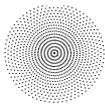


Anspayaxw

An installation for voice,
image, and sound

by John Wynne

Photography by Denise
Hawrysisio





Curatorial statement

After close to a century of forced assimilation of First Nations in Canada through such programs as the often brutal Indian residential school system that operated between the 1880s and 1990s, the number of fluent speakers of Indigenous languages had diminished significantly by the end of the last century. In British Columbia, which is home to over half of Canada's native languages, many of the province's 32 Indigenous languages and 59 dialects are amongst the most endangered in the country.

Through the work of many dedicated individuals and grassroots community initiatives, some of B.C.'s Indigenous languages have gradually begun to strengthen since the early 1990s. However, the situation remains critical. Gitxsanimaax has a few hundred fluent speakers, yet the language remains at risk, a fact reflected in the high average age of those who speak it.

Meanwhile, and not unrelated to attempts to preserve and protect the province's languages, ethnographic practices amongst Western Canada's First Nations by non-First Nations researchers during the 19th and 20th century are riddled with instances of misappropriation and misinterpretation. Aware of this troubling and troubled history, sound artist John Wynne seeks, in part, to challenge ethnographic conventions in his project *Anspayaxw*.

Wynne questions and reconfigures the key ethnographic practice of the recorded interview. Through his adaptation of innovative sound technology, images of the people literally and figuratively become the sound system. Through the use of transducers affixed to the back of the photographic portraits, each image vibrates like the human larynx. By combining spoken Gitxsanimaax and English with recorded environmental sounds and composing these sounds across 12 audio channels, the artist creates a rich, immersive experience that links language with history and geography.

Anspayaxw creates a new form of experience where the public and private, immersive and pictorial, visual and audible are all deeply interconnected. It is both human portrait and portrait of place. Yet, *Anspayaxw* is also a testament to the power and resiliency of language, the need to protect and support the diversity of languages and the role that new forms of audio-visual art can play in doing so.

Anspayaxw is presented as part of the Surrey Art Gallery's three-part year-long exhibition *Polyphonic Cartograph: Open Sound 2015*. The first quarter of 2015 began with the presentation of Taryn Hubbard's five channel sound and text installation *Surrey City Centre née Whalley*; later

this fall, the gallery will feature a new collaborative work by Carmen Papalia, Phinder Dulai and Andrew Lee.

On behalf of the Surrey Art Gallery I would like to thank John Wynne and his collaborator Denise Hawrysiw, in addition to all of the participants in the project, the 'Ksan Museum in Hazelton, and Karen Duffek at the Museum of Anthropology.

Jordan Strom
Curator of Exhibitions and Collections

Anspayaxw

Artist's statement

Anspayaxw (Kispiox) is a small reserve a few miles from Hazelton, British Columbia, where I worked with linguist Tyler Peterson and visual artist Denise Hawrysiw to record and photograph members of the Gitksan community. Gitksanimaax is one of many seriously endangered Indigenous languages in British Columbia, an area of remarkable but dwindling linguistic diversity. Today there are roughly 400 fluent speakers of Gitksanimaax, most of whom are middle-aged or older.

Several of the people featured in this installation learned Gitksanimaax as children, despite attending Indian residential schools where its use was forbidden. Such attempts to suppress Indigenous languages by colonizing powers around the world are far from rare. Even within the United Kingdom, well into the 20th century, Welsh school children heard speaking their native language were subject to corporal punishment with a block of wood known as the Welsh Not.

The sounds used in this piece are the participants' voices and other recordings I made in and around Kispiox. Only a small portion of what we recorded is used here, but all the video, photographs and audio material collected during our fieldwork is kept for community use at the 'Ksan museum in Hazelton as well as being held in the archives of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project at SOAS in London.

The word Anspayaxw ends with a 'voiceless fricative' — a breathy sound characteristic of the language. This sound influenced the way I worked with the environmental recordings such as water running under the frozen Kispiox River, steam from the ubiquitous pressure cooker, a bingo caller, a panting dog, etc. Sometimes the sounds are filtered, stretched, and resonated, but no sounds have been added.

The imperfectly mirrored images make a fairly obvious point about presence and absence in relation to the language and those who speak it. They are also meant to problematize the ethnographic gaze and to highlight the subjectivity and mediation involved in the process of translating lived experience into archive material, or indeed art. My aim is to balance context and humour with an awareness of asymmetrical relationships — and to acknowledge the inadequacy of language, and perhaps of art, to communicate the untranslatable.

John Wynne

2015

Asymmetrical Translations

An essay by Kate Hennessey

Entering the space of John Wynne's *Anspayaxw* is first an encounter with sound: feet crunching tracks through snow, a river flowing under ice, the rapid breath of a dog who has been running hard. There is the chime of an electronic clock, the sound of a passing vehicle, and then, Gitxsanimaax and English-speaking voices, telling stories, calling out bingo numbers, ringing in laughter, and singing. These sounds and voices were recorded by Wynne in collaboration with linguist Tyler Peterson on the Gitxsan Anspayaxw (Kispiox) reserve in northern British Columbia.

It is then also an engagement with the visual, as these twelve channels of sound are projected through twelve flat-panel speakers, suspended in a darkened gallery. These are hung facing inwards to create their own rectangular space. Each speaker is fronted by a vividly lit image created by Wynne in collaboration with visual artist Denise Hawrysiw. Some of these photographs depict Gitxsanimaax road signs. They were created by a few young residents hired by the band office back in the seventies, one of whom, Gwen Simms, appears in the piece. They chose names that reflected the clan and family organization of settlements on the reserve, or local references to places, to replace road names assigned by the Department of Indian Affairs. What was once arbitrarily named 'Poplar' or 'Spruce' became Lax-see'l (Frog clan), a road where several of the clan's families were living; or Angol (meaning 'run'), named after a road where the softball team would run to build stamina. These road signs represent one of many dynamics of translation in *Anspayaxw*. These are not literal, symmetrical translations but transformative inscriptions and reclamations of language, meanings of place, and culture.

The photographs are also of people from *Anspayaxw* who, in their homes or in one case in the linguistics lab at UBC, are shown in the act of recording language and narratives—some of which are included in the installation—for Wynne and linguist Peterson. These images, framing the documentation of Gitxsanimaax, are also translations. Wynne has transformed them into something new. They have been mirrored, but asymmetrically, like imperfect Rorschach ink blots. On one side of the image, the subject of the photograph is present, animated in speech, focused on the act of recording surrounded by photographs of family, and children's toys. On the other side, the microphones and tape recorder remain, but the person is gone. Only the trace of his or her body is left as an imprint in the chair, or the suggestion of a recorded voice left echoing in the room. The photographs depict the presence and the absence of a person. The artist's translation of these images evokes concern over the shift of endangered Gitxsanimaax to English, the gradual loss of a

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language that could one day only exist on the linguist's tape.

The images and sounds of Wynne's *Anspayaxw* hang in the border zones between anthropology and art, drawing attention to the subjective nature of language documentation and photography, and the multiple layers of translation that are central to the documentation and interpretation process. It is Wynne's navigation of this border space between disciplinary practices that is most unsettling about the work. The sounds and images, the products of ethnographic and linguistic research, are edited and remixed to resist easy interpretation. Reality, Wynne suggests, is never symmetrical. This is a quality that the doubled images are intended to reflect. The imperfect reflections counter the viewer's desire for symmetry; they disrupt the sense that what is seen and heard can be simply understood. Relations of power are rarely symmetrical either, but there are spaces of negotiation in between.

Thelma Blackstock is recorded speaking the words of a funeral song named *Xsin Naahlxw* (Breath). The words are spoken rather than sung for the linguist, whose goal is to transcribe the Gitxsanimaax words. Wynne uses this recording in the installation with the permission of the representative of the House of Geel, Catherine Blackstock-Campbell. He presents it as spoken word to resist ethnologizing and circulating this sacred, hereditary, song. Instead of a documentation of a performance, it is a record of the moment of encounter between researcher and speaker. It reveals the process of translating intangible cultural property into orthographic transcription, which, without permission from the owner, is an act of theft.

Later, Fern Weget sings her own Gitxsanimaax translation of Bob Miller's 1933 country song, *White Azaleas*. Unlike Blackstock's funeral song, with its strict protocols of ownership, Weget sings the song because "it doesn't belong to nobody." Weget makes this popular song her own, yet at the end of her performance Wynne reinterprets the recording, drawing the tones of her voice into expansive harmonics, remixing the piece anew. Both of these songs, like the images, are asymmetrical reflections. The artist's/linguist's recordings, Wynne demonstrates, are not unmediated actualities, but the creation of new forms. Weget's *White Azaleas*, a Gitxsan version of a public-domain country-and-western song, is translated into the social and cultural life of Anspayaxw. The two songs illuminate the tension between epistemologies and legal regimes of ownership. Along with the stories told by residents of Anspayaxw—narratives of survival, suffering, and humour in the face of colonial oppression and discrimination—they expose negotiations of relations of power: the subjective acts of recording language and culture, creating works of art, and the dynamic processes of cultural change, adaptation, and appropriation.

Kate Hennessy is an Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University's School of Interactive Arts and Technology. As Director of the Making Culture Lab, she studies the role of new technologies and collaborative research practices in the documentation and safeguarding of cultural heritage. She is a co-founder of the Ethnographic Terminalia Curatorial Collective, which curates exhibitions at the intersection of ethnography and contemporary art. hennessy.iat.sfu.ca/mcl

The Speakers



Bob Wilson

Ladies and gentlemen, the point of interest here is about the old language from *Galdo'o: Sm'algyax*. Very little of that remains here in the village because our descent moved down to the village over a hundred years ago, over a century ago, and that just about extincts our own language. The accent is different. We use the Anspayaxw—Kispiox—accent; we were born and raised here. I heard my great-grandmother speak it, and I tell you that's real classic. You talk about Shakespeare compared to present English, that's how it was: really deep, with expression. I love to hear it; I want to use it all the time. I have no problem speaking English. I don't stutter or sputter around or stamp my feet when I speak it, but I'd much rather use my own. When we get together, guys like us, we don't speak English—like my younger sister, my brother Roy, here. But the next generation is entirely different. As soon as they start speaking, it's English. They do understand, but they don't want to know why. We call it Sm'algyax [the true language].

This is what the young people do today. They should learn how to live, how to make preparation for winter, know when it is time for berries, how to plant a garden like people have done in more recent times. There will never be a shortage of fish as long as the rivers flow. They keep the fish in the ground, in an *anuust*, an underground pit for food. They lined the containers with bark from the birch tree and the fish is preserved. The little animals cannot get in. The young people today should be taught how to live/survive. They should not sit in front of TV, playing video games and drinking pop and eating chips. It amazes me that they are still alive, how they eat. They should be told how to eat. That is what is called not listening—when they are talked to they don't listen.

Thelma Blackstock

[Thelma speaks the words of a funeral song entitled *Xsin Naahlxw* (Breath). The song belongs to the House of Geel: this recording was made with the permission of the former Geel, the late Walter Harris, and its use in this installation is by the kind permission of the current Geel, Catherine Blackstock-Campbell.]

I want to tell you (all) why I didn't go to residential school. I really wanted to go. When my siblings, Doreen, Margaret, and Walter, came back from residential school after one year, I saw how much education they got and I really wanted it for myself. In April 1945 I got ill. I didn't want to go to hospital, but Dad was insistent because he wanted the doctor to tell us why my neck was swollen. They said it was bronchitis and admitted me right away, trying to get the lump on my neck to go down. Then I got another sickness because I was lying by an open window.

I got very skinny. I lost a lot of weight, nearly went blind, and couldn't taste my food. I lost my hair and my nails, and a lot of my skin came off. I was an absolute skeleton, just bones. I was sick for a year and that's why I didn't get to go to residential school. My heart is still sad about it now, but maybe heaven changed my plans. I've had a very good life, even if I'm not educated. It was hard for me when my siblings left me behind. I worked and tried hard to get an education when I left our village.





