

Standing Up  
with Ga'axsta'las

Jane Constance Cook and the Politics  
of Memory, Church, and Custom

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*and the*  
KWAGU'Ł GIXSAM CLAN



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FOR GWAYULALAS, EMILY

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# Foreword

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*Who is Granny Cook? Why do I think I know her?*

*Was it my dad's stories about Granny Cook that sparked a loyalty and an allegiance in me to a woman I had never met? Or was it Granny Cook's whispering from the spirit world, planting the seeds of knowledge and inquiry into my mind?*

I was born two years after Granny Cook passed into the spirit world.

While I was growing up in Alert Bay, we would attend Sunday school every week, and after Sunday school we would make our way up to Daddy Cook and Nana's for our family lunch. The Cook big house, as we called it, was always full of surprises. It was big and perched on the hill overlooking the bay, and there were always lots of nooks and crannies to explore and hide in.

I knew as a child that I would find a room full of leather-bound books and old dresses in the upstairs front bedroom. The old dresses provided hours of entertainment, and the books provided hours of reading and the desire to play school underneath the big house. I didn't really know who owned all of those books at that time. I only knew that it was fun to dig through them and then "borrow" a couple of books on occasion! I didn't know, at a conscious level, as a child, the legacy of learning and reading that Granny Cook had left to us. My dad, George Cook, spoke fondly of his granny. She was a woman who had sixteen children yet had time to sit and talk with her many grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. Dad saw Granny Cook as an

understanding and caring woman. He could talk with Granny Cook about his problems and his challenges and always counted on her for valuable advice. She was also there to celebrate the good things in his life.

I never had the privilege of meeting Granny Cook in person; however, the imprint of her energy still permeated the big house in Alert Bay and was left on the pages of the many books stored in the front bedroom.

I grew up knowing the value of reading books and of education. Reading and learning were to be a very important part of my life; my parents reinforced these teachings continuously. Many of our extended family members are compulsive readers. Any chance we get we whip out our books, find a comfortable spot, and immerse ourselves in another world. We could be out on the fishing grounds waiting for the big fishing set, or we could be relaxing in the evening – whenever we had a spare moment, we would be reading. I grew up in my family knowing that women could pitch in and work as hard as any man, that women could do anything they wanted to do, and that education could provide the bridge to the mainstream world. Our Cook family was very involved in the commercial fishing industry, and my sisters and I were working on our dad's boat at a very young age. We worked hard and earned our own spending money.

When I attended the University of Victoria in 1972, I majored in anthropology and sociology. It was at this time that I began to read a lot of historical materials. One day, I was reading through Franz Boas's book *Kwakiutl Ethnography*, when I came across a quote that stated that, after the potlatch trials, people were laughing at Granny Cook, saying that she spoke Kwakwaka'wakw like a baby. I was incensed, and it sparked my curiosity. Who was this Granny Cook, and what did she represent to our family? I remember quizzing my dad about Granny Cook, about who she was, and over the years I gleaned as much information about her as I could. I understood that she was an interpreter in the potlatch trials and was against the potlatch, but I knew that there had to be more to her story and we needed to hear that story. As a family, we have carried the social and cultural stigma that has emanated out of this time period, and we need to lift that stigma through the telling of her story.

In the early 1970s, the 'Namgis band received the declassified potlatch files from the Department of Indian Affairs. I worked for the 'Namgis band one summer as a student, and I started to pore through

these files. They were fascinating and told a much larger story of what had transpired during those times. Tidbits of information began to unravel, and I became aware that Granny Cook had a very powerful voice in the political world, and it was more than being an interpreter in the potlatch trials. She in fact was a fighter for the women and the children. She fought to maintain our lands in our traditional territory with the McKenna-McBride Commission; she travelled to Ottawa with the BC chiefs to have their voices heard there. She was a woman before her time. Her voice couldn't be silenced.

As members of the Cook family, we have a responsibility to make sure that her voice is not silenced and her side of the story is told. Flash forward to the late 1990s, and we saw that books were still being published referencing the statement in Franz Boas's book about Granny Cook speaking Kwakwaka'wakw like a baby. As members of the Cook family, we knew that it was now time to have Granny Cook's personal and historical story told. We could no longer stand back and let the legacy of her work be tarnished by these comments.

The research that has been conducted by Leslie Robertson has opened the gateway to increased understanding of a difficult historical time for all of our people. She has provided us with knowledge of the strength of Granny Cook in a time when women's voices were often silenced. Granny Cook's letters and petitions to the church and to government were done with one main goal in mind – to support our people, especially the women and children, and to maintain our sense of place and belonging in our families, in our villages, and in our traditional territory.

Granny Cook's legacy has inspired many of her descendants to support family and community, to stay connected to their traditional lands, and to use education as a bridge to mainstream society. Many members of the Cook family are now active members in our traditional ceremonies in the Big House and have now become the transmitters of culture and family history. There is no greater gift than to know from whence you came.

Nella Nelson, Victoria, BC  
February 2010



# Acknowledgments

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This book is built upon an imaginative conversation sustained over a period of nine years. It is forged on the skills and knowledge generously shared by Ga'axsta'las's descendants. Pearl Alfred is the rock of the work. Her hope, endless energy, and vision for change have fuelled it. Nella Nelson, Kelly-Anne Speck, George Speck, Wedłidi Speck, and William Wasden Jr. were also extraordinary collaborators (and untiring readers) whose fearless curiosity and expansive knowledge made for wonderful company on the way.

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At UBC Press, Jean Wilson provided the first editorial eye and supported the project generously from its inception. We are grateful to Ann Macklem and staff at UBC Press and to the anonymous reviewers whose suggestions sharpened this work.

