

Racism and Reclamation in Daajing Giids Llnagaay (briefly known as Queen Charlotte Municipal Village)

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HAIDA GWAI is an archipelago in what is now known as Northern British Columbia, home to the Haida Nation, who have never relinquished ownership of these islands. In April of 2019, the HIGaagilda Xaayda Kil Naay Skidegate Haida Immersion Program (S.H.I.P) requested the restoration of the “ancestral ancient Haida name of Daajing Giids Llnagaay, where the current village of Queen Charlotte is located” (S.H.I.P, 2019, para. 2). The municipal village underwent an engagement process to respond to this request and, at a village council meeting on May 16th, 2022, voted in favour of pursuing the name reclamation from Queen Charlotte to the municipal village of Daajing Giids.

Yet, while the name will be put back in place, the episode revealed tones of white fragility, settler colonialism, and racism. The comments retrieved from an engagement survey administered by the municipal village of Queen Charlotte, in particular, provide important insight into the racial tensions on Haida Gwaii. The flaws in the engagement process, as outlined in the open-ended responses to survey questions and the statements supporting the name change, are not discussed here (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022). Instead, I engage in dialogue with the (minority but still harmful) negative views contained within the survey — unpacking the settler ignorance, and resistance to change therein.

Conceptualizing Racism

Kendi (2019) argues that “the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it — and then dismantle it” (p. 9). As an academic, Haida Gwaii resident, Haida citizen, and human who has experienced racism, I chose to take the time to write this to talk back to the

racists who prefer me to be silent while they inflict harm. I speak to those who do not know what it is like to navigate the weight of oppression and racism or to feel displaced in your own homelands.

To navigate my own discomfort when I lived in Daajing Giids Llnagaay, I had a post-it on the inside of my door that said: “This is Daajing Giids, this is Haida land, and you belong here.”

In this piece, I refrain from engaging in a history lesson (one that many of these comments warrant) — but instead, I opt to respond to the very real and present consequences of racism. The statements exemplified below are the minority, but that fact does not mean they do not have an impact and need to be unpacked and resisted.

Razack (2015) argues that “Indigenous people stand in the way of settler colonialism, contesting settler entitlement to the land and throwing into question settler legitimacy as the original and rightful owners” (p. 7). Made to grapple with these realities, settlers to Haida Gwaii demonstrated fragility, denial, ignorance, and discomfort. As Denis (2015) outlines — “by not talking about racism, residents maintain a balance whereby prejudice and discrimination coexist with daily positive contact” (p. 235). In instances such as the simple request to reclaim this place name, the undercurrent of racial tensions becomes clear.

While race is a social construct, it has very real implications on the lives of racialized peoples and in sustaining white supremacy and inequality. Racism is structural and systemic: it is embedded in policies, laws,

and societal institutions — and it is normalized. Structural racism is apparent in disparate employment, healthcare, and incarceration rates, etc., amongst Indigenous peoples and settlers (both White and non-White). This embedded societal racism often goes unnoticed, and the nature of racism is that it is continually reinforced — sustaining inequality (DiAngelo, 2018). Coates (2008) defines covert racism as the often undetected “subtle, subversive, and deliberate informal and formal mechanisms” (pp. 211-212) that disproportionately privilege White people under the guise of politeness. Similarly, DiAngelo (2021) outlines “nice” racism — in which racism is permitted and rarely acknowledged. This form of racism goes unchallenged, leading to a denial of its existence.

Racism impacting Indigenous peoples is *legitimized* and thus ignored and reinforced both societally and institutionally (Robertson, 2015).

The Urge to Preserve Settler Histories

Thematic analysis of the survey’s open-ended comments revealed a historicization of harm and assertions of settler history on Haida Gwaii. Historicization of harm includes a focus on historic colonialism (not the ongoing displacement, dependency, and oppression) and/or the harmful, shameful acts of the past while ignoring the continuation of racial harm today. This distancing is representative of what Tuck and Yang (2012) deem “settler moves to innocence,” defined as “strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (p. 10).

The survey included those who referenced their long occupation on Haida Gwaii. For instance, “my grandfather came to the Queen Charlotte Islands as a newlywed in the early 1900’s and cleared his land” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 36). These statements exemplify settler moves to innocence that ignore the pre-existence of Indigenous (in this case, Haida) peoples and their occupation and relation to territory.

