

Aiitoohsimit 'Blackfoot Trails'

By

Piinotóyi Saahkómaapi (Conroy Provost)

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to explore how technology can be used and or embraced to help keep our culture and language alive in the Blackfoot context. By creating a story of language re-membering through the field of Language reclamation in the form of an autoethnographic documentary film, I wanted to share the story of my Blackfoot language journey. I returned home to Canada in the winter of 2025 to film for eight weeks. Using a narrative method I reflect on who I am, where I come from and what it means to truly connect with my Language and Culture by learning from an Elder William Big Bull of The Piikani Nation for myself and for the future generations. This research project was done in a Blackfoot framework and done with an approach that is rooted in Blackfoot values and conscience.

Through my journey to explore the stories and histories of our Language (Niitsipowahsinn) and Culture I begin to develop relationships with the plants, the land, the ceremonies, and the people. I gain a thoughtful understanding of the importance of pronunciation and the knowledge that is encoded with proper articulation of Niitsipowahsinn (Blackfoot Language). I relate my emerging understanding that Language acquisition necessitates confronting my own colonial shame and insecurities. Finally I reflect on the healing of the journey, and on the experiences and feelings of reconnecting with Niitsipowahsinn (Blackfoot Language).

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the memory of my Father, Vance Provost. It was an honour, privilege and blessing to be your oldest son and to call you my Dad.
Kitsiikakomimmo Kitakitamaatsin Ninnaa.

Prologue

(Blackfoot)

Oki nikso'kowaiksi niisto anoahk Piinotóyi Saahkómaapi Ahkainai. Nim'totoh Piikani.

Ninn aisto'to Piikani, Niiksist aisto'to Maskwacis.

(English)

Hello my relatives, my name is Wolverine Boy Many Chiefs. I am from the Piikani Nation, my father Vance Provost is from the Piikani Nation. My mother Elizabeth Saddleback is from the Samson Cree Nation (Maskwacis).

I began this journey in the Summer of 2021, one year prior to starting this Masters of Education program. I had just finished my second Bachelor's Degree in Education and upon a major life-changing event, I had decided to take time away from home, which was my community and family on the Piikani Nation, and to move for work in the Pacific Northwest, a solo relocation move.

I later found that going to a big city like Seattle, Washington, USA was intimidating. I took a job as a teacher for the Muckleshoot Tribal School and the following year I started working as an instructor at the Muckleshoot Tribal College. After a year of working and experiencing some success as a solo independent teacher, I had decided to apply and accept enrollment in the Masters of Education – Indigenous Languages Revitalization program at the University of Victoria.

I remember keeping this endeavor a secret, but when I was offered admission to the program, I called my dad and told him the news. He was of course very happy and supportive of me. When I was a child and young teenager, my dad (and uncles) would spend hours lecturing me about the importance of education in life.

To have an education, from dad's point of view, would afford me the right and the freedom of independence and a way out of poverty. It would mean that I could create opportunities and have access to resources, people, opportunities and financial capital that he could not have provided to me growing up. My dad knew education was the key to climbing the social economic stratosphere and ensure my future; whatever that path may look like.

For the next 21 months my dad and I had frequent communication on the telephone about the progress of my program; he knew everything going on in my life. I remember one of the last conversations we had together before he passed away, I had shared with him my intention of coming home for a couple months in the summer of 2023 to complete my master's project. He was very pleased to hear this. He was excited. He was happy that I was coming home. He understood it was only for a short time; to complete my master's project, and that I would eventually come back to Seattle once I finished the program.

One day, I was having a conversation over the phone about the stresses wrapped around my work as an instructor and my fitness journey. These components of my life had dominated my time and energy. He simply said "It'll be good for you to come home to work on your project. That's priority." Like the many conversations and times prior to this conversation, I took comfort in his validation which was subtle.

These little reminders from dad gave me permission to feel safe and make hard choices about my work and school for a balanced life. Eventually, the choice was my own to come home and finish my project: it was hard, it was scary, and felt very

intimidating to me. With dad's comforting reminder "That's priority" the choice was easy. I suppose this was one of his final messages to me.

Being away from home for nearly four years brought about new advantages and new challenges that made this project unique. One of the advantages was that I taught filmmaking during my time at Muckleshoot Tribal College. Filming was not anything new to me, I was resourceful and persistent. Editing digital video was another advantage I gained and was able to utilize coming into this project. I have experience, in both personal and professional editing projects.

I knew asset (video files) management was one of my strong skills which created efficient workspaces and workflows. However, there also came equal and opposite challenges like being out of practice with the language. If you don't use it, you lose it. This common saying has new meaning to me. Over several conversations, ceremonies and notes from my files, the language made its way back into my heart and I will always be a language learner.