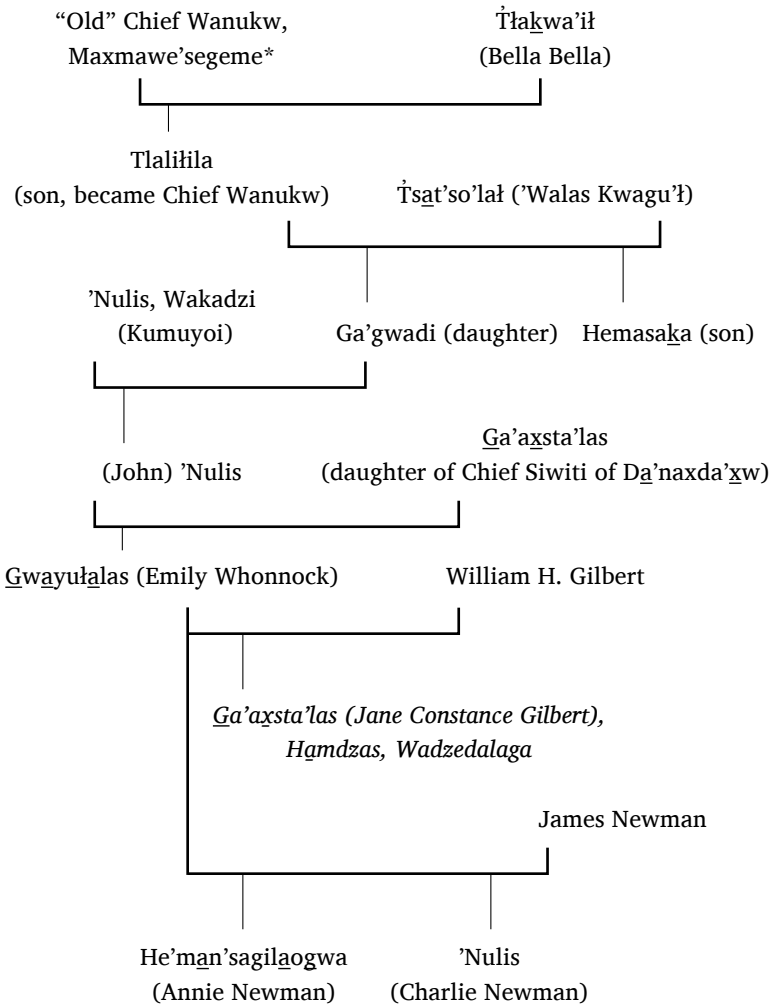
This book is infused with Dara Culhane's generosity, her friendship, humour, and intellect.

Finally, I must express my respect for the passionate members of the Kwagu'ł Gix̱sam. You generously guided me through your history and, with patience, led me through the remarkable story of Ga'axsta'las. Your project is a gift to those who seek a gentler way to move through difficult pasts. I have learned much from you. It has been a great honour.

Royalties from the sale of this book will go to the Kwagu'ł Gix̱sam.



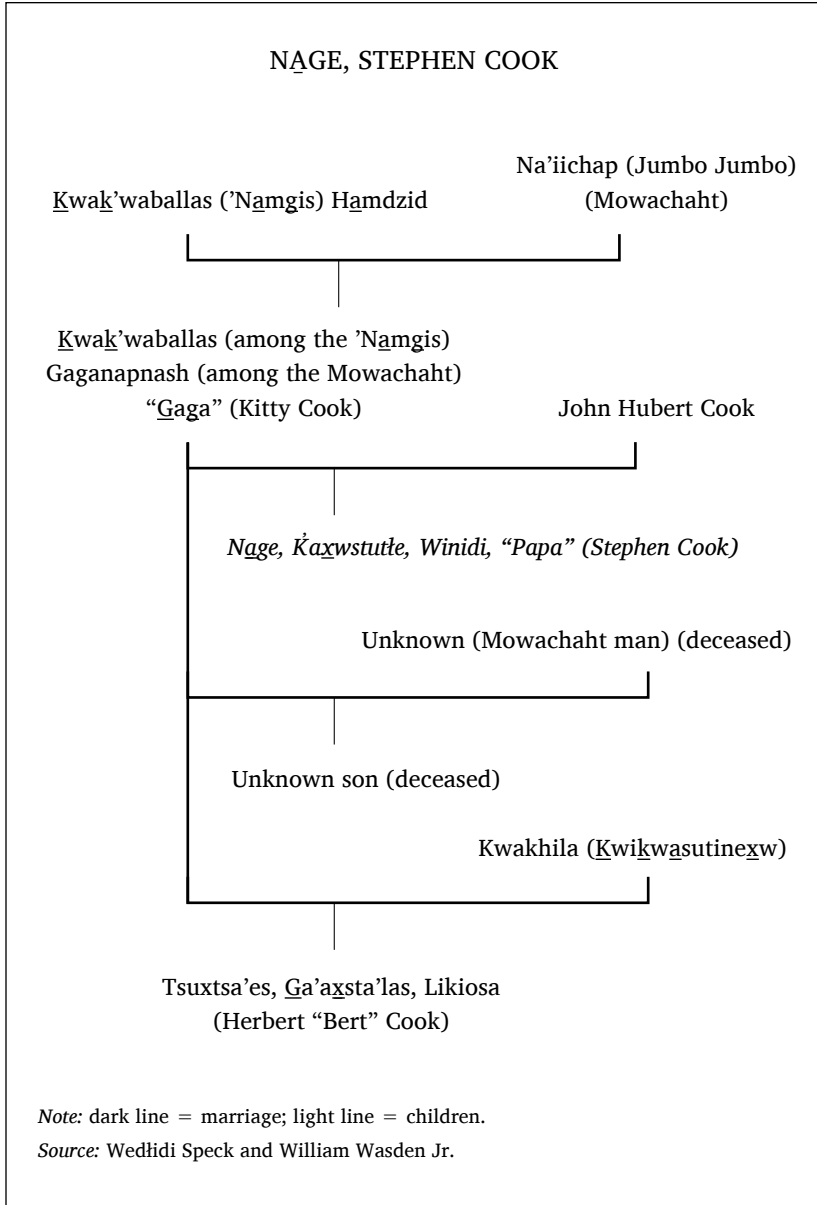
GA'AXSTA'LAS, JANE CONSTANCE GILBERT



Note: dark line = marriage; light line = children.

\* Married three times and had ten children. This is his first recorded marriage (Wedñidi Speck).

Source: Wedñidi Speck and William Wasden Jr.



DESCENT FROM JANE AND STEPHEN COOK,  
including those who have contributed to this research

Jane Constance Gilbert (1870-1951)

Stephen Cook (1870-1957)



*Note:* dark line = marriage; light line = children.

Source: Wedlidi Speck and William Wasden Jr.



# Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las



# Prologue

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*History makes people, but people make history.*

– Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*

Kwagu'ŋ Gixsam Feast, 'Yalis Big House

19 May 2007, 3 p.m.

Chief Robert Joseph, Kwankwanxwaligedzi  
Gilakas'la!

The chiefs, matriarchs, my people, the Cook family welcome you here today, and they thank you for paying attention to your call for us to come here and to celebrate together their idea and their will and desire to be part of this great sacred circle of the potlatch and life itself.

They want you to know that they're extremely proud to be Kwakwaka'wakw, to be members of the 'na'mima that they are, and they respect all of the other 'ni'na'mima.

We are here today to commemorate the ancestors of this great clan, this 'na'mima, and to work towards bringing about the revitalization of this nation in full knowledge of all of the things that we need to do as Kwakwaka'wakw.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a great gathering.

This is a moment of reconciliation for all of us.

This is a moment when we reach out together and talk about being inclusive and being part of, so that we can become whole as the Kwakwaka'wakw.

So that we can become strong as the Kwakwaka'wakw.

That's how historic this moment is, this gathering is.

My brothers and sisters, I look forward to seeing you demonstrating the heart and the will and the spirit and the desire to welcome this great 'na'mima into the circle. So that when we look forward into the future, the future of our children is secure.

This great house has always been the place, my brothers and friends, this has always been the place where we right the wrongs and we correct the paths on which we've been, and where we make and create a world that is safe for our children, that is strong for our children.

Throughout the evening you're going to learn more about the purpose of this great gathering.

Gilakas'la.

This book begins at the end of the trail it travels, in the ceremonial realm of gukwdzi (the Big House at Alert Bay, British Columbia), where in May 2007 members of the Cook family were “standing up” to show their history. Here, high-ranked Kwakwaka'wakw lineages demonstrate lines of descent from a single ancestor, who represents their 'na'mima (clan), which comprises several extended families. Just as “standing up” in gukwdzi represents 'na'mima history, this book shows how members of one descent group represent their past by revisiting the story of an ancestor named Ga'axsta'las or Jane Constance Cook, who was born in 1870 and passed away in 1951.<sup>1</sup>

The Gixsam Feast hosted by the Cook family is a significant public moment in the resolution of a difficult story that four generations of 'na'mima members carry. In welcoming guests to witness the feast, Chief Robert Joseph (Kwankwanxwaligedzi) of Gwa'yi (Kingcome) spoke about reconciliation. His invocation pertained not to relations with the colonial state (although they also are relevant) but to internal dynamics among Kwakwaka'wakw peoples.<sup>2</sup> The feast represented the awakening of the Kwagu'ł Gixsam 'na'mima, a clan that had been quiet for ninety years – since their ancestor had let go of her position in the potlatch.<sup>3</sup>



Like the feast, this work is grounded firmly in the here and now, yet it too references the past. The themes that run through this book reflect the organizing principles of the feast: attention to 'na'mima relationships and responsibilities, a desire to prepare the way for future generations, and the need to flesh out what has been an over-simplified public image of an ancestor. Ga'axsta'las lived through a period of intense upheaval for First Nation peoples. She was born during the late frontier era on the Northwest Coast, one year before aboriginal people were declared wards of the state in the new province of British Columbia (see map, page xxiv). In 1876, when she was six, the dominion government introduced the Indian Act, legislation that deprived aboriginal societies of the right to govern themselves; generated classifications that defined membership; racialized mobility and social behaviour; and sought to assimilate indigenous peoples. When Ga'axsta'las was eleven, an Indian Agent arrived at her mother's village to enforce colonial policies. Her ancestors' territories were appropriated and surveyed, and small portions were eventually reconceptualized as reserves. When Ga'axsta'las was fourteen, the state enacted legislation to ban potlatching – *the* complex of customary interactions at the heart of cultural and political sovereignty among coastal indigenous societies. The potlatch prohibition extended to the year of Ga'axsta'las's death, and like others, Ga'axsta'las was embroiled in the fury of conflicts wrought by the ban. Her generation negotiated a world that called for daily acts of translation, for the honing of bi-cultural skills and the ability to respond to opportunities and obstacles. Her life was animated by Christian and customary cosmologies, and she acted consciously in a world that she knew as a Kwakwaka'wakw woman of high rank and as an advocate for justice.

*Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las* attests to Jane Cook's legacy, which is apparent in her descendants' ongoing participation in the political struggles of First Nation peoples in Canada. As a work initiated by these descendants, this book includes their many voices alongside words written and spoken by Ga'axsta'las, words that have entered the historical record or have been waiting in archival repositories for consideration in the present. Our work reconsiders dominant historical and biographical portrayals that flatten the diverse motivations of aboriginal people and represent them as having naively consumed the colonizing project. We turn instead to a story embedded within the daily and ritual embodiment of one's place in a web of 'nami'ma relationships and within relevant social, economic, and political

realities. Our collaborative, intergenerational approach seeks an intimate rendering of larger historical forces by focusing on family and community histories as they came to be governed by colonial suppression and by new forms of religious and political expression.

Briefly stated, the family oral history begins around 1869, when the warship HMS *Clio* sailed along the coast to the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Tsaxis (Fort Rupert) to arrest men suspected of committing a murder. During the skirmish, the village was bombarded. Kwagu'ł chiefs were taken to stand trial in Victoria, and Jane Cook's grandfather John 'Nulis was among them.<sup>4</sup> His daughter, Gwayu'łalas (Emily Whonnock), accompanied him to Victoria. Eventually, the chiefs were released without charges, but it was in Victoria that Jane Cook's mother, Gwayu'łalas, met William Gilbert, an English trader and sea pilot. Jane Constance Gilbert was born to them in Port Blakely on Washington's Puget Sound, in 1870. Gwayu'łalas later married another man named James Newman, and they had two children – He'man'sa-gilaogwa (Annie Newman) and 'Nulis (Charlie Newman) (see Part II).

On paper, Ga'axsta'las's story is difficult to trace until she appears, at the age of twelve, in the 1881 census at Tsaxis, her mother's village. Some in the family say that Jane, her sister Annie, and her brother Charlie were brought home by their grandfather John 'Nulis after the death of their young mother. According to other stories, after traveling for a time with her father, Ga'axsta'las was brought to Tsaxis and later entrusted to the care of the Reverend Alfred Hall of the Anglican Church Mission Society (see Part III). Hall taught a few Kwagu'ł children in his home, and he later established a mission in 'Yalis (Alert Bay), where he built Christ Church in 1881. It is likely that Jane Gilbert (Ga'axsta'las) met her husband, Nage (Stephen Cook), at this time, as they were both missionary-educated. Through his mother, Stephen Cook had Mowachah roots among the Nuuchahnulth peoples of the West Coast. His father was also European. At a young age, he received the name Nage among the 'Namgis.<sup>5</sup> Jane and Stephen married in Christ Church in 1888, and they raised their family in 'Yalis. They were parents to sixteen children and grandparents and great-grandparents to many more.

