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> **SGaawaay K'uuna: Edge of the Knife, Indigenous Language Revitalization**

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At the intersection of Indigenous language socialization, linguistic preservation of endangered languages, and a sociocultural anthropology of Indigenous media, lies how Indigenous languages are being revitalized by film and the production process. The critically acclaimed production of the first all Haida language feature film, *SGaawaay K'uuna: Edge of the Knife* (2018), tells an inspiring story of bringing hope to the elders, Indigenous language to the youth, and a passionate revitalization of language and community with its radical approach to language revitalization through its community-driven production process.¹

This analysis is drawn from my experiences at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, the Mother Tongue Film Festival, with blogs put out by the Haida Nation (primarily written by one of the Haida scriptwriters, Graham Richard),² the CBC short documentary, *Retake* (2018), about the filming process (directed by Haida/Cree documentary filmmaker Kristi Lane Sinclair and produced by award-winning Anishinaabe filmmaker Lisa Jackson),³ and recorded Q&A sessions from the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).⁴

¹ "Haida Gwaii Language and Film," *Isuma TV*, accessed June 30, 2020, <http://www.isuma.tv/haida>.

² "Haida Film Project," *Council of the Haida Nation*, accessed December 8, 2018, <http://www.haidanation.ca/?cat=148>.

³ "Retake: Making the World's First Haida-language Feature Film | CBC Short Docs," YouTube video, 24:16, posted by CBC Docs, September 04, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Wwl-Cs7S-AQ>.

⁴ "EDGE OF THE KNIFE Cast and Crew Q&A, Sept 9 | TIFF 2018," YouTube video, 34:57, posted by TIFF Talks, September 8, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT7pbYGWwnA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT7pbYGWwnA;);

"EDGE OF THE KNIFE Cast and Crew Q&A, Sept 10 | TIFF 2018," YouTube video, 25:49, posted by TIFF Talks, September 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=664XFzBWso4>.

Haida is a critically endangered Indigenous language with little more than 20 fluent speakers left before this film was made. Legendary producer Zacharias Kunuk of Isuma laid a path 19 years ago for Indigenous language feature films with *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), and he also brought his expertise to this project. In addition to multiple awards, co-director Helen Haig-Brown said the film's success is contained in "the spirit that's been ignited around and the excitement and love and the passion around the language and how happy and joyful it's making people and... for those few handful of speakers left to say, that is exactly how we sound"⁵

Danis Goulet, an award-winning Indigenous Cree/Métis filmmaker, programmed the film at TIFF and provided the framework of the importance of this film to the larger public when she introduced it saying, "everybody is really in for a very spectacular and unique experience. This is an incredible rendering of a classic Haida tale set in the 1800s in Haida Gwaii. And it is a really stunning cinematic achievement as well as being shot entirely in the Haida language which is critically endangered. And so, this was very much also a language revitalization project and really an ambitious undertaking. And I think, you know, it's so rare that we get to see, you know, Indigenous stories reimagined in this way for the screen, but I think that the depth of these stories really also redefines what cinema can be"⁶

Goulet opens the public's experience of this film by drawing attention to key concepts that also showed up in Haida conversations about what is so important about this film. It is a Haida tale, set in Haida Gwaii, and told in the northern and southern dialects of Gaw Xaad kil and HIGaagilda Xaayda kil.⁷ Goulet grounds *SGaawaay K'uuna* in a context of cultural pride, narrative film intervention, and Indigenous resilience. This Haida story is passionately rendered through the language, excellent filming, and is a true cinematic achievement.

The Indigenous community driven filmmaking process is also radically important. Those involved in the production of *SGaawaay K'uuna* spoke explicitly about how film practices relate to language and community revitalization. The production process has been well documented by the Haida Nation, and from start to finish was community-driven.⁸ As Production Manager Dana Moraes said, "this film came from our community. It came from community planning. And in our community they said they wanted to, number one, they wanted to revitalize our language. It was in a crisis, and it still is in a crisis. So we wanted to revitalize our language, we wanted to protect our land and water"⁹

5 "Q&A, Sept 9 | TIFF 2018."

6 "Q&A, Sept 10 | TIFF 2018."

7 Craig Takeuchi, "SGaawaay K'uuna: World's First Haida-language Feature Film to Be at Vancouver International Film Festival," *Georgia Straight Vancouver's News & Entertainment Weekly*, September 05, 2018, <https://www.straight.com/movies/1129981/sgaawaay-kuuna-edge-knife-worlds-first-haida-language-be-vancouver-international-film>.

8 "Haida Film Project."

9 "Q&A, Sept 9 | TIFF 2018."

Haida people wrote the script, translated it, conducted the language training, built the props, wove the costumes, hand-poked the tattoos (for the first time in 100 years), ran the production, scouted for locations, composed the music, and acted in the film - all while learning their Haida language and acting, for many, for the first time. Haida artist Gwaai Edenshaw made his directorial debut with this film, and spoke about using the film for multiple purposes, including community capacity building, mentorship, and ongoing language projects.¹⁰ Of the four fluent elders in the film,¹¹ some had not used their Haida language for 60 years, because of the damaging effects of the Canadian residential schooling system.¹² By 1900 the smallpox epidemic took out about 90% of the Haida population, and the residential school silenced a generation.¹³ Now children are not only speaking Haida words, but joyfully bringing them to life. As Edenshaw said, "I think through film we have this opportunity to have the Haida language play in the soundtrack of people's lives!"¹⁴

At screenings, those involved in the filming opened and closed the film with live Haida chants and prayers, drumming and song. They created a space filled with a vibrant Haida language that properly prepared the public to witness their story and the space to hold it reverently. Adeana Young (a Haida actor, who played Hlaaya, a central character in the film) elegantly showed her fluency and ease of using the Haida language when she opened her comments at the TIFF Q&A in Haida as she introduced her matrilineal family line with a commanding presence.

Our language is something that we, that makes us who we are... It's our culture and the respect that any nation has for our culture, and our language, is exactly who we are... So the language for me - I started learning when I was in kindergarten, and it was something that I started to forget when I was finished high school. And I remember going to school thinking, I want to be a fluent speaker, I want to be a fluent speaker. That's all I ever wanted, was to be a fluent speaker... One of the Nonnies said that any person can copy our art, they could copy our weaving, but they can't copy our language because that's who we are (Adeana Young).¹⁵

The Haida words flowed easily out of Young at the screening, but it was a long road for the actors to get there. Haida actor Willy Russ (who played Hlaaya's husband Kwa) spoke at length about the process of learning the language, which contains sounds not found in English and demands a different use of the throat, mouth, and body. Beyond technique, his story about the elders is indicative of how this film has infused new life into the Haida language.

¹⁰ "Haida Film Project."

¹¹ "Q&A, Sept 9 | TIFF 2018."

¹² Catherine Porter, "Reviving a Lost Language of Canada Through Film," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/06/11/world/americas/reviving-a-lost-language-of-canada-through-film.html.

¹³ "Retake."

¹⁴ "Retake."

¹⁵ "Q&A, Sept 9 | TIFF 2018."

Our elders used to believe that the language was going to die and it was something that they were very, very sad, very sad about and very concerned with. When we first started this there wasn't a lot of hope for us to get this project done because we were so brand new and we were very terrible at pronouncing any of the Haida and getting it into sentences and all this other stuff and understanding it. But through hard work... the elders really started to believe that something was going to change or that things were changing. And after this movie was made, and after it was screened, there's been a huge growth spurt in people wanting to reconnect with the language and signing up for the language programs and being a part of that side of the culture... because this movie was made, people are feeling and realizing the importance of our language and wanting to take part of it and learn it. And so I feel, the elders are very proud. They feel heard, they feel cared for and loved. They're the ones who understood and know the language and for a long time they felt that their knowledge was going to pass on with them but I don't feel like they feel that way anymore (Willy Russ).¹⁶

SGaawaay K'uuna offers a unique approach to Indigenous language revitalization, where some of the most successful Haida speakers learned their language outside of state funded schools¹⁷. Filmmaking can be a tool for language revitalization and community capacity building. Haida people were trained to be actors, filmmakers, and fluent Haida speakers. This production drew Haida people into a unique engagement with their language. It has created desire.

University of British Columbia community planning professor Leonie Sandercock has been involved in the production process from the start and has received funding to continuing studying the impact of this film on the Haida language, local community, employment, and further influences¹⁸. Over half of the \$1.8-million budget for the film stayed in the community, and recent festival prize money will go towards more Haida filmmaking and language projects¹⁹. The impact from this work on many levels is just beginning to be felt, and more is sure to come from the Haida Nation and Isuma's Indigenous community-driven film productions.

¹⁶ "Q&A, Sept 10 | TIFF 2018."

¹⁷ "Retake."

¹⁸ Leonie Sandercock, "TIFF Premiere: Sgaawaay K'uuna, the First Feature Film about the Haida People," *The Conversation*, October 19, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/tiff-premiere-sgaawaay-kuuna-the-first-feature-film-about-the-haida-people-102109>.

¹⁹ Edge of the Knife, "Sgaawaay K'uuna wins Most Popular Canadian Film at VIFF's closing gala tonight!!!" Facebook, October 12, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/edgeoftheknifemovie/videos/157185548560462/>.

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