led by Liard First Nation and any signage, or any type of recognition or acknowledgement must be vetted accordingly, with Liard First Nation's input and

approval. Currently, there are no public acknowledgments of Kaska presence anywhere in or around the town of Watson Lake. However, small collaboration projects with two local agencies are underway to create Kaska language signage for two public buildings.

6.5.9 Foundational Supports for All Programming

An essential component of being able to implement the language programs outlined above is having adequately trained staff with a sufficient level of fluency in the Kaska language to handle the demands of each program. Currently, most fluent speakers are elderly, and while they might be able to assist younger advanced learners and emerging speakers in running programs, they cannot be expected to run such programs on their own. This crucial lack of capacity in the community is not lost on anyone. To develop adequately trained staff requires funding, time, and quality training, including language training. **Dene Zā́gé' Zelé' — In the Kaska Language Only — Full-time Intensive Kaska Language / Mentor Apprentice Program** was envisioned as one possible way to begin providing the necessary supports for all the above programming to be able to function. The goal of this program is to build a framework and develop a plan to consistently support full-time, paid language learning opportunities for Kaska learners willing to make the commitment to study their language and serve their Nation. This would include both the Language Proficiency Program and the Mentor Apprentice Program (Hinton, 2002). A well-designed and well-run Kaska Language Proficiency Program, inclusive of Intensive or Mentor Apprentice programs, is one of the foundational supports the Language Department is aiming to create.

In addition to the areas outlined above, an extensive, well-organized, and accessible repository of Kaska language and cultural materials and resources has been identified by the community members and the Language Department as one of the key ingredients for Kaska language and cultural programming's success. This repository must be all-encompassing to support all the above areas of focus. Developing such repository will take time and will require careful planning and substantial financial investments. The participants also recognized the need for community research and documentation of lesser-known topics, to ensure that all programs are provided with holistic, culturally relevant, appropriate, and accurate resources.

Such materials will then require suitable, long-term archival solutions to ensure that they are not only secure, but also well-organized and managed, and accessible to the programs and to the community. Prioritizing and investing time and financial resources into this area will undoubtably be worth the efforts as having well-developed materials and resources to draw on is at the core of every program. Such repository will be valuable not only to the Language Department, but also to other LFN departments and their programming as they move towards integrating Kaska values and the Kaska language into their activities, decolonizing and indigenizing the way they deliver services to Kaska citizens .

6.6 Embarking on New Trails

It has been over three years since the planning session took place and since then, the Language Department has been working towards several goals identified as priorities during the planning session. Notable progress has been made in several areas. In the following sections I briefly outline some of the work that has been done or is currently in progress and how these efforts work towards the overall goals outlined in the Liard First Nation Kaska Language Strategy. However, I mostly only report on these efforts and do not provide an extensive analysis of their effectiveness or impacts on the community. Since much of this work is relatively new and still in development, the long-term effects of these efforts are yet to be determined. However, it appears that at least some of the current interventions are making a difference through facilitating language learning opportunities and engaging more people in language work. What has been accomplished up to now demonstrates that by opening a space and facilitating work that is community driven, bringing together people with different skills, capacities, and expertise can be productive and empowering and significant advancements can be made. Focusing on building capacity within the community, so in the future, communities have the tools and expertise they need to continue this important work has been crucial. The development and dissemination of various language resources are likewise generating more interest in Kaska language learning and raising awareness around Indigenous language revitalization in general. Given the right conditions of productive community – academic partnerships, together with institutional supports, technical expertise, and funding, significant advances towards language recovery can be made.

The following are just some examples of the work that has been ongoing as a result of the work I have been engaged in, creating more favorable conditions to provide support for Kaska language speakers, learners, and the community as a whole.

