Our languages are spiritual, emotional, and powerful aspects of our existence. Language is also key to our sovereignty and a practical tool for protecting our history and worldview. It has the power to clarify the understanding of our rights as Indigenous people and to help heal the impacts of colonial trauma.

The traditional territory of Sinixt people spans British Columbia and Washington State. Though we live today only on the U.S. side, we never forgot the northern half of our homeland, even while colonial forces worked to remove us from our territory above the 49th parallel. Their efforts culminated in a 1956 declaration of “extinction” made by the Crown, another name for the Canadian federal government. The reason given by Canadian authorities was that the people of the Sinixt First Nation, also known as the Arrow Lakes Band, had left their homelands. It felt like a final blow to hope for official recognition of our people in that part of our land.

I grew up on the Colville Reservation in a place called Kewa, which means “yes” in our language. I didn’t understand how we could be called extinct, and my young mind went to dinosaurs and prehistoric animals. How was I extinct? Why would a country say that? Did I matter, and more importantly, did my people matter? It never made sense to me, but I did feel a sense of “less than”; why would we be called extinct, while not just myself but my whole family and larger community were right here? Was there something wrong with my people and with me? These were the thoughts of a young girl trying to understand a label that had been placed upon her for political reasons when she didn’t yet understand politics.

Everything our elders said is true. Our language is critical to our sovereignty, identity, and collective wisdom. Our home was rich with our language and culture, but it was just life to us. Unfortunately, the practical application of this knowledge has been more challenging to understand. For many of us growing up in Indigenous homes during the 1950s and 1960s, we took our cultural teaching for granted. As a result, we didn’t understand the process of colonization and how it was impacting us on a larger scale.

Our family was poor by many standards; our dad had left, and our grandparents helped raise us in his absence. Our tupia (great grandmother) also lived beside us in a yellow school bus, and she was the matriarch of our family. She was an amazing woman by any standard. Tupia spoke five languages, including French, English, and three Native languages, including our own, called nselxcin, which is a dialect of the interior Salish family.

Tupia had a brilliant mind, and as a younger woman served on our Tribal Council for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, of which the Sinixt Nation is a part. Her Sinixt name was Sepitca, and in English she was known as Helen Toulou Perkins. Some may have called her disabled because of an accident when she was a young girl that left her unable to walk “normal” because one leg was several inches shorter than the other. Still, it didn’t stop her from riding horses, raising children, or doing most things that anyone
would do. She just had to adjust how she did them, although she was confined full-time to a wheelchair by her later years. As a young woman, she was unique in how she had to ride side-saddle, and running was not her strength, but she did both quite well. Two of the most incredible memories I have of my tupia were first telling our Creation stories and how she could change her voice to fit the animal people involved in the story. 

Our home was tiny for such a large family. My three brothers would sleep in the back room with a door curtain. Our grandparents had their beds in a wide hallway (with more curtains for doors), and our mother and my two sisters slept in the living room, where we would pick up bedding each morning and remake it each night. Beyond doors, we had only one wicket in the whole house for entry from outside, and that was to the bathroom that everyone shared. None of our elders had much formal education, but they were incredible teachers, and the way we grew up was an education in itself. The way we lived molded the strength and closeness of family in a way no classroom could.

From our perspective, “cultural ways” were just how we lived, and our “cultural teachings” were part of survival in our communities. We didn’t hunt for trophies, we hunted for food. We didn’t pick huckleberries, smoke meat, or dig roots for “fun”—we did those things to eat. Although we still had communities prosperous with language speakers, we gathered within our communities for celebrations and ceremonies. We were unaware on many levels that the colonial aspects of boarding schools and mainstream America were set to diminish these very teachings. Our tupia insisted that we become formally educated and understand these aspects. As a result, I was among the first in my community to earn a bachelor’s degree, and even more rare, a master’s. Through this, I came to understand a Western perspective through my upbringing, but I also know the spiritual power of our language and worldview. However, none of these formal or informal educational paths came easy for me.

When our dad had left us, I would talk to my mom in tears because I didn’t understand why. She would say, “maybe that was the best he could do.” She explained that after he had come back from the war in Korea, he had lost his spirit and who he had once been. I understand now that even when our sunsets come back from war, it doesn’t mean they survived. I didn’t understand until many years later the blessing it was to be raised in a tiny cabin with my five siblings and elders. I was blessed with the wisdom of three generations of strong Indigenous women without the unpredictability of a father who had a lost his spirit and drank too much.

I didn’t understand why our tupia would say that we needed to learn the whitener education but still held tight to who she was as an Indigenous woman. The two worlds seemed to conflict on so many levels. Life was confusing, especially after she died, and then when our grandfather—who we called Papa—died a few years later. I couldn’t understand why our mom moved us from our home in Kewa to the small town outside the reservation.

Coville, Washington is named after the Hudson’s Bay Company and later military post Fort Coville. It was a bad place for a poor Native family whose mother pulled a Radio Flyer wagon instead of driving a car to the grocery store. That was just the beginning of our differences. Coville was only an hour from Kewa, but it felt like a different universe, and this was where I learned about racism.

When I look back at that time in Coville, I understand why I became pregnant when I was 15 years old. I was lost. I missed my elders, and I missed the freedom of the land. I wanted to go home to where I felt safe, I wanted my tupia, and I wanted my Papa. But I also learned to be strong in a different way and for different reasons. I still have a hard time going to Coville, but I realized I could live anywhere if I needed to, and the most important thing is family.

I gave birth to my oldest son only a few months after turning 16 years old. I lived first with my sister and then with my son’s father until we broke up when I was a senior in high school. Until this time, I had not known a single person from my tribe or our family who had graduated from college. But the same year I gave birth to my son, a new teacher arrived at my school. She was a distant cousin, and she was tribal.

When Doll Watt looked at me, she didn’t see a pregnant 15-year-old. Instead, she saw a strong young woman steeped in her culture, with a sound mind, a good heart, and the ability to do whatever she put her mind to. When I looked at her, I saw a strangeness that was hard to imagine in my world, but she was living proof of something more. I saw a woman who reflected my community, who had been raised like me and had left the safety of the reservation to earn a college degree. She showed me through her life that there were more options than I had ever imagined for my life. She told me I could succeed in college and that I MUST support my child. As I made my way through formal education, I learned that the most significant difference between my professors and my grandparents was love; my elders were intelligent, demanding, and expected all we could do. I decided I would exert everything into finding fluency and revitalizing our language and our culture.

Our days at the Chopaka Language House consisted of three main rules. 1. Study your guts out with a curriculum developed by The Palouse Indian Language Association and The Salish School of Spokane. 2. Immerse ourselves in our language. 3. Speak every word possible in the language.

Based on my experiences at Chopaka Language House, I can say this with absolute belief: save the language, and the language will save you. In 2011 in our tiny living room back in Kewa, with the support of Chris Parkin of the Salish School of Spokane, I began teaching our language and working to incorporate it into the classroom and homes of the children who attended our community childcare center. During this time, along with my three cousins and Chris Parkin, we officially created a 501(c)3 nonprofit called The Inchelium Language and Culture Association. I became the executive director and began the Inchelium Language House, where others could come and learn and live our language and culture.

Then, in 2016, tragedy struck again when my husband, who had also been working very hard on the political advancement of our tribe, passed away unexpectedly as a result of not taking his high blood pressure medication. He was the chairman of our tribe at that time, and he had told me he didn’t have time to go to the doctor to refill his meds.

. . . since time immemorial my people have lived by these trees and this water. In the great space of time, it has been our language that this tree has heard and, in my mind, understands more deeply.

Columbia, Canada near where her great-great-grandmother was born. Courtesy Shelly Boyd.

Shelly Boyd connecting with a very old tree on the Upper Arrow Lakes in British Columbia, Canada near where her great-great-grandmother was born. Courtesy Shelly Boyd.


Shelly Boyd demonstrating in favor of the Sinixt First Nation at the Canadian federal capitol in Ottawa, Ontario. Courtesy Shelly Boyd.


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After all, Jim was in great shape. As a 60-year-old man, he had the discipline to exercise regularly and eat well, he wasn’t overweight, but he was busy all the time. At the time of his death, one of the major projects he was focused on was the rights and interests of the Sinixt people of Canada, whose government had declared our people extinct in 1956. When our tribe began what would become the landmark April 2021 Desautel Decision at the Supreme Court of Canada—reversing the Crown’s declaration of extinction—the managing attorney called me to be a witness at the trial precisely because of my language and cultural background. Later, I was selected to be the cultural facilitator and spokesperson for our (Sinixt) people. Today, I still focus on language revitalization, and I am actively involved in deepening our rights in our traditional territory through the legal system.

The Sinixt, along with eleven other tribes, make up the Colville Confederated Tribes. Our people are located on the northeastern corner of the 1.4 million-acre reservation and are called Lake Roosevelt State Park. Lake Roosevelt is a reservoir created by Grand Coulee Dam, but these waters will forever be the Columbia River in the minds and hearts of our people.

We, the Colville Confederated Tribes (Sinixt Band) of Washington State, have been leading a fight for recognition of our people’s traditional territory north of the boundary. As a Sinixt woman who has been working on my fluency journey for over ten years and having had the gift of being raised in a home with a fluent speaker, I’m honored to be on the cutting edge of that fight in the most unexpected ways. In my later years in life, I understand how powerful my early teaching and life was when it comes to current situations and our fight for truth, rights, and interests of our people within our traditional territory. In addition, I see how vital our languages are in these rights with governments and outside agencies.

For more than 500 years, outside forces have tried to silence our voices. The most powerful thing we can do is to hold on to who we are, speak our languages and practice our cultures. The Supreme Court case in Canada has reiterat

the importance of our traditional ways of being and the need to decolonize minds, the land, the political system, and the schools that teach our children.

Language is at the heart of this work. For example, čikal is our word for “the forest” in our language, but when we say we are going to the forest, it is čikal d̓aʔ. The medicine of trees is one of the most powerful because our elder swiʔnúmtx̣ helps us in prayers and understanding of the world and our elder Kewl shows us the path for the coming year.

When I look at these trees, I want to cry, to feel their strength and wisdom, and to think of my ancestors who also touched these trees. However, I can’t help but smile in my heart and think this particular tree is happy to be handled by me, too. This tree is located on the Upper Arrow Lakes in Canada, which are the lakes from which the great Columbia River flows. My great-great-grandmother was born near this tree, and since time immemorial my people have lived by these trees and this water. In the great space of time, it has been our language that this tree has heard and, in my mind, understands more deeply. I look at the great trees in this cedar stand and think of the 600-plus years they have lived, while it has been only for a hundred years or so that the English language has dominated the land.

I think time flows differently for our people, and for trees, we feel the connections of our ancestors and the needs of our coming generations more as a meeting place where we exist rather than a past or present. These trees are our grandfathers, and they hold wisdoms that I cannot begin to understand. It is enough that science teaches me that they are the very creators of air.

Our languages are our way to sovereignty not just as a cultural idea but as a legal framework for future interactions regarding our rights, title, and interests as Indigenous people.

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