As Tuck and Yang further explain, echoing Razack, “for the settlers, Indigenous people are in the way” and thus, through “the destruction of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, and over time and through law and policy, Indigenous peoples’ claims to land under settler regimes [including the imposition of the *Indian*

Act and the reserve system], land is recast as property and as a resource” (p. 6). The assertions of settler history also included:

- “the pressures of the request of changing our village’s name feels disrespectful to us and our history”;
- “what is your plan for recognizing and preserving our history from late 1800s to today”;
- “I also believe that by dropping the name Queen Charlotte completely dishonors the people who have built and sustained our community and is causing an unnecessary riff in our community that will not heal” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, pp. 48, 49, 70).

The urge to preserve settler history while continuing the erasure of Haida peoples is in line with the notion of land as resource and property; it is a willful ignorance that preserves settler entitlement and occupation.

Another comment that fits within this historicization and pushes for settler history to be recognized first and foremost is demonstrated by the following:

The reason that I am opposed to changing the name of our village to Daajing Giids is because the community is ours and we are not Haida. I would support the changing of the name from Queen Charlotte to another name not out of respect for Haida people’s sad experiences with British colonialism but we should choose our own name... We deserve also to be respected (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 68).

This settler entitlement reveals a resistance to the Haida name but an acceptance of a different non-Haida name. As Lawrence and Dua (2005) outline, “Settlers find a remapping of traditional territories to earlier names, boundaries, and stories by Indigenous peoples to be profoundly unsettling. It reveals the Canadian nation as still foreign to this land base. Even after five centuries of colonization, the names the colonizer has bestowed on the land remain irrelevant to its history” (p. 127). Resistance to name reclamation reveals settler discomfort at coming to terms with their existence on Haida territories.

Unpacking White Fragility

White fragility was evident across multiple comments. DiAngelo (2018) suggests that those who benefit from white supremacy are often sheltered from seeing their own privilege and therefore “become highly fragile in conversations about race.” This fragility is often evidenced by resistance and defensiveness (p. 2). For instance, one comment noted,

it is erasing the identity of people who were born, raised, worked, and died in a community they were proud to know as Queen Charlotte City... it has similarities to the erasure of native languages... the folks in Skidegate can call it whatever they want, but let the residents of Charlotte keep their community name... Or, let everyone in Charlotte be exempt from income tax, sales tax, property tax etc. like Skidegate (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 37).

There is a lot to unpack here. When faced with racial discomfort, this individual has gone on the defensive, spewing extremely ignorant, racist, and factually incorrect comments. This defensive form of pushback is concomitant to White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). This participant also demonstrated their ignorance around a common stereotype and misconception of taxes — an *Indian Act* regulated, constrained, and determined minimal right that only applies to certain Indigenous peoples under specific circumstances (Willmott, 2020). This discussion of taxes functions as a settler move to innocence, permitting the perpetuation of racist ideas and self-proclaimed superiority while simultaneously distancing oneself from the Indigenous other.

White fragility is further emphasized by a claim that the name change would cause “mental stress... as you erase my family history” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 50). Well, to this I have to say, “Welcome to the club!” Another commenter spoke about the long history of the existing name:

I believe the name Queen Charlotte should not be changed as it is a beautiful name and also has a history as to how it became the Queen Charlotte Islands all the way back to 1778... just about 250 years ago... THINK ABOUT THAT... I am very proud to tell people that I have a home in Queen Charlotte City and am quite surprised most people know where it is, Haida Gwaii not so much (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 55).

This comment demonstrates a refusal to acknowledge the damaging and continued impacts of Haida people’s displacement — including the imposition of *Indian Act* controlled governance, the reserve system (small parcels of our existing land, Crown land ‘reserved for Indians’), and the paternalism to which we are continually subject. White fragility is evident when “white people [dig] their heels in deeper... protecting their worldview, blocking any further engagement ... [It] functions to deter any additional challenge and bully people into backing off. It functions as a protective force field preventing growth” (DiAngelo, 2021, p. 172).

This reference to settler history and feigned ignorance of Haida occupation (which is at least 13,500 years), as well as the use of all capitals, demonstrates a refusal — a blocking of any more discussion.