6.6.1 University-accredited Kaska Language Classes

In the fall 2019 and spring 2020 the LFN Language Department collaborated with Dr. Patrick Moore and the University of British Columbia's First Nations and Endangered Languages program, located within the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies in offering community-based, university accredited Kaska Language Level 1 and Level 2 courses. Two young people working in the Language Department were able to enroll, connecting via zoom several times a week, working with a speaker who joined the Zoom sessions. These courses were made available to them as a part of their employment training, and all fees and tuition was covered by the First Nation. In the summer of 2020, the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) and Yukon Native Language Centre (YNLC) negotiated an agreement with Simon Fraser University (SFU) to develop a Language Proficiency Certificate program, specifically designed specifically for Yukon Indigenous languages. This program includes not only university accredited courses in all Yukon Indigenous languages (provided instructors are available to teach the course), but also several linguistic oriented courses focusing on Dene languages' structure and grammar, phonetics, and training in language documentation and revitalization. These courses are available to all Yukon First Nation citizens and beneficiaries, with all fees and tuition are covered by the CYFN.

The Liard First Nation Language Department decided to transition from the UBC-based courses to the YNCL/SFU model to provide better access to other Kaska students who might otherwise not be able to participate due to UBC tuition and fees. Additionally, since the classes are offered over Zoom, they are available not only to local community members, but also to those who live outside of the community. In the past year and half teaching these course, Kaska students joined from other Kaska communities in the Yukon and British Columbia, as well as Kaska people living in Whitehorse, Vancouver, Edmonton, and even California.

6.6.2 Development of Kaska Language Resources
Kaska Language Curriculum Development

Since there were no ready-made curriculum and course materials developed to enable the teaching of a university-level Kaska language course, they had to be developed. The Department collaborated with Patrick Moore, who was instrumental in developing many of these course materials. The themes and topics of the curriculum materials up to now are based on the existing conversational lessons the UBC Kaska Language Website described below. These had to be modified to fit the needs of beginner learners and more materials had to be developed to accommodate classroom-style teaching. All lessons developed are conversation-based, progressive, and focused on practical language skills for learners to be able to use the language in everyday situations – at home, at work, around town, and on the land. Students were provided not only with text-based materials, but also audio recordings. Additional topics were developed as well to correspond to curriculum templates developed by the Yukon Native Language Centre for their language proficiency certificates to ensure consistency across all Yukon First Nation's languages. Currently, materials for levels 1 through 3 have been developed.

Dene K'éh Négűdzédédéh K'űgé' - Kaska Phrase Book

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic restrictions, 2020 had been a challenging year for many people and communities around the world. This community was no exception. Since the possibility of in-person interactions were limited, it constrained how we were able to work together and what we could accomplish. With the Language Department months-long closure due to Covid-19, the Language Department team focused on projects activities that could be done remotely, either by phone or over video conferencing. Hence, the idea of creating *Dene K'éh Négűdzédédéh K'űgé'* - Kaska Language Phrase Book was conceived. In 85 pages, the phrase book is organized by themes and topics such as greetings and introductions, encouragement, morning and evening routines, hand games, bingo, and love and endearment, for example, each section containing a list of useful phrases. This is the first Kaska phrase book created. The artwork used for the phrase book was created by a Kaska artist and was inspired by one of the phrases in the phrase book "*Gūzā́gī gūdzě' desa'ān"* – Our language is within our heart," featuring an image of a crow and a wolf to represent the two Kaska Clans. Currently the book is available in print or as a digital copy. To date, over 500 copies have been distributed locally as well as mailed out to interested Kaska citizens

living elsewhere, away from the community. Currently, the entire phrase book is being audio recorded and the recording processed for distribution.
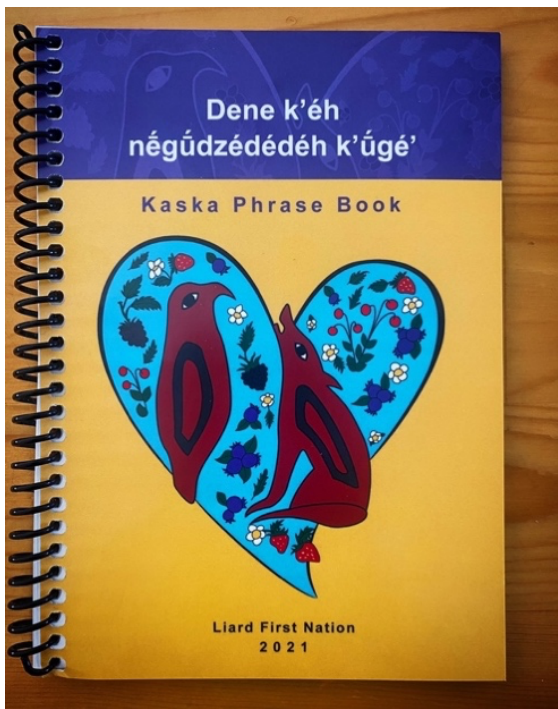

Figure 14. Dene K'éh Nę́gų́dzédédéh K'ų́gé'

6.6.3 Media and Technology as Tools of Mobilization and Advocacy

For several years starting in 2014, our Kaska language team has been working towards increasing the Kaska language's visibility and accessibility in online spaces, including not only on various social media and audio and video sharing platforms, such as Vimeo and Soundcloud, but also by creating the UBC Kaska Language Website, the UBC online Kaska "talking" dictionary, and most recently, the Kaska Cards flashcard app. Prior to these efforts, Kaska language's online presence was limited, mostly through the First Voices website, an initiative facilitated by British Columbia's First People's Cultural Council in the early 2000s. While this platform still exists, the content is minimal, and I personally find it cumbersome to work with. In our extensive conversations with Elders and others in the community we recorded with regarding making the Kaska language available online, people felt it was important to increase access to language learning resources as much as possible. Similarly, they felt it was

important to take advantage of new technologies and normalize the Kaska language in contemporary spaces, including online spaces. Following are examples of some of the platforms we have been utilizing.

Facebook

The Kaska Learners Facebook account was started after spending my first summer in the community in 2014. Since I came as a part of a UBC team, recording for the Kaska "talking" Dictionary, I generated an extensive collection of recordings. I wanted to share them with people, so they can begin engaging with the work. Additionally, I aimed to raise awareness of the dictionary project and other documentation activities, including sharing photographs from various recording sessions. Over the years, the account has transformed into the unofficial account of the Liard First Nation Language Department. I continue posting words of the day with audio links, Kaska language videos, short language lessons, information about language learning opportunities, and various other cultural and language related information and events. The account has also become a point of contact for people to acquire about various language resources, including translations and spelling of words and phrases. Currently, the account has nearly 1000 followers.

Vimeo

The Kaska Language Videos on Vimeo (Kaska Language Videos, n.d.) has been a place to house a variety of language videos that have been created over the years. I started this account in 2016, as a way to share videos I had been making while working with Kaska speakers. Many of these videos are short phrases, featuring an Elder speaker doing some activity, such as picking berries or working on a hide, for example, and teaching a Kaska phrase relevant to the activity. Recently, a few short video skits made by two language learners and the Language Department's employees. In these videos, they can be seen in various local settings, talking about the weather, greeting each other, sitting around the fire, and chopping wood, for example, all in the Kaska language. This account has also become a repository for longer videos of local storytelling events, and digitized audio books. Currently, this account holds over 30

videos, all are open to the public. Links to this site are usually shared on the Kaska Learners Facebook page or shared with students as a part of our Kaska language classes as another learning resource for students to explore.

Kaska Cards App

Kaska language audio flashcard app Kaska Cards (Liard First Nation, n.d.) is available online in a web version, as well as a mobile app, available for both Apple and Android products; see Figure 15. This app has been in development for several years and has recently become available to users. Currently, the app holds more than 30 decks with over 500 cards with audio recordings. More content is currently being developed and added regularly. At this time, the app contains only cards made by the Liard First Nation Language Department, but a built-in function of the app allows for users to create their own decks of flashcards to fit their own learning needs and goals. This feature makes the Kaska App an exciting tool for collaborative, community-generated content. The vision of this tool to be used by a variety of users in many different settings, including students in the adult Kaska language classes as well as an easy-to-use, engaging tool for the local elementary and secondary schools.
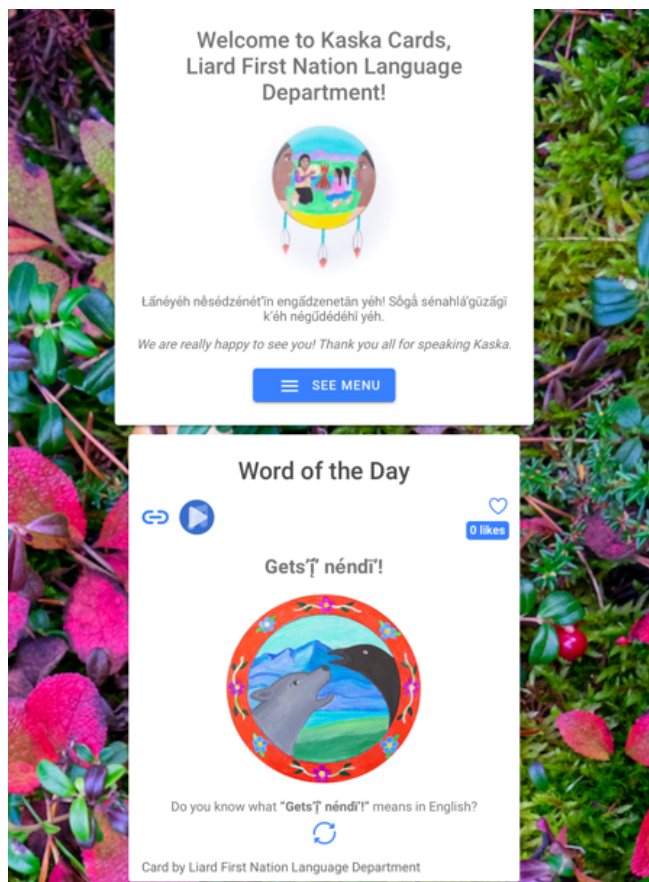
Figure 15. Liard First Nation Kaska Cards App

UBC Kaska Language Website and UBC Kaska "talking" Dictionary

Both the Kaska language website (University of British Columbia, n.d.) and the Kaska "talking" dictionary have been a result of collaborations between Kaska First Nations, both in the Yukon and in British Columbia, Liard Aboriginal Women's Society, Yukon Education, and University of British Columbia, and both are ongoing projects. The UBC Kaska language website currently houses over one hundred audio conversational lessons with transcripts, pronunciation exercises, and a variety of videos, all in the Kaska language. See Figure 16.
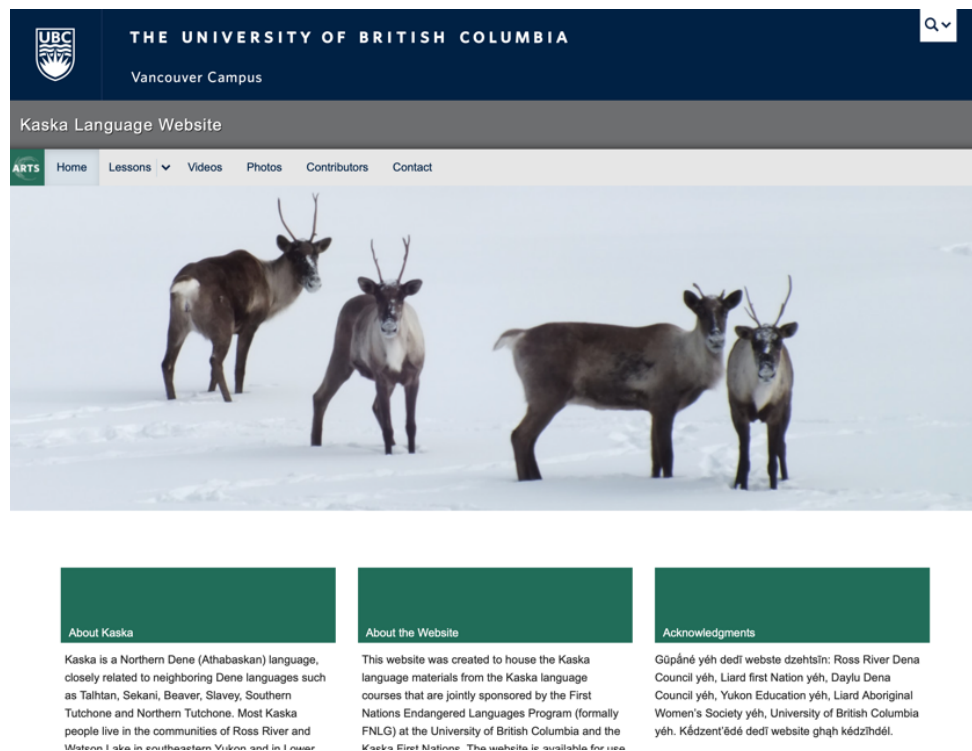
Figure 16. University of British Columbia's Kaska Language Website

The Kaska "talking" dictionary (see Figure 17) is an ongoing project, which has faced multiple technical difficulties over the years and is currently offline due to technical issues. Nevertheless, a substantial number of recordings have been produced because of this project, and currently, there are over 6,000 entries. While this began as a strictly UBC project, multiple community members have been involved in recording and processing the recordings. Creating the content for both the website and the dictionary had been an opportunity to provide training and employment opportunities to multiple community members.

Figure 17. University of British Columbia's Kaska Talking Dictionary website

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I aimed to capture the ongoing process of the Kaska community's imagining, planning, and generally working towards creating more favourable conditions for their ancestral language to not only survive, but thrive, healthy and strong for future generations. I suggested that through the various language reclamation and revitalization practices, the language's rightful place in people's lives is acknowledged and affirmed. Additionally, I provided various examples to demonstrate that language revitalization activities, including the production of various language objects, have the capacity to begin re-shaping the language's trajectory from decline to growth and vitality. I also considered some of the ideological tensions which have emerged in these future making contexts as people expressed concerns and anxieties about what must be carried forward, and how it should be done. I discussed some of the negative impacts and unintended consequences these tensions have had on local language revitalization efforts over the years, while at the same time, I provided examples of important ideological recalibrations and reorientations which have also occurred in recent years, some as a direct result of people's engagements in language revitalization activities and language-related training. I argued that these recalibrations and

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reorientations serve as mitigating strategies, proving to be beneficial to the overall Kaska language revitalization efforts.

I described some of the activities and discussions that took place during the formal 2018 Liard First Nation Community Language Planning Session, which ultimately led to the production of the Liard First Nation Language Strategy Plan. The session's participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to see the Kaska language playing a vital role in the community's life, today and in the future, ultimately spoken everywhere by everyone again. The Liard First Nation Language Strategy Plan reflects this sentiment, outlining some of the first steps to achieve this vision. This plan outlines several priority areas for the First Nation to begin focus on, with the aim of creating wide-ranging language learning opportunities and cultural programming to encourage and support language learners in the community, in all stages of life. With all these programs in place, well-developed, well-run, and well-funded, the community members believe proper conditions will be in place for the language to begin to grow again.

Next, I described some of the initial steps the Liard First Nation's Language Department began to take, following what the community envisioned during the planning session. Since all programming outlined in the strategy plan requires well-trained staff with higher level language skills, the Department prioritized this task, and began with activities to increase staff capacity, including providing more language learning opportunities via Simon Fraser University accredited language courses. To be able to provide effective language learning opportunities, the production of a progressive curriculum and related language learning and teaching materials had to be initiated. The Department also began investing into staff training and professional development in general, increasing local capacity in language related work in, including training in language documentation, basic linguistics, teaching and material development, and digitization. The Language Department also began focusing of developing a variety of other language teaching and learning tools and resources to support its programming.

Since much of this work is relatively new or still in development, what the creation of more favourable conditions looks like locally, and what will be the impacts of what is currently under way is yet to be fully determined. The current interventions such as the

involvement of more people through employment and language learning opportunities, the creation of more widely available language resources, and the ongoing work of language promotion and activism are unmistakably changing the local dynamics, generating more interest, and perhaps for some, changing the expectations of what can be accomplished.