Gwen Simms

Back when I was a young teenager we were hired by the band office, and one of the projects was to name the streets. I and my working buddies got together and we saw the list that the government had given the band office, and it had names like Spruce Street and Poplar Street, and we kind of didn't like that—so we came up with a different set of street names. We went through and looked at who was living on what street, and a lot of the Frog members were living on this one street, and we said, well, why don't we name it after who is living there? And so we named that one street Lax-see'l Street, which means Frog clan. Lax-gibuu Street, where all the Lax-gibuus lived—a lot of the clusters had close family members. An-gol Drive—that came about because when we were playing on the softball team that was where we used to run—*gol* is to run, to run on. We ran on that street and then went down along the beach. The elders made us run in the sand so we could build up our stamina. We didn't know any better so we just did as we were told. Shaman—it should have been called Halyt Avenue, that's how we would say shaman. I'm trying to remember the story that came with that... If I remember correctly from our *nigoot* [father], he talked about a *halyt* who lived on that street, and he was called on quite a bit to help when people got sick, because when he was growing up that was the time of a lot of smallpox—that disease was hitting our people quite hard, and a lot of the younger kids weren't surviving, and he helped with quite a few of the kids.

Simon Gunanoot—he was a hero, a rebel. What I remember hearing as a small child was that he was a bad person—but this wasn't coming from our people, and whenever we repeated the negative that we'd heard we were told, no, this is who he was... He lived in the *spagaytgan* [woods], and did all of the things that people wanted to do but couldn't because they were herded onto the reserves. He lived a free life, he lived the way he wanted to live, and he hunted, gathered, fished. So in the eyes of my parents, and especially my grandparents, he was a hero because he got to do what they only dreamed of at times. He lived right on the land.

Gary Williams

We were out on an ice rink—an outdoor ice rink—all of a sudden we heard the fire bell ringing and there was water squirting all over the place inside the building. We didn't know that someone had broken into the pantry where they kept all the Spam, and there was boxes and boxes and boxes of it. So all the bigger kids, the teens, had broken into this place and they were so disturbed about all the Spam for all these years, so they started carrying boxes and boxes of it out onto the front lawn and driveway of that big dorm. When the police started coming out, they ran all over these Spam cans, so that was quite the thing. Indian Affairs came in and they started meeting, and shortly after that things started getting a little better.



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Clara & Fern Weget

[Fern sings her own Gitxsanimaax translation of Bob Miller 's 1933 country song, *White Azaleas*.]

Clara: When we arrived at our hotel in Korea we just dropped our luggage off and took a taxi to go shopping and look around. And when I went to pay for my purchases, I realised I'd lost my purse. I wanted to cry, and my tears started to run. The lady in the shop said, "Do you believe in prayer?" And I said to her, "Absolutely, I believe in prayer." And she took my hands and prayed for me to find whatever I'd lost. And that is what happened when we returned to the hotel in the evening, at one o'clock. Right away the hotel manager told me that they wanted me to go to the police station. "They want to see you and they said for me to bring you myself. I'll run you and your husband there," he said. We walked to the police station, and my heart rose when we went upstairs and I saw how many workers there were. We were on the fourth floor, but I saw cars running around. And the man asked me if I had lost my purse and what was in it, so I told him. But I totally forgot that I had hidden some of our money in the purse, and it dropped out. I gave the money to the man and he took us back to the hotel. It's good that nothing was lost, and I thank heaven for that woman who prayed for us. That's what happened when we went to Korea.

Barbara Harris

Okay, I'll say it in English first because I've become sort of Anglicized, you know, so to organize my... [coughs]... *gwadza-oos*... You know what that means? Dog poo! Anyway, I was born and raised on a reservation called Kispiox, or Anspayaxw. I lived there until I was about five, and then I was in and out of hospital with rheumatic fever and TB, and then I went to residential school. To me, as a child, it was just a community, and everybody spoke Gitxsanimaax. They used to have a little medical room, and everything was white and it smelled good to me—the medicines and that. The white person that was looking after it was very nice, and he probably had learned a few words in Gitxsanimaax. But I was always in marvel of the difference. The hospital was a missionary hospital but it was segregated. The front part was where the White patients were, and the back part was for Gitxsan people. And the fire door was always closed, but being little kids... We weren't supposed to get out of bed, but sometimes after bedtime we would sneak over and look through the window, and the window had nice white curtains, a tablecloth on the bedside table, and nice white sheets and fancy pillowcases. On our side, the plaster was coming off the walls and you could see the wooden slats, and the metal beds were nicked—and they were probably poisonous; the paint, you know.