Throughout their lives, Jane and Stephen opened their multigenerational home to those recovering from losses, to travellers, and to people who were ill or in need of shelter. Relatives and others remember Ga'axsta'las's generosity. From her well-tended orchard, she distributed fruits, and her kitchen was open to visitors. They recall both the

splendid Christmas dinners that spilled out over two rooms in the Cook big house and the more intimate sharing of seaweed and *t'lina* (eulachon grease) at the kitchen table. Those who lived with “Granny Cook” recall the occasions when she was called away at all hours to assist births, to tend those who were ill, and to comfort and prepare those who were dying. Ga'axsta'las is remembered as a woman of strength who demonstrated the importance of family relationships.

Together, Ga'axsta'las and Nage and their children ran a general store in 'Yalis, a salmon saltery, and net loft. Later, they and their sons built a successful fishing fleet and took on leadership roles in the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia. Their lives were touched by tragedy too. Before 1911, they lost three sons: Stephen Jr. (to tuberculosis), Alfred (to dysentery), and Rupert (to bronchitis). In 1918, they received news that their son Edwin had been killed in France while serving in the armed forces during the First World War. Daughters Grace and Alice died in the 1920s, and Jane and Stephen opened their home to their daughters' grieving husbands and children. Today, some of their descendants hold the title of hereditary chief; others have been initiated into the Hamatsa (Cannibal Society), or they are recognized and named performers of traditional expression who themselves host potlatches. Their descendants are also dynamic figures in First Nations structures of health, community and cultural development, education, law, resource rights, and local government who trace their passion for politics to Ga'axsta'las and her legacy of public engagement.

As president of the Anglican Women's Auxiliary for over thirty years, Ga'axsta'las ran weekly meetings in the village, offering women Christian teachings and support through often difficult circumstances. An avid reader and thinker, Ga'axsta'las's belief in education and literacy left an impression on her descendants and a trail in the recorded history of First Nations activism in BC. She translated sermons, speeches, and legal and extra-legal testimonies from English and her language, Kwakwala. Her letter writing began in the late nineteenth century, when she wrote to colonial officials at the request of community members (see Part IV). Sometime between 1911 and 1914, Ga'axsta'las translated traditional narratives told by Chief Lagius of Gwa'yi (Kingcome) for Edward Curtis, a photographer and researcher who worked to document the peoples of Native North America (see Part V). In 1931, she worked with anthropologist Franz Boas as he studied the Kwakwala language (see Part VII). Her services as a translator extended to the

legal system, where she, and others, served officially as court interpreter for trials and hearings from the 1910s onward.

Ga'axsta'las was also an interpreter and representative of her people at government hearings for aboriginal rights. In 1914, she translated the words of Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs who made land claims before the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission, where she also testified as witness on behalf of the A'wa'etłala (Knight Inlet), Da'naxda'xw (New Vancouver), and the 'Namgis (Alert Bay) and made co-claims to resource sites (see Part VI). She was the only woman on the Executive Committee of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia, in 1923, an early political organization composed of chiefs and other aboriginal leaders. Representing what was then the Kwawkewlth Agency, she spoke for commercial and food fishing rights and for nonracist health services – specifically, for Indian-only tuberculosis hospitals (see Part VII). Her words carried conviction, for she had already lost two of her own children and had nursed many others suffering with TB.

In her work with the Allied Indian Tribes, Ga'axsta'las represented potlatchers seeking compensation for property confiscated under the antipotlatch law, and she assisted potlatchers in scripting a petition to “relax” the potlatch ban. Some chiefs entrusted her to look after their ceremonial property, and she and Stephen were asked by relatives to hold money for them. Ga'axsta'las carried an abiding confidence in the law, and in the 1940s she stood with the Native Brotherhood in its fight for aboriginal peoples to benefit from the rights of Canadian citizenship without losing Indian status and hereditary privileges (see Part VIII). Too often, Jane Cook's contributions to the struggle for rights are overlooked. Many focus on her later support for the colonial ban on the potlatch, but simple versions of her story do an injustice to the complicated situations and events that she likely faced.

Although both of high rank (or perhaps because of this), Stephen and Jane Cook stood their ground on controversial matters, matters that would eventually leave them feeling – in Jane Cook's words – like “outcasts” (see Part VII). Ga'axsta'las's objections to some aspects of “the custom” had to do initially with questions about potlatch marriage and what she saw as women's limited choices. Potlatch marriage was a primary mechanism for the transfer of property and the naming of chiefs among high-ranked lineages. For colonial authorities, it was an obstacle to their attempts to control the political, legal, and social lives of coastal indigenous peoples. Positioned at a major intersection

of the colonial and Kwakwaka'wakw worlds, marriage was anything but straightforward.

When Ga'axsta'las advocated for women, she entered into dialogues that sometimes placed her in conflict with customary leaders and with colonial agents. Initially, she wanted officials to acknowledge the legality of Kwakwaka'wakw marriages in the potlatch. Later, she asked them to legislate some kind of family support for women and children left destitute. Ga'axsta'las wrote and spoke about underage brides married without their initial consent, and about the specific situation of women who were converts, caught between Kwakwaka'wakw and Christian norms. Eventually, she spoke about her own position within the realm of rank circumscribed by *gwa'l* (the marriage contract). One of her letters about the potlatch stated that it was more than just a custom: it was a form of "government" or a "constitution" that affected all aspects of Kwakwaka'wakw life. She was concerned that young women especially had few options but to follow customary authority.

In her early letters, Ga'axsta'las clearly supported the custom. As official prosecution of potlatching intensified, she took more decisive stances – against the social effects of long-term criminalization, against the financial burden faced by families, and against the more competitive aspects of potlatching that she felt affected village life negatively (see Part VIII). Ga'axsta'las communicated with powerful men in the colonial hierarchy: she wrote to and had meetings with bishops, senior Indian Affairs officials, police chiefs, and politicians in BC and Ottawa. Looking at archival materials, it is evident that she worked within a strong web of 'na'mima relationships, for many of her actions were directed to protect women and girls in her extended family.

Some stories about Ga'axsta'las charge that she informed on potlatchers during the colonial ban and that she mistranslated at the famous potlatch trials in 1922. These stories imply that she had a central role in the long sequence of potlatch prosecutions, the imprisonment of chiefs, and the appropriation of their ceremonial regalia (see Part VI). Although Ga'axsta'las was a woman with strong influence, these accounts underestimate the power wielded by Indian Agents, politicians, and police officials whose actions and decisions determined the outcomes. During the ban, potlatching stayed alive, but it went underground. The political terrain was shifting, and people found themselves in complicated positions given their allegiances to family, their membership in the Church, and their reliance on commercial sources of income.