This internal challenge opened up several wounds through the course of this project, which I discuss in the video journal logs. A more outward challenge was trying to figure out how to film a video project with only one other set of hands. Many films are created with teams of professionals, but I did not have access to the professional human resources most production crews have. In fact, this entire project was done by myself and my assistant behind the camera. Other challenges included financial resources, technology infrastructure, capacity and reconnecting with community which took time.

Purpose of the Project

Today in 2025, technology is all around us. The cell phone technology, which is available to nearly all Canadians, coupled with technical competence gives everyone a vast library of information and also gives the Users a voice or the opportunity to become a content or resource creator. Technology is to be embraced for preservation, advancement and relevance if our language is to survive for the next generation of learners. For this project, I wanted to demonstrate how I employed digital audio and video technology to capture a Blackfoot perspective on my language learning journey. There is ongoing research on how technology has grown and evolved in the field of Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR), from being the controlled oppressed object of Western interests to the growing field of indigenous scholars, artists, storytellers, and creators and how “important voice in technology is used, envisioned and created.” (Meighan, 2021) By embracing new technology, Galla (2018) explains, Indigenous-created resource materials can allow for the control of the creation, development, production, publication and distribution processes (pp. 108).

In my attempt to navigate living in two worldviews, which is the Blackfoot and the Western Canadian worldview, I wanted to explore how technology can be used and or embraced to help keep our culture and language alive. By creating a story of language re-membling through the field of language reclamation in the form of a documentary film I wanted to share the story of my Blackfoot language journey.

This finished project can serve as a resource for Blackfoot communities, schools and for Blackfoot families on how I approached my Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

journey by using traditional protocols and relationships and by exploring how modern culturally relevant technologies can act as a bridge between two different worlds.

The purpose of this research project was to create an autoethnographic audio/visual story, a story that is intended for a Blackfoot audience and by greater extension the Indigenous community as a whole. By telling my story, I am acknowledging my ancestors, elders, family and community, which is a reflection of the ways in which Siksikaitapisinni (Blackfoot way of life) Storytelling and the re-telling of stories are the manifestation of our Indigenous philosophy and pedagogy. The process of renewal is a reflection of the Blackfoot way of being. The film project is compatible with storytelling and re-telling of stories for anyone who desires to view the film.

Archibald (2008) states that “Sharing what one has learned [storytelling] is an important Indigenous tradition. This type of sharing can take the form of a story of personal life experience and is done with a compassionate mind and love for others.” (p.2) More specifically, in the Blackfoot context Crowshoe (2024) explains that “Blackfoot scholars Betty Bastien (2004), Darrell Kipp (2000), Leroy Little Bear (2009), Duane Pepion (1999), and Dorothy Still Smoking (1997) ... affirm that Pommakssin through narrative storywork connects us to our ancestors and ways of knowing Blackfoot ontology, epistemology, and pedagogies.” (p. 40)

In order to gain a deeper understanding of why this project was selected to be produced in a multimedia audio/visual medium, we must first look at and understand the target demographic audience. If cultural permanence in the form of language revitalization is the intended goal, then the concept of culture will clearly be represented by the Blackfoot Language. Permanence or perpetuity must therefore include the youth

and future generations, and more specifically the Blackfoot youth and the future generations that will be born into the Blackfoot Confederacy (Piikani, AmskapiPiikuni, Kainai, Siksika). Of course, intergenerational transference of (Indigenous) knowledge cannot occur without the current support of Elders, and (adult) language learners.

According to Kitchenham (2013) “multimedia in general, and video media in particular, would be a powerful medium to preserve oral language and culture to promote self-determination among Indigenous learners.” Battiste (2000) argued that First Nations and provincial schools need new teaching resources that properly represent Indigenous culture, history and languages for Indigenous youth. The education model in Alberta historically has ignored Indigenous cultures and failed to acknowledge Indigenous identities.

The young people are truly new people. They no longer know the language, they have not experienced the old people talking, and therefore they have not had the opportunity to hear the words of the ancestors. These new people have been moving further away from Kiipaitapiiyssinnooni [our way of life and our connections with our ancestors] (Bastien, 2004, p. 37).

This project, capturing my language learning journey, my lived experience, and connection with the help of a Piikani Elder, will serve as an example of how to connect with our Elders while they are still here. Aside from our children and youth, our Elders are our most precious natural resource. They hold sacred knowledge, sacred wisdom, ceremonies, stories, and represent our most significant connection to our ancestors. In sharing my vulnerabilities and making meaningful connections with my target audience,

I show the Blackfoot youth that our language and culture live in our Elders, not books, and that our way of life (Kiipaitapiiyