

University of Westminster – Pedagogies for Social Justice

Episode 2: Yahlnaaw

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**Interviewer – Italics**

**Interviewee – Normal**

**[?/word] – denotes audio inaudible/unclear**

**Note: There were points when interviewee’s voice was distorted or dropped out due to connection.**

*Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I’m your host, Kira, and for this episode, I’ll be joined by Yahlnaaw, originally from HIGaagilda Xaayda Gwaii, as she speaks to her experiences as a woman who holds the identities of Indigenous, queer, and transgender, whilst encompassing the epistemologies, ontologies, and axiology that accompany her intersecting identities. Yahlnaaw [delves into] navigating Indigenous identity while being submerged in colonial social systems and revitalising her Indigenous language as a second language learner and how it has influenced her Master’s thesis research. Yahlnaaw offers possible avenues for communities to utilise in a de-constructing processes of oppressive and colonising frameworks and systems.*

*Before we begin, I want to clarify that this episode will discuss the colonisation in the context of Indigenous communities and their experiences of coloniality. You’ll find that the definition of “decolonisation” in the UK is very different to that of “decolonisation” in settler colonies, like the land we call Canada, and when we talk about decolonising the curriculum, epistemologies and our minds, Indigenous researchers and academics consider this to be practices of Indigenization. For them, decolonisation is about the repatriation or, as Yahlnaaw calls it, rematriation of Indigenous land and life. As Yahlnaaw finds herself located in British Columbia, in the land we call Canada, and situated in the HIGaagilda Xaayda Gwaii community, it was appropriate to use the version of decolonisation that she has come to study and advocate for.*

*Hi Yahlnaaw! Thank you so much for being on this episode of the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I’ve been really looking forward to having this conversation with you, and you’re actually our first external guest, so it’s even more special.*

Yes. Well, first of all, haawa for having me – I’m grateful to be here.

*I wanted to begin with talking about your background, as I’m sure you can agree it has had a strong influence on your research and passions. So, first, how would you describe your experience of growing up in Skidegate Haida Gwaii, which is in the settler colony Canada, and did you find yourself having negotiate or even navigate your Indigenous identity?*

There was certainly a lot of difficult navigation, as with any Indigenous child being raised in colonial educational and social systems. I believe that’s the base thing I had to navigate when I was younger, was that I was Indigenous but my complexion was very white. Thus, I often escaped the racism that is accompanied with being Indigenous, especially in the late-1990s, early-2000s. I mean, the last residential school on the land we now call Canada closed in 1996, and that was the year that I was born, 1996. I was often, at a very young age, confronted with racial and [ethnicity] Indigenous remarks from, for example, white settler children on the playground, which were directed at Indigenous children, visibly Indigenous children, children of colour, on the playground, and I was often put in the situation of whether I stay quiet and keep myself safe or, if I speak up, [out myself] and risk my own safety in

those situations. Of course, this is a very privileged way of thinking and being, in not facing the discrimination head-on because I looked a certain way.

As I became older and I began embracing my intersecting identities as an Indigenous, queer, pan-sexual, transgender woman, I began to see how these systems of oppression – colonialism, the patriarchy – how they worked together to oppress people in communities who stray from what colonial and patriarchal powers deem as “right”, which is white, straight [ancestry].

*Thank you for sharing. I feel like, you know, it's obvious for me to say that your upbringing has had a great influence on your choice of Master's and the focus of your research at the moment, which is HIGaagilda Xaayda Gwaii language – revitalisation through story-telling, whilst incorporating queer theory. So, what does language revitalisation entail and how have you come to understand it through queer theory?*

So, growing up, Nanaay , my grandmother, T'aawgiwat han.uu Nan<sub>ga</sub> kii<sub>ga</sub> ga – her name is T'aawgiwat - – would sometimes tell me our traditional Haida stories and teach me pieces of our Skidegate Haida language. However, as a young and easily influenced child, raised in the colonial education system, I did not see the critical importance of these knowledges and wisdoms. I thought these will be available to me later, which was not the case at all. In 2014, I began to audio-record our Haida stories from my Nanaay . These stories are not just stories – they are our history, our future, and depict a way of life which has been battling eradication since colonial contact. Nanaay and I then applied for the MentorApprentice Program, which is a funded language revitalisation through First People's Cultural Council [of BC], and we were accepted, and since that time, my Nanaay and I have been working on our many, many hours of language immersion, primarily focusing on stories. It was through these stories that I was able to begin learning my language later on in life. And it was...like...as I was learning these stories, I began to see how these stories were essentially tools for learning my language, as a second language learner, and stories provide a fluid way of learning one's language, instead of sitting down, for example, in my Grade 11 high school French class when we learned, okay, in French, dog is this, and that's how we learned it, as a translation of English, and it was very much, “Okay, today we're going to learn about animals, tomorrow, we're going to learn about furniture.” But when you're learning through stories, the stories give you what you need to learn in a fashion that you touch on so many different topics in one story – you could talk about animals, to family names, to travel, to ocean, to sea-creatures, and it very much so mimics how babies learn a language, which is how language takes place - through seeing, observing, and taking what the universe gives to you in those moments. And through this learning, I have come to know how important, precious, and endangered our language is, in multiple respects. These epistemological processes led to the creation of new knowledges and therefore the “what” language learning and the “how”, grounded in Haida social relations and knowledge production of these valuable knowledges, and myself possessing my intersecting identity situated within.

In regard to queer theory, this came in because I always say – and I say this all the time – that I am my work because my work would not exist without me. Therefore, holding myself as central to my work is crucial in what makes my work my work. I didn't just wake up one day as an academic and decide that I wanted to study Skidegate Haida language revitalisation. It was the experiences, and the relationships embedded within those experiences, myself and my intersecting identities embedded in these relationships, in these experiences, that shaped what I brought to the table of my life, my work, and my future relationships. Therefore, studying it or looking through these epistemological and methodological processes in regard to queer theory is simply my situating myself in the body of queer knowledges that come with it into this work and essentially demanding that the colonial institution sees these Indigenous knowledges and these queer knowledges as valuable, important, useful, and possessing the possibility of eliciting meaningful change in, for example, the colonial institution for young, queer, Indigenous people who come after me - who are going to continue in this war to have our knowledges validated.

*What a topic, and I really appreciate how close you are to this subject. I think it's often forgotten how much a language, like you said, keeps the kind of cultural and historical past of communities alive and*

*offers like foundation to a people's sense of belonging and identity, and, yeah, I agree, I think it's so much more than just a dialect. But, overall, I'm looking forward to seeing your work in this area flourish, and hopefully I can get a chance to read it sometime. On that topic, I actually read an article recently that talked about storytelling as a form of resistance, and it also said that it was "...decolonisation theory in its most natural form". So, my question for you is: what is it specifically about sharing stories in Indigenous epistemology specifically that make them an effective method of decolonising or Indigenization?*

Yes. So, there's a lot of work situated on the land we now call Canada that revolves around Indigenous research methodology, epistemology, ontology, axiology, as avenues of resistance, and in my thesis itself, I talk about how this research, and Indigenous research overall, is resistance. I entered this work three years ago with assumptions on I will be able to do all these amazing things and...and be able to embed these different knowledges that I have gathered within, and of course, that was not the case at all. I faced many, many roadblocks, many barriers, and I have essentially been at war for these knowledges and [this thesis/these theses] and this research to be validated within the colonial institution. Now, here's the thing, I hate the word "validation" because it's almost like...a higher power, in this case colonial powers, saying that, "Okay, your work is real, your knowledges are real, your identity is real – there you go", but I'm not seeing validation in that sense. Validation, in this respect, simply implies that systems of oppression which force these diverse forms of knowledge out of the institution, and therefore the people who possess these various and diverse forms of knowledge out of the institution, be deconstructed in a collaborative and communal way so that these knowledges can be embedded in their rightful places and be used to address real-life social and equitable problems that we are facing within institutions, within communities, and within our own personal home lives.

What was the second half of the other question, of this question?