In the last years of her life, Jane Cook made strong statements about the “awful results” of colonialism and the missionary condemnation of Kwakwaka’wakw beliefs, about their continued lack of access to traditional resources, and about the “white man’s” misunderstanding of their “past.” Traced through her words offered up in varying contexts, the arc of her story still holds mysteries. What is clear is that Ga’axsta’las stood firm. She defied structures of customary authority at a time when senior, high-ranked Kwakwaka’wakw women held power in their ’ni’na’mima but rarely throughout the public spectrum.

Jane Cook’s descendants do not intend to erase her involvement in colonial processes. They seek to contextualize her activities in the villages and in the wider political sphere (see Part I). By revisiting her story, they interrogate the historical record and seek to overcome a sense of stigmatization linked to her actions. They also “stand up” with Ga’axsta’las in a larger effort to reincorporate her descendants – especially younger members of their family – estranged from the potlatch system and from other sites of Kwakwaka’wakw identity.

As a first-born child of a first-born child, Ga’axsta’las had the right to ’na’mima privileges that flowed through her Kwagu’ł grandfather, Chief John ’Nulis. Upon her marriage in 1888, Ga’axsta’las stepped out of her standing in the potlatch system. Her historical decision left some descendants without standing in that traditional arena. Many of Jane Cook’s descendants participate in this continual re-creation of identity, tracing descent through their mother’s and/or their father’s lines to ancestors from whose mythical encounters the symbols and stories of ’na’mima belonging are generated. Others are without this option. Among her potlatching descendants, there is a good deal of talk about young people who are without names, without the vitality of Kwakwaka’wakw being.

This book documents ways in which one family has worked to resolve questions about the past. It is also intended to inform more distant relatives about a history to which they belong. The efforts of Ga’axsta’las’s descendants to include new generations in the cultural realm are documented in Part X, which includes discussions with two family chiefs about the potlatches they hosted in 2005 and 2006. Ga’axsta’las’s descendants also ritually reanimated the Kwagu’ł Gixsam ’na’mima in 2007 at a feast where they bestowed over sixty names. This book concludes with an edited transcript of the feast through which the family stood up to reactivate dormant names and positions through one line of descent from Ga’axsta’las. In the welcome speech

that opens this book, Chief Robert Joseph speaks of how the return of the Gixsam 'na'mima will strengthen the Kwakwaka'wakw as a whole, for the vitality of the potlatch system depends on a complex network of participating, interrelated clans. Evident at the feast was a palpable sense that Ga'axsta'las's descendants were stepping back into a relevant Kwakwaka'wakw history.

The words, actions, and embodied interpretations of the potlatches and feasts offered throughout this book address many angles of public and personal memory. The Big House in 'Yalis harbours an echo of the voices and movements of ancestors still alive in the recital of their origin stories, in the donning of their crests, in the bestowal of their names, and in the words and gestures that accompany their songs. Each of these prerogatives – these acts of remembering – is revealed to witnesses by retelling their paths of transmission. The tellings affirm links to the present; they are vital demonstrations of one's place within a 'na'mima and within the Kwakwaka'wakw world. To make the genealogical links explicit in the Big House is sometimes, as Chief Robert Joseph states, “to right the wrongs” and “correct the paths on which we've been.”

Every potlatch or feast celebrates the continuity of a particular 'na'mima, and it is important to acknowledge that each lineage holds the memory of multiple histories that, over time, have woven themselves into the experiences and thoughts of individuals. The momentum of these histories generates shared ideas about the past, conjuring memories of collective struggle and colonial oppression and sometimes triggering the difficult stuff of belonging and exclusion. This book is a textual act of remembering that documents how some members of the Cook family use 'na'mima knowledge and historical analysis to “make and create a world” that is both safe and strong for their children.

# Introduction:

## “Having Oneness on Your Face”

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In 2002, I was invited by Dara Culhane to meet with Pearl Alfred, who was looking for someone to research and write a book about her grandmother.<sup>1</sup> My notes from that first meeting are a patchwork of annotations to published papers, to places and relationships to them, to names of people with whom to speak, and to some key details of a life lived. Pearl stated her convictions about the proposed research and the book that would follow. “Nothing is to be written,” she said, “at the expense of anyone else.” The first parameter set for the project indicated the extent to which this story not only intersects with but also belongs, in some way, to other Kwakwaka’wakw people. This is important, for not everyone agrees with the decision to commemorate Ga’axsta’las.

Our book is not intended to weigh the polemics that surround interpretations of Jane Cook’s actions. Rather, it is an account of how her descendants situate her story within particular historical contexts, cultural analyses, and their own family history. Given the nature of their ancestor’s story, our work is intended to present details about her life not yet in the public record so that a more balanced conversation may follow. Because of their desire to address portrayals of Ga’axsta’las in the scholarly literature, it made sense to work with an academic (See Part I). I am a Euro-Canadian scholar drawn to this project for a number of reasons. As someone long interested in the imprint of colonialisms on settler and aboriginal worlds, I see the story



of *Ga'axsta'las* and her descendants as a compelling narrative about the afterlife of colonization, a kind of "unfinished history" inhabited by the family.<sup>2</sup> As an anthropologist, I am intrigued by how this family's story folds into the history of my discipline while also having something important to say about real-world struggles with memory, the legacies of resistance, and histories of gender. Researching *Ga'axsta'las*'s story offered the opportunity to collaborate on something that mattered to people, to build on the family's vision, and to improvise as our work unfolded. Such opportunities are rare. By writing about the process, I also hope to say something about the collective labour involved in collaborative work.

I was inspired by a project conducted with members of a Tsimshian community for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' Life History Project. Margaret Anderson Seguin and Tammy Anderson Blumhagen worked to compile the life history of Louisa Anderson, a "little grandmother" who had passed away some time before the research.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, their work emphasized "communal memory" in the politicized context of contemporary social life. Like Seguin and Blumhagen's research, our work is also embedded in customary relationships – in ways that remembering extends through lineages, crests, and names and through colonial accounts and scholarly literatures. As a western genre focussed on an individual, biography is a somewhat limiting form. In this work, it is the telling of collective histories that offers the necessary medium through which an individual life is commemorated.<sup>4</sup>

Collaborative ethnography in aboriginal communities holds an uneasy place in debates about interpretation, voice, and the politics of colonial power. In our work, these contentious debates coexist with the more usual quandary of translation across historical boundaries. We sought a process that would include ongoing conversations about "academically positioned and community positioned narratives," and so we explore different forms of knowledge production.<sup>5</sup> We had explicit conversations about our approach, discussing the academic requirement (on my part) to publish articles and speak at conferences about this work and the importance of adhering to social and cultural protocols. While conscious of the need to work toward a much-sought-after decolonized methodology, I was guided by my collaborators into a research process that I came to understand was rooted in *'na'mima* relationships.<sup>6</sup>

## RESEARCHING THE STORY OF GA'AXSTA'LAS

Jane Cook's descendants drafted an initial list of participants who were chosen because of their desire to contribute and their experiences with and perspectives on their ancestor GA'axsta'las. I was given a descendant chart compiled by the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay that documents the branches of Jane and Stephen Cook's sixteen children. Invaluable as it was for its orientation, the chart also cued me to the ways that the family was directing me to include members of each lineage and to acknowledge the convention of primogeniture (respect for the authority of first birthright). When sensitive issues arose, considerable effort was made to direct questions toward the eldest living member of that branch of the family in question. This was often dealt with by someone else.

Our methods included archival research, oral history, and family meetings. We co-analyzed anthropological field notes; police, church, and government reports and correspondences; private papers; news media; photographs; and archived transcripts from the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission, meetings of the Allied Indian Tribes, Anglican Church meetings, and a scholarly conference. Ethnographic participation at community and family events and potlatches and feasts hosted by family members complemented the textual approaches. I worked closely with seven or eight people noted for their expertise. Pearl Alfred was my primary collaborator in discussing the shape of the project as it unfolded.

Significant materials obtained through our research were distributed to GA'axsta'las's immediate descendants: to her grandchildren (now elders), their cousins, and her great-grandchildren. It is important to acknowledge that many family members with whom I worked have considerable experience with aboriginal organizations and band administration. Some work to represent First Nations' perspectives within different branches of the federal and provincial governments. Already familiar with the body of documents that record the administrative history of colonialism in their villages, they sketched out for me a general terrain of topics and events that inhabit the archives. Additionally, several family members have conducted extensive research of their own, having interviewed elders now gone, read scholarly and popular works, and made their own archival searches – a far from unusual circumstance, given that First Nations are forced to engage with states on terms set by legalistic and bureaucratic regimes. My collaborators' familiarity with primary materials fed this research,

making for stimulating dialogues and comfortable discussions about matters of interpretation.

Guided by the knowledge of what to look for, I consulted collections held by the U'mista Cultural Centre in 'Yalis; the Church Mission Society Archives in Birmingham, United Kingdom; the Anglican Diocese Archives in Vancouver and Victoria; the BC Archives in Victoria; and Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. Other repositories from which we obtained materials included the Washington State Archives, the Seaver Collection in Los Angeles, and local historical society collections in Port Townsend and Alert Bay. Many Kwakwaka'wakw individuals also keep collections of their own, and family and community members offered photographs, letters, and media accounts from their personal archives. They include documents left over from the days of carbon copies and original handwritten letters that were later copied and sent to colonial agents. Some are "declassified" files. Made available in the 1970s, I have been unable to find some of these materials in public archival repositories. Deemed irrelevant, they might have been culled by archivists or perhaps lost in the shuffle of records. Much of the material included in this book comes from these family collections. Early in our work, we compiled a collection of historical documents that was distributed to members of each lineage of Jane and Stephen's descendants. It was exciting to see how these materials launched conversations about older interpretations, which acquired new meanings as they percolated through the family. Much of our work focussed on co-analyzing these documents.

We also examined the field notes and papers of Franz Boas. In April 2005, I travelled to the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia with Wedłidi Speck, now recognized as chief of the Gixsam 'na'mima, and William Wasden Jr., a potlatch chief and prominent traditional performer. Both men are descendants of Jane Cook and well read in anthropology; both were eager to comb through the archive's vast Franz Boas Collection. Boas recorded the names and stories of their ancestors. His papers include verbatim transcripts of their speeches and songs and descriptions of dances, feasts, coppers, houses, territories, and privileges. We found references here and there to Ga'axsta'las's grandfather John 'Nulis and to Boas's work with Jane Cook in 1931. Wedłidi and William repatriated previously lost 'na'mima names with the intention to redistribute them formally through potlatches and feasts. Our days in Philadelphia were rich with conversation. Listening to Wedłidi and William was like travelling through time to villages on the Coast. Their stories about conflicts, marriages, or

births many generations past clarified, for me, large-scale changes in their society as well as how things work today. Such folding of the past into the present characterizes much that is at the heart of this book.

Research for what has from the beginning been called the “Granny Cook Book” began with speaking to individuals chosen by the family. Pearl Alfred initially accompanied me, but I later met with people in their homes, at restaurants and cafés, at homes where I was staying on the reserve, or in a rented cabin on the other end of Cormorant Island, on which Alert Bay is situated. Rarely did these meetings take the form of question-and-response interviews; rather, they were appointments with orators who often spoke for over an hour, until they had finished. We then had conversations about specific topics, about how they would like *Ga’axsta’las* to be remembered, about how they imagined the book, about the visual materials they would like to see included, and about why they wanted the book to be written. The initial list of participants expanded to include other community members and cultural experts (although these categories are in no way exclusive). Our meetings took place in *’Yalis*, in Comox, and in the cities of Vancouver and Victoria. The labour of transcribing audio recordings was shared with family members, sometimes younger people who did not speak for the book but who were interested in learning about their family’s history. Individuals with expertise in Kwakwaka’wakw also transcribed interviews. Nella Nelson spoke with her father, George Cook, in November 2009. A transcript of their conversation was sent to me via email so it could be added to relevant sections of this work. Transcripts were returned to people and, with their permission, they were sent to Pearl Alfred, who offered further directions to pursue and suggested other contacts or events to follow up on. The research process was discussed at family meetings held in *’Yalis*, often to share new information.

Jane Cook’s descendants have for some time met regularly for family business – enormous reunions, family calendars, or loonie auctions. These meetings also came to include conversations about the book.<sup>7</sup> On the occasions when I was present, we discussed historical events and situations that invoked different interpretations, and we recorded these manifold perspectives. As individuals offered personal stories from childhood and adulthood, I heard about the sense of stigmatization shared by members of the Cook family (see Part I). Often, while discussing the research, conversation would turn to an explanation for why someone should be contacted. At these meetings, shared genealogical knowledge became a kind of matrix within which new

information was continually absorbed and arranged. There were always new voices at the meetings as family visited from off island and as others dropped in when they had time. At one meeting, some questioned the family's intentions to publish a book, and this sparked conversations about difficult relationships, conversations that again emphasized the communal investment in Ga'axsta'las's story.

### WRITING THE "GRANNY COOK BOOK"

Family history research in 'Yalis often sparks controversy among those whose histories converge in the political arena that surrounded the potlatch during early colonialism, a time when "individuals were ranked within the 'na'mima consisting of the head chief, a direct descendent of the founding ancestor, lesser chiefs, commoners and their families." As Joseph Masco writes, for Kwakwaka'wakw people, "Rank is both a possession and a practice"; it involves active "negotiation between [community] structure and historical circumstance."<sup>8</sup> Negotiations among high-ranking families are often voiced through family-sanctioned biographies.<sup>9</sup>

Published works by and about Kwakwaka'wakw peoples are rarely neutral.<sup>10</sup> Read through markers that are recognized internally, most have something to say about the histories of a specific 'na'mima or tribe, and they reflect the lively style of ongoing community conversations about the past. As is discussed in Part I, these works are central to the story of Ga'axsta'las because she appears in both early scholarly studies and in more contemporary literature about colonial history in Kwakwaka'wakw territories.

Given these representational questions, I hold to the ethnographic responsibility of rendering collaborators' various articulations of the past in the present visible and understandable. Following anthropologist Richard Price, I agree that works by the "ethnographic historian ... must be animated by a constant attentiveness to meaning ... to processes of producing histories ... to processes of knowing ... and to problems of form."<sup>11</sup> Members of all societies understand that history making requires acts of interpretation and documentation that generate powerful images for present reflection. Indeed, the production of history here is, in effect, a long conversation with versions of literary and oral pasts suspended in the present for the purpose of telling Ga'axsta'las's story. This book offers a view of the ways particular "individuals represent themselves to *themselves* in history."<sup>12</sup>

I am self-conscious about my use of historical methods. Following anthropologist Peter Gow, “there is one point that must be made clearly: an anthropological analysis that uses historical methods must start from ethnography, and from the problems ethnography presents. Ethnography is to anthropological investigation what ‘primary sources’ are to historians.”<sup>13</sup> Our work rides the wake generated by people’s responses to oral and textual artifacts of the past. It represents the views of those members of one clan with whom I worked, not as “data” collected from “research subjects” but as the analyses, descriptions, and explanations of knowledgeable partners in research.

My collaborators sought to “set the record straight,” but there were varying opinions among them as to how that could be done. What everyone did agree on was protecting (when judged necessary) the anonymity of individuals whose presence is documented in written and oral histories. As an ethnographic history, this work seeks to be responsible to living participants, and so we take a stance that protects the anonymity of individuals to whatever degree possible. Thus, names and other identifying information are removed from discussions of sensitive topics. This stricture not only protects Ga’axsta’las’s descendants, it also extends to the ancestors of other families whose actions in the past may not be known to them or about whom we are not authorized to write.

Another realm of memory that is important to acknowledge involves the descendants of those people who were prosecuted and persecuted because of their defiance of the potlatch ban.<sup>14</sup> On one occasion, I was informed that Ga’axsta’las’s involvement in the potlatch ban should not be erased from any story about her. Clearly, she is a controversial figure, and this book does not shy away from critical information about her. It is narrated from the perspectives of those who both admire her and who sometimes struggle with her historical decisions.

Few readers will be indifferent to Ga’axsta’las. She worked in proximity to the agents of colonial rule, to the arbiters of Kwakwaka’wakw authority, and to men and women and children whose daily lives were shaped by conflicting forces. Whether Ga’axsta’las influenced those who wielded political power, the potlatch ban followed a colonial script for the suppression of key indigenous institutions around the globe. Her actions were based in a faith that justice was attainable through colonial law, a position shared by the leaders of formal aboriginal organizations then struggling for recognition. Where she diverted from that position was in her confrontation with male customary

power as it then affected the lives of women – and that stance challenged the potlatch practices of her day. As a living network of relationships continually re-created by each generation – responsive to local and external forces, to imposed structures and internal constraints – the potlatch is not static. Our work represents Jane Cook's stance on the social effects of the potlatch in the context of changing potlatch practices that she witnessed and that shaped to some considerable extent her early life experiences.

What is certain about Ga'axsta'las is that within Kwakwaka'wakw villages her voice was (and still is) potent. She acted in a political realm where local demands were heard within national (and even transnational) arenas. Her bilingualism, her literacy, her economic security, and her position in the church cannot be separated from her high rank in the Kwakwaka'wakw social world, all of which afforded her a powerful place from which to speak. But her location only enabled what was certainly a remarkable will to act and be heard. Readers will have to decide themselves where they land in the debates that her story rouses.

Ga'axsta'las's descendants stressed to me that although her stance on the potlatch ban is important, there is a woman at the heart of this story who was a village member, a wife, and a mother and grandmother whose busy household left an indelible impression on them. To remember "Granny Cook" properly means keeping an eye on the everyday and the mundane – meals, church activities, meetings, illnesses, and seasonal fishing activities. More importantly, Jane Cook's family members want to acknowledge the living legacy of her character in their lives, and so our story unfolds through the words of her descendants, accounts of their accomplishments, and their reflections on her life and times.

As we discussed writing strategies, people agreed that (anonymity permitting) Jane Cook's original words should be included whenever possible. We encourage her words be read not as timeless proof of her ultimate stance on a subject but as instances of active dialogue frozen in transcripts that do not convey the rich atmosphere or context of the original interaction. It is certain that much more exists "out there," in private or public collections. Like all histories, ours is partial. Written in a collage that privileges past-present voices and original texts, this book presents verbatim excerpts from historical sources, media tributes, official testimonies and letters written by and about Ga'axsta'las, and published interviews with her. Throughout, her descendants co-analyze these materials, explain aspects of their collective history,

and tell stories that animate Ga'axsta'las's life. Some stipulated that ancestor legends be included as key orientations to who Ga'axsta'las was at birth and through marriage, and they also decided which narrator's versions of these stories should appear and where. I drafted an outline for the book with several options, and my collaborators decided on a chronological presentation of Ga'axsta'las's story.

We had many conversations about collaborative authorship and what it might look like. As is recognized in relevant passages throughout the book, family members have written sections on 'na'mima descent, Kwakwaka'wakw history and concepts, political rights, and customary privileges, and their titles, footnotes, captions, and co-analyses appear throughout the book. But there are other techniques of collaborative writing hidden in the text – continuous conversations about form and content and the wealth of shared interpretations.

Early in the writing process, we worked from the primary sources that were circulated among family members. They commented or expanded on the materials and focussed on whatever details they chose, usually through documented conversations, sometimes in writing or over email. Their analyses, descriptions, and speculations show historical imaginations at work, revealing the detail passed through oral histories. Our exchanges were “live feeds” to this book, and they were often elicited and included as I wrote about particular incidents or examined particular documents. All sources are attributed in the text.

Our dialogue about how to write about sensitive topics extended into the writing process, but I wrote independently and was not hindered in my interpretations. Indeed, engaging discussions often ensued. As I finished drafts of chapters, they were sent to family members for corrections and additions. Following a well-worn path of collaborative scholarship – and in accordance with the 'Namgis First Nation Guidelines for Visiting Researchers, the final manuscript was read critically by six family members, who reviewed the text, corrected names or Kwakwaka'wakw orthography, and offered further details, often about kinship affiliations.<sup>15</sup> A few of the photographs that appear in this book I chose myself. Most were contributed by descendants. Interpretations of historical photographs illustrate another body of knowledge production through a close reading of material culture (clothing, construction techniques, or symbols).

We worked against a backdrop of scholarship that is a reminder of the degree to which Kwakwaka'wakw peoples have been documented.



I found an eerie similarity in representations of these peoples throughout time and in different places. Certainly, the rugged coastal beaches and lush rainforests of their territories remain recognizable, but the myriad ways in which people represent themselves and their histories often seem to be defined by the Boasian canon. The canon is impossible to avoid. An imposing literature, it has been trawled for over a century by successive generations of anthropologists. The gift of the literature is the rawness of the presentation, yet it holds its own secrets. Earlier texts were compiled largely by those whose interests in theory and ethnology revolved around precontact "traditional culture." Seldom do they represent topics that diverge from the well-worn pathways of scholarly interest.<sup>16</sup> My collaborators and I sometimes step off the path of accepted scripts, yet we too strive to maintain the clarity of primary sources.

Most work that seeks to represent Kwakwaka'wakw peoples includes a linguistic note. Kwakwala has been textualized by explorers, missionaries, government agents, by Franz Boas, by subsequent linguists, and by the U'mista Cultural Centre in 'Yalis. When quoting from various sources, I use the form used in the original. When there is confusion, I clarify the word or name in the text. Throughout, family members sometimes use Kwakwala words that do not conform to the U'mista orthography. We include those in the spirit of recognizing informal language conventions.

## ON HOPE

All collaborations are unique, shaped by the desires, knowledge, and imaginations of those who are involved. Our research and this book are just one aspect of a larger process initiated by Ga'axsta'las's descendants to offer a more complete public record of her activities. I imagine our work within a larger chain reaction of activities, conversations, and decisions. In my struggle to describe this process, I was reminded of an early conversation with Wedłidi Speck and his use of the concept of *'namata*. I contacted him to ask if he thought it could be applied to the way knowledge has been generated through this project. He responded with the following email: "The concept of oneness, of being in relationship with all things flows from aweetnakula.<sup>17</sup> It is held up by the *'na'mima* ... people of one kind. When viewed together, fellows of the *'na'mima* are considered *'namwut* ... those

that are one. Kwakwaka'wakw cultural discourse could go no other way than to aim at 'namala, to have oneness on your face. I got that from Jimmy Sewid. He taught me 'namala; he told me a story about my great-grandfather, Chief Harry Hanuse."

"He was a strong leader, and when he wanted to discuss things with his 'namwut, he walked to one end of the village singing a song, his song, and the men of the village would come out of their houses and join him. He would walk back to the other end of the village and do the same thing. Soon, all the men of the village were walking together, singing his song. Then the men went into his big house. A mat was provided to each man to sit on. When they were seated, he discussed the contents of the song as the principles that would guide the discussion. His aim was 'namala."

"The key ingredient to 'namala was the place in which he (my great-grandfather) resided ... having oneness on his face. He started with it. This is seen in his desire to include all the men in the discussion. He also carried the spirit of sharing (providing the men with an opportunity to share his song [property] and experience ritual oneness). In walking through the village he also modeled transparency, openness and fellowship. 'Namala is connected to cultural discourse and is woven into the fabric of one's journey in life. It is only as good as the effort being applied. When a leader sets out to discuss things, he/she must know the place in which they are starting from. The meeting process is as valuable as the outcome."

Just as Chief Harry Hanuse "resided" in 'namala, from which place he gathered together his 'namwut and brought them into a shared realm of discourse, so too have members of the Cook family worked from 'na'mima relations to arrive at a oneness on the face regarding their ancestor's story. Wedłidi Speck's response reflects an analytic approach common throughout this book, one that works through stories rather than – or as – explanation and calls for contemplation rather than the acceptance of a truth.

Creating this book involved a collaborative, multimethod approach, but there was another process at work, one that attests to the ways that experience and knowledge and identity sometimes rub shoulders to let go a sea change. The process includes practices through which knowledge moves through different collectivities, generating fresh impressions and processing older interpretations in order to revisit the communal story of Jane Cook. Our research compiled *information*, but the *real* work of revisiting how Ga'axsta'las is remembered flows

through relationships in the community that unite people in a shared – but sometimes contested – history. Potlatching and feasting are other realms of memory practice in which knowledge is transformed into ritual that sanctions certain kinds of information, creates new social networks, and modifies existing narratives. As new evidence moved through the family or as events in *gukwdzi* (the Big House) met with community approval, there was a palpable letting go of breath.

There is some resonance here with what others have named a “method of hope” that includes practices separate from our tasks as researchers, practices that go on – that have always gone on – in communities where we work. At the heart of this method, writes Hirokazu Miyazaki, is the mobilization of hope through what he calls “different genres of ... people’s self-knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> Evident here is the futility of separating scholarship from social relationships when the research is meaningful – that is, when it engages with deeply held convictions and carries a sense of movement toward a hoped-for outcome. Although research has a role, it does not constitute the whole venture.<sup>19</sup> In a place where relationships are everything, the desires re-presented in this work deserve consideration as part of a larger endeavour of hope.

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