All these interventions were only possible once the First Nation began receiving their core language funding from the Federal Government and they can continue in the future only if this funding is consistent and guaranteed long-term. It is difficult to plan the future relying on uncertain and precarious funding. Further, to grow these efforts and to ultimately meet all the goals outlined in the First Nation's language strategy plan will require a substantial increase in funding and other supports and resources. Additionally, more funding is desperately needed for infrastructure. Safe and adequate buildings and sites to house language and cultural programs are in limited supply. Setting up a language immersion daycare in the community, for example, doesn't only involve developing the program, creating resources, and training staff, all of which is complex enough, but it might also involve the construction of a new building, because a suitable building to house this program is not available.

Finally, I want to underscore that while there must always be locally controlled and locally informed approaches to Indigenous language documentation and revitalization, it would be a serious error to attribute slow progress or various failures in this area onto the communities themselves. As I have demonstrated, Kaska people have long understood that serious actions must be taken to work towards documenting and revitalizing their language and their culture. For decades, they have taken it upon themselves to do what they could with the resources they had available to them. What they have been able to accomplish is impressive, despite all the obstacles they have faced over the years. All local efforts are inevitably intertwined with regional and national politics, interests, and governmental priorities, which are routinely outside of the First Nation's control. In addition to all the complexity and hard work on the ground, countless structural and systemic hurdles regularly constrain and interfere with the important work communities are doing or would like to do. Years of chronic underfunding and lack of investment into Indigenous communities, together with incredibly bureaucratic and arduous funding models which are difficult to navigate,

continue to undermine and hinder progress not only in language work, but overall, in all areas of First Nation services and program delivery.

In a recent radio interview with CBC North (Linklater, 2021), Deputy Chief of Daylu Dena Council Harlan Schilling discussed the ceremonial demolition of the last remaining part of the Lower Post residential school building, which for decades, out of necessity, housed the First Nation's administrative offices and the community's post office. For the Lower Post Kaska Elders and residential school survivors, this building, situated in the middle of the community, was a daily reminder of the horrific experiences many of them lived through as children. Going to the post office to get mail, which for most of us is a mundane chore, required overcoming the feeling of anxiety and dread for many. While discussing the construction plans for the new multipurpose community building, which will replace the old building, and which is slated to be built in the next two years, the Deputy Chief shared a much broader vision for the Nation's future. At the core of this vision is the complete revitalization of the Kaska language and culture, whose decline he attributed to the violence committed on Kaska people at the Lower Post residential school. "People's languages and cultures were stolen there" he told the radio audience. He highlighted that for him, reconciliation is not about words, it is about actions, "reconcile-action" as he called it. He further told the audience that what he wants from the Federal Government and the Catholic Church is for them to put the same level of financial investment and ambition into assisting First Nations in their efforts to bring their languages and cultures back, as they did into operating the Lower Post residential school and other institutions like it. In this sense, Deputy Chief Schilling invited all listeners to join him and his people in imagining and working towards a future in which Indigenous languages and cultures are respected and well supported, vibrant, and healthy again, present in all aspects of Indigenous people's lives. The community has been doing their part, but they cannot do this alone. It is only through concrete actions and through financial and legislative commitments that reconciliation can be achieved.

Closing

Back to the Beginning, Moving Forward

It was the end of the summer 2015, and I had the opportunity to attend the Yukon teachers' in-service week, organized by the Yukon Department of Education in Whitehorse. Teachers from all over the Yukon came together and participate in various meetings and curriculum training sessions to prepare for the upcoming school year. I was particularly interested in a training session concerning the British Columbia's Indian Residential School and Reconciliation Curriculum component, which was being introduced to the Yukon schools that year. One of the training workshops was a demonstration of how to facilitate the Blanket Exercise. I will only briefly explain how this exercise works, since anyone can explore the KAIROS website (*Kairos Blanket Exercise*, 2020) for more detailed explanation, including training videos. While the degree of effectiveness and appropriateness of this activity for the diverse types of participants and audiences are worth carefully thinking about, it is not my focus here. Instead, I will focus on how this activity unfolded at one particular moment in time, with a small set of Yukon educators, First Nation Elders, and school administrators. I believe that what followed this activity demonstrates the ongoing Indigenous interventions and active participations in the official telling and re-telling of history and the refusal to simply "go along."