*How does...sharing stories, how does that make them an effective method of decolonising or indigenising?*

Yes. So, sharing stories, it...it helps us understand where...where we come from. And a few years ago, in the Skidegate Haida Immersion Program - in our language house in my home community of Skidegate, we were trying to figure out a word that was lost as we were creating our dictionary, and when a word is lost, so many pieces of cultural knowledge are lost with it. We began chatting in pairs, chatting in groups, and then we heard stories being told, personal stories, of where this word could have come up, cultural stories, spiritual stories of where this word could have come up, and you could tell that story with a default method from a community for figuring out something that we could not figure out in that moment. It was something that we [jumped] to because we know our stories possess so many components of who we are, where we come from, and therefore we [opted] to pick where we hoped to go. And then there was an uproar as...as the word was said and everyone began chanting the word over and over and over again. A word that we thought was lost was found. It was brought back to life because we defaulted to stories. That's when my Uncle [Roy] and my [Nanaay's] older brother, who unfortunately passed away last year around this time, in 2020, he said, "When you put a group of people in a room for the same purpose, goal and outcome, something beautiful is going to happen," and something beautiful did happen: we came together as a community and used one of the most important forms of knowledge, knowledge-telling and sharing and transmission, which was storytelling, to figure out something that could have been detrimental to our world view if it had actually been lost.

*What wise words...and I'm so happy that you ended up finding that word. What a feeling it must have been!*

*In some of your previous work, you've also spoken about Psychology as a colonial discipline and how "...it cannot be decolonised because it wasn't colonised in the first place". I found these statement*

*really interesting, especially being a student from another Social Science, so I wanted to get into kind of speaking about this a little bit more. First, what were the specific elements of Psychology that made you kind of come to this conclusion?*

So, I have spent a lot of time thinking and telling people that...well, Psychology is a colonised discipline. It came over with the colonisers and it was used as a tool of destruction to destroy ways of being and ways of knowing within Indigenous communities situated on the land we now call Canada. Growing up, I lived off-grid for a while with my family, just outside of [a rural] Indigenous community, and I often saw the negative impacts of languishing healthcare, languishing mental health, addiction, not being accepted by one's family in regards to you being queer, and I saw all of this happening at a young age in this community that I was very close with, and I spent most of the time thinking, "Well, how can I help, what can I do about this?" and of course, being eight or nine at the time, of course there wasn't much I could do, but as I grew, and as I entered post-secondary education, the institution told me, "Well, Psychology can help [your peoples], Psychology is an avenue to work and address mental issues, and [grow] Indigenous communities," and I thought, okay, well, Psychology is what I need to do. So, I took myself and I dove into the realm of Psychology in my undergrad, making my major in my undergraduate studies as Psychology, and my minor in Indigenous Studies, to kind of hope that these two areas of study for myself could hold hands in regard to the work that I wanted to do, which was aspects such as addressing languishing mental health in Indigenous communities. And, as mentioned, Psychology is a colonised discipline, and the more I dug into it, the more I thought to myself, "How can I decolonise something that was never not colonised?" Psychology was always colonised, so if I undergo this process of decolonising Psychology, to work within these Indigenous communities, it's not going to be Psychology anymore, it's going to be something else, because I'm trying to decolonise something that was never not colonised in the first place, so what would it be? And then that made me think about how I would, by using Psychology to address the areas of study that I wanted to address, that I would be using a colonial tool which was used to hurt and oppress our communities to now try to work within healing frameworks with our communities, and that felt wrong. It felt like that wasn't the proper and effective way to go because I was trying to use a tool of destruction as a tool to aid in healing frameworks. That was when I began to learn that Indigenous [cities need to be held] at the forefront and that I needed to focus on Indigenous ways of knowing and being and healing and resilience and empowerment and delving into those knowledge realms to work within our own communities. It was difficult for me to...to come to terms with that, that I had been doing things the wrong way for so long in my mind – and I'm not saying that Psychology is a not needed discipline, it's an important discipline and does a lot of important work, but it was not going to help me get to where I wanted to go, working within our Indigenous communities. There's actually quite a bit of research now that show that communities who have low levels of cultural revitalisation and language learning have higher rates of youth suicide, whereas communities that have high levels of cultural revitalisation and high levels of language learning have much lower rates of youth suicide, and that brings me back to using cultural revitalisation, language revitalisation, story revitalisation, as tools at the forefront of addressing aspects such as languishing mental health due to colonial powers within our Indigenous community.

*Thank you. It almost sounds like it kind of...it all was supposed to happen in this way and kind of go in this kind of full circle. Thinking about kind of world views and different contexts, I feel like we should talk about how the conversation about decolonising in the UK is very different to the conversations being had about decolonisation in settler colonies like Canada. You'll find that when we talk about decolonising the curriculum, epistemologies, and our relationships, Indigenous researchers and academics might consider those to be practices of what you call Indigenization. So, how would you best explain the key difference between decolonisation and Indigenization?*

This is definitely a difficult question, and I believe that the...the frameworks are...the frameworks of oppressing systems, such as colonialism and the patriarchy, definitely hold hands across cultures, nations, communities, and peoples who have been negatively impacted by these systems and frameworks, so the negative impacts across [the different communities] are going to be different depending on the culture at hand, the nation at hand, and the traumatic effects of colonisation that took place within those different communities, whether it be in regard to land domination, resource domination, or just straight domination and racism. These effects are going to be different, but the tools are going to be similar. However, Indigenous nations draw upon their own unique realms of knowledges, world-views, to address oppressive systems such as colonialism to illicit avenues of empowerment, resili-

ence, and revitalisation. So, what I'm saying is the oppressing frameworks hold hands and have a similar aim, to eradicate anything that strays from, for example, colonial and patriarchal ways of seeing the world. However, impacted peoples and nations have their own unique bodies of knowledges to draw upon, gifted to them from their Ancestors, and carried through generations, through, for example, coming from the Haida culture, oral teachings presented through our language and learning our language. There is not one single decolonisation approach that is going to work for all nations or an Indigenization approach that's going to work for all nations who have been impacted by colonialism, for example. Each require their own avenues to address this. However, within, for example, my Master's thesis, many of the tools to work within these avenues can be fluid, flexible, and adaptable. So, decolonisation situated on the land we now call Canada, and overall I believe, decolonisation revolves around land, and the returning of land and life to Indigenous peoples. Tuck and Yang (2012) discuss this in their work, Decolonization is not a Metaphor. If you look at a very old dictionary and you look up the word "colonisation", it's going to tell you that colonisation started with the act of taking a plant from one plot of land and planting it and sustaining it on another plot of land in which it was not Indigenous to. So, colonisation revolves around land, the relocation of land, and the forcing of activities and things on an area of land which is not natural to it. Indigenization on the land we now call Canada focuses on...it focuses on the integration and the building and the reconstruction of embedding Indigenous ways of knowing and being into structures, such as institutional structures, communal structures, in such a way that we can begin to use these knowledges more widely in spaces in which they were once forced out. Again, these knowledges are specific to, for example, in my own community in the land we now call Canada in a lot of other coastal Indigenous nations on the land we now call Canada. However, those ideologies are going to be different. For example, people in Egypt who suffered a lot of different colonial powers coming in and eliciting trauma and damage in different ways of knowing and being. However, these tools, these ideologies of decolonisation and Indigenization can be flexible, fluid, and adaptable in such a way that different nations who are suffering the effects of, for example, colonisation, can use different aspects of these ways of knowing and being to build frameworks or avenues or processes, such as empowerment frameworks, revitalisation frameworks, and reclamation frameworks, to revitalise that culture in ways of knowing and being that had been taken away due to colonial structures. When one's culture is taken away, when one's ways of knowing and being with their Ancestors intended to be passed down is taken away, one loses components of their identity, and when you lose components of your identity, who are you? And it's the overarching question of identity loss: who am I, where do I come from, and if I don't know who I am and where I come from, how am I going to know what I need to do and where I need to be going? How do I know what my Ancestors intended me to do if I am missing these crucial pieces of my identity? This ties back into this body of research that I've been talking about, that nations who don't have a prominent cultural realm to draw upon and who do not have empowerment frameworks, who do not have Indigenization frameworks, who do not focus on language revitalisation, have high numbers of youth suicide because they do not have their identity.

*So, when we come to think about activism and transformation, I feel like one of the major issues they face today is that there's like a select bunch of people who are aware and concerned by coloniality in higher education, but they're unaware of how they can begin to kind of take action and be actively involved in kind of dismantling these things. I think, as a first step, education is definitely crucial – you know, reading the literature, listening to speakers, going to seminars - but I feel like that cognition needs to be met with an outlet, otherwise it just has this kind of individual function and it doesn't do anything for anyone in the colonised communities that they study, which I think is quite a harmful position to...not necessarily be in but to stay in, and I personally believe that what we learn needs to be met with things that we can do in order for us to kind of transform and actually make change. So, my question is: what piece of advice would you give to non-Indigenous academics that want to get into kind of indigenising their curriculum and teaching?*

So, this ties back into the story I have just told about my Uncle Roy and a word that we revived and how, when you put people in a place together, with the same purpose and outcome, something really beautiful is going to happen. We need everyone in the circle - Indigenous, non-Indigenous, queer, straight – to get to where we want to go, which are avenues such as understanding where people come from, through relationship and community-building, and therefore the valuable and diverse knowledges, which often stray from what colonial powers have deemed as valid, that accompany them to be used to elicit meaningful and much-needed change. Collaboration is also central in deconstructing oppressive frameworks, and self-education, as you mentioned, via, for example, seeking out people, for example, Elders, Indigenous knowledge-holders, community knowledge-holders, to prop-

erly and effectively engage in, for example, Indigenization frameworks, while of course properly compensating these people for their time and knowledges is critical of course. And I think coming from... again, the most important thing is understanding that different people, with different identities, and therefore diverse realms of knowledge that they're drawing upon, come with these knowledges, and these knowledges need to be seen as important and valuable, despite the fact that the colonial institution has deemed them as not valid and not useful.

We're in a place where it often feels like there is more...more challenges than successes with the state of the world, and ourselves situated within, and I think Covid really brings that out in a lot of situations. Things like, for example, understanding that stories, in my context, are fluid, adaptable, flexible, changing, and flowing. A very admired scholar of mine, Joanne Archibald, her 2008 book, *Storywork Methodology: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*, she tells us that stories are a teacher and that we can and do live life through stories. They can also be used as a tool, as we've talked about, of decolonising because a central component of decolonising frameworks is educating, whether it be institutional, communal, or personal. An essential component of stories as tools of language-learning, for example, in my Master's thesis, is that the methodological processes, for example, my conceptual framework which I have named Ts'uuk'waayga, which means Cedar Sister, or my methodology of Storywork, or my methods of the Mentor-Apprentice Program, as I talked about, and auto-ethnography, are intended to be fluid and adaptable so other second language learners may use these tools to engage in language-learning in their own communities. Knowledge is meant to be shared and not hidden away [for oneself].

*Thank you. I think that's such an important piece of advice, and you explained it so beautifully too. We're unfortunately coming to the end of this interview, but a question I like to end on, Yahlnaaw, is: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?*

So, as I just touched on, we are living in a time period where it feels like there can be more challenges than successes – things like Covid, a global pandemic, the housing market, racism, discrimination, capitalism, hate attacks, hate-driven terrorism. A huge component of why this isn't been addressed is because it is hard to find the resources and people with the right [and unique] experiences to adequately address and design appropriate knowledge and learning sharing avenues so we may begin to elicit meaningful change [in what] we seem to be lacking, especially in higher education environments, colonial institutions. We, as humans, are often good at spotting the problem, but addressing the problem is what can be hard. I believe that the goals of creating programmes and frameworks that are action-based, not just discussing the issues as institutions like to do, and that's that keeping them open, accessible, and are directed towards creating actionable change to benefit our communities in such a way that we can address areas such as oppressive frameworks, could be a focal point in higher education in the next [while]. I believe that this is a big challenge that we are facing: shifting things more into an action-based mindset. We've identified the issues long enough. And Covid has made many of these issues very clear – for example, lack of resources, privileged and oppressed identities – and it's now time that we really take action to more holistically address such topics that have been floundering for so long.

*Yahlnaaw, I can't thank you enough for joining me on this episode of the podcast. You've shared some really insightful knowledge on your work and you've also been open to sharing your own really touching stories, and I look forward to seeing your research develop in language revitalisation, whilst incorporating queer theory, and hopefully we can see, like you said, more action-based programmes develop in the next 10 years. Thank you again.*

Thank you.

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*[End of Recording]*