The Spectrum of Settler Resistance

Multiple comments centred on difficulty pronouncing Daajing Giids Lnagaay. Some suggested that both names be utilized and others that said it was simply too challenging to learn how to pronounce the old name. There were also people who discussed the presumed difficulty of changing addresses, registering businesses, and the general inconvenience and cost. Others suggested a different, easier Haida name or a new name altogether. Comments along these lines included: “I will probably never be able to say the name”; “I can’t pronounce it, I can’t spell it, and neither can anyone else in Canada”; or “I tried it on my wife and she thought I was having a stroke” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, pp. 59, 53, 55). This resistance to learning how to pronounce Daajing Giids or even how to spell it shows a refusal to experience discomfort and an objection to change.

Other forms of resistance demonstrated settler moves to innocence based on not wanting to navigate discomfort. For instance, “it’s just a name. It only causes confusion and fuels an even larger racial divide than what exists” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 35). This acknowledgment of the existing undercurrent of racial tensions on Haida Gwaii brings to light a complicity with the existing state of Haida-settler relations. Ignoring these racial tensions only perpetuates inequality and ignorance and compounds existing harms. The

undercurrent of racism is often apparent in small towns that border colonially imposed reserves — in which niceties and the appearance of harmony mask racial tensions (Zanussi, 2018). Ignoring the existence of racism to remain comfortable only perpetuates its impacts. Some comments were demonstrative of nice racism in which “niceness” operates to “protect racism” (Coates, 2008; DiAngelo, 2021, pp. 50-51). For instance, “it might be appropriate to change the name, if the majority of landowners in the village of Queen Charlotte are Haidas... personally, I am very attached, emotionally, to the current name. I lived there for over 30 years... no disrespect to the good Haida people” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 38). Alternatively, some statements referenced the need to focus on other more pressing municipal matters, “prioritizing the wishes of our neighbours over the village’s needs... demonstrates a total lack of commitment to Queen Charlotte residents. Unfortunately, there are those who would consider the above statements to be racist (they are nothing of the kind)” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 43).

Another commenter suggested that they “don’t feel safe voicing [their] opinion publicly for fear of being ridiculed or labeled a racist” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 70). While another recalled, “I am in support of a respectful culture that recognizes our Indigenous peoples. Changing the name does not achieve this, and I see no value in changing the name as a gesture to the Haida people” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 50). These denials of racist ideas and intentions are evident of a refusal to acknowledge racism in the name of preserving self-interest (Kendi, 2019). Clearly, by recognizing that some people may find these statements offensive or racist, these commenters show an awareness that their words could be problematic. Instead of spending time reflecting on why they are distancing themselves from these racist undertones, they chastise those who might be offended.

One Hundred Punches

Another comment suggests a further refusal to learn — or unlearn — noting, “I do not wish to insult the Haida culture or people by butchering the pronunciation or spelling” (Village of Queen Charlotte, 2022, p. 42). As a Haida citizen who was raised off-island and whose family

was displaced via the *Indian Act* and legislated identity, I did not grow up surrounded by culture, language, or connection. I, too, struggle with the pronunciation of Haida. However, I know that my inability to speak and understand my language is the result of settler-colonial imposition and colonial barriers to language revitalization and reclamation. This feigned worry about insulting the Haida demonstrates a resistance to any responsibility to step outside of one’s comfort zone of settler legitimacy and learn something new — or, in this case, very old.

Additional comments signal a resistance similar to that which arose when the Haida Nation reclaimed the name of Haida Gwaii and gave back “Queen Charlotte Islands” (See: Council of the Haida Nation and British Columbia, 2010). These included statements that they would still call the community Queen Charlotte regardless of any name reclamation. Some remarks included reflections on feeling uncomfortable and not liking the conflict arising in the community.

Necessary change often follows discomfort, disagreement, and conflict — getting uncomfortable is a part of the process.

Reading these racist comments was like taking one hundred punches to the stomach. However, I did not learn anything new; I have long known that this level of ignorance, racism, and outright complicity existed here. Of course, that knowledge did not make reading these words any less harmful. These are important issues for us as a Nation and as an Island people to be aware of as we move towards Haida self-determination. As I have argued elsewhere, “the day-to-day realities of racism operate as contemporary colonial roadblocks to resurgence and reclamation of self and place” (McGuire, 2021, p. 433). Deciding not to address racism allows it to fester, grow, and be repeated over generations. Reclaiming ancestral names is one small step forward; it is worthy of celebration. And to those who fought long and hard to see this happen: haawa, haawa, haawa (thank-you). However, as these comments illustrate, we, the Haida Nation — and those who believe themselves to be our allies — have much more work to do.

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