The nurses were nice. They used to pick me up and walk me around on the White side to show me off. I had curly hair and I was really cute—I'm not bashful—that's what they told me! But the other little Gitxsan kids were not treated that way because they didn't look as... what do you call it—*aesthetic*? Well, I had curly hair for one thing, and they had straight hair. Anyway, they never took them around like that. In the two years I was there I began to realize that all the workers were White—you know, I began to notice things like that—but I don't know what I thought about it. When my family came to visit me they had to come in the back door; Native people weren't allowed in the front door. But now I realize what the impact was of living a segregated life—and maybe there's another word harsher than segregation. In the town we could only go to the worst little Chinese restaurant—Sunrise—it's still there. And that's only when we were going to the cannery or coming back. The Chinese community didn't mingle with the Whites or the Indians, but at the Sunrise they allowed us to be there and the old Chinese guys were nice, and it seemed welcoming and warm. As time went on, my sisters, Doreen especially, they broke the segregation rule. She had a White boyfriend and my sister Margaret had a White boyfriend. They used to have a dance at Gitanmaax and a different dance for the White people. The way Doreen tells it, they ran back and forth between the two dances and just kind of ignored the restriction. So they broke a lot of ground. The movie theatre was segregated, too, and when they acquired White boyfriends they didn't know what to do, so I think she said they would take turns going either side until one day you could sit anywhere you wanted.

7/17, 2022



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About the artist

John Wynne is a Canadian sound artist currently living in London, UK. His practice, which is often research-led, includes large-scale, multi-channel installations for galleries and public spaces, delicate sound sculptures, flying radios, and composed documentaries that hover on the boundary between documentation and abstraction. His *Installation for 300 speakers, Pianola and vacuum cleaner* became the first piece of sound art in the Saatchi Collection in 2009. At Surrey Art Gallery in 2009 he created the installation *Wireframe*, described in the *Globe and Mail* as “an intense, visceral experience”. His work with endangered languages includes the installation *Hearing Voices* (2005) and *Anspayaxw* (2010). His work with heart and lung transplant patients, in collaboration with photographer Tim Wainwright, led to a book, a 24-channel installation, and commissions for CBC and BBC Radio. Wynne obtained his PhD from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and is a Reader in Sound Arts at the University of the Arts London.

www.sensitivebrigade.com





Denise Hawrysis

Denise works in a variety of media including site-specific installation, bookworks and print. Her work is in collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Chelsea Art Library in London, Yale University, the Bruce Peel Collection in Edmonton, the National Gallery of Canada and the Surrey Art Gallery. She received her BFA from Queen's University, Kingston, and her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She had a solo exhibition, *Situational Prints*, at Simon Fraser University Gallery in 2007, and is curating and participating in an exhibition at Malaspina Printmakers in Vancouver in 2016.

Denise and John have collaborated on several projects over many years. On John's endangered language projects in Botswana and Canada, the photographs she took during the recording sessions were digitally manipulated by John and printed onto the surface of bespoke flat loudspeakers.

www.hawrysis.com



Tyler Peterson

Tyler is a linguist and Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona who works on Gitksan. His research interests focus on how understudied languages such as Gitksanimaax can enrich our empirical and theoretical understanding of how meaning is embodied by language. This work is balanced with a strong interest in endangered language documentation, maintenance and revitalization. He obtained his PhD in Linguistics from the University of British Columbia.

Tyler and John received a grant from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project in London to carry out the fieldwork for both Tyler's linguistic research and this project.

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The artist dedicates this work to the memory of Doreen Jensen (Ha'hI Yee), artist and project participant (1933 – 2009).

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*Because every last word means
another lost world...*

K'San



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