This exercise is designed to be a participatory history lesson, in which more than 500 years of colonial history in the Americas is presented. In a one and a half hour long, emotionally charged interactive workshop, the participants are invited to grapple with the impacts of colonization on the continent's Indigenous lands and peoples. At the beginning, each participant is assigned a role they will play. There is a main facilitator, who acts as the narrator of history from the colonizer's perspective, who is referred to as "the European." The exercise starts with multiple blankets spread on the ground, covering the entire floorspace. The blankets represent the pre-colonial contact Indigenous lands. Each participant is given a colour-coded scroll, detailing their roles in the historical narrative as it unfolds. The narrator then begins his narration with the 1492 arrival of Columbus, with the idea to presumably continue with the narrative until the present day. Through the narration, significant events such as brutal massacres, the

signing of treaties, and the various epidemics and violent displacement of peoples are dramatically highlighted from the colonizers' perspective only, often citing excerpts from various official government policy documents, quotes from the correspondence between government officials, and official government statements. As various waves of illness and violence sweep through the continent, participants representing the population affected by these disruptive and deadly events are asked to "step off the blanket" to enact the human casualties that followed these upheavals. The systematic land dispossession is enacted by the European character's periodic removal of the blankets from the floor. With each progression, more people were asked to step off the blankets, fewer blankets were available to stand on, so those still left standing were forced to crowd on whatever blankets were still available. The idea was that as more land was stolen, more people died, and those who were still alive had less and less land available to subsist on.

I was personally asked to step off the blanket early on, as a casualty of one of the earliest epidemics, so I stood on the side and watched the activity unfold. Most of the participants in the room were teachers, some of European ancestry, many Indigenous to the Yukon. Present were also multiple Elders and residential school survivors, who for the purpose of this exercise were also assigned roles. The narration script of the European was cruel, methodical, and unapologetic. As more and more Europeans made it into the Americas, more Indigenous people died, more land was taken.

Even though what was being choreographed was not revelatory for me personally, I cannot deny that I was moved by this activity. It was powerful and overwhelming to feel and witness, especially since so many of my co-participants were Indigenous, some, like the residential school survivors, have directly experienced and survived institutionalized colonial violence through the residential school system. As the activity went on, I kept thinking about where all this was going and what the end was going to look like. In this activity, people were only responding to the voice of the European telling them what to do. "You are being relocated," the European told a group of people standing on the edge of one of the remaining blankets, ordering them to move to the opposite side. "You died in the smallpox epidemic, step off the blanket," he told another group. We only moved around as we were told, moving about the room somberly and

robotically. We didn't talk, we didn't question, we just followed the European character's directions.

It became clear to me that this exercise completely failed to account for the countless acts of Indigenous resistance that too were a part of this history, focusing instead exclusively on the atrocities committed by the colonizers, cultivating, at least in me, a degree of despair and hopelessness. Perhaps that was the intention? "But wait," I thought to myself, "I am surrounded by Indigenous people; they are still here!" They are here, because of their ancestors' resilience and resistance! Despite centuries of colonial violence and dispossession, re-enacted in the room, people are still here, and they are definitely neither powerless nor passive! Their presence is a living testament to their ancestral strength and to the failure of the dreadful policies recited by the character of the European. Tragically, this aspect was not reflected in the narrative at all. Instead, it only represented people as passive, submissive subject, completely lacking agency and defiance. I wondered if going through this exercise might have been re-traumatizing for some people and whether this tragic omission was doing further damage to the Indigenous-settler relations and the process of reconciliation this activity was meant to facilitate. Trauma-centred narratives always seem to dominate in these contexts over narratives which acknowledge trauma but predominately focus on resistance and resilience of Indigenous peoples.

Unfortunately, I never got to see how the exercise officially ends. Somewhere around the mid 1800s, we ran out of time and were asked to gather around to debrief as a group. The remainder of the blankets was cleared out of the way, making space for a large circle of chairs we were asked to sit on. Several boxes of tissues were distributed around the room in anticipation of the emotional moments to come. We sat down and after a few brief remarks from the facilitators, we were encouraged to share our thoughts about what we had just gone through. What followed was an uncomfortable scene I have witnessed on many occasions before, when the truths about colonial brutality and injustice are exposed. Some participants, specifically those of European ancestry, became very emotional, nearly unable to speak, some sharing with the rest of us that prior to this day, they had never realized the extend of what went on, feeling guilty and ashamed. The mood was somber and some of the Elders and residential school survivors took it upon themselves to comfort those who were visibly struggling,

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bringing them a box of tissue and offering a warm embrace. For me personally, the sight of a residential school survivor comforting a struggling settler, whose eyes were just opened to a very different Canada, was upsetting. While the kindness and compassion of the Elders was admirable, this put them in a position of not only educating but also shouldering the emotional burden of those who somehow got into adulthood completely unaware of the country's history, including the not-too-distant history of residential schools. This should not have been the Elders' responsibility!

As we continued around the circle, an Elder whose turn it was next stood up, took a deep breath, and began to speak. I had never met her before, but as soon as I heard her voice, I immediately knew who she was. She was a Kaska Elder from Ross River, whose language recordings I used to listened to and transcribed for hours in my Vancouver apartment, working as a graduate research assistant to my supervisor! I still distinctly remember the feeling brought on by the familiarity of her calm, yet firm voice. I felt like I knew her so intimately, like we had spent hours, or even days together, yet, she obviously had no idea who I was. It was a feeling that's hard to describe, but one thing was clear — her strong voice powerfully disrupted the European narrative we had all been immersed in for the last hour or so of this activity. In me, it also disrupted the feeling of despair. Her voice denied any suggestion of Indigenous silence and passivity. What followed was possibly the best ending to this exercise one could wish for! After her brief personal introduction in the Kaska language, the Elder told the facilitators: "Give me the blankets!" As soon as she got them in her hands, she began spreading them back on the floor without saying anything – we all watched her in silence. After covering nearly the entire floorspace inside of our chair circle, she stepped in the middle of the blankets and began to speak again: "We have never lost our land, we are still here, and nobody can take our land away from us! We never signed the Land Claims, we speak our language, we never gave anything up. We have it all for our children and grandchildren forever."

The metaphor of the blanket as uncolonized Indigenous lands lent itself exceptionally well to this kind of "interruption" and refusal to "go along" with the merciless script of the European. For those in the room who might have not noticed it up to this point, I believe it underscored the undeniable absence of Indigenous voice and agency in this narration of history. While the Elder was most likely specifically

referring to the Kaska response to the treaty-making in the Yukon and the Kaskas' long history of refusal to go along, her intervention exemplified more broadly the enduring Indigenous voices of resistance – survivance - so ironically absent from an activity that was meant to correct the record and to tell the truth. Powerfully, she identified the Kaska language as an effective tool of survival, resistance, and as a linguistic marker of resilience, intimately connected to and rooted in place, in *Dene Keyēh.*

Years have passed since the above-described activity took place, and since then, I have met countless other Kaskas, who feel just as strongly about their land and the Kaska language as this Elder does. The frequent pairing of land and language in these contexts makes it clear that for the Kaska people, language and land are, always have been, and will be tied together, inseparable from its people.

Figure 18.Ceremonial demolition of the Lower Post Residential School

Note on the photo:

This photo was taken during the ceremonial demolition of the Lower Post residential school on June 30, 2021. Wooden planks taken from the school building were available for the participants to burn in the ceremonial fire. All participants were encouraged to write their own messages on the wood before throwing it in the fire. (Photo: Government of Yukon, 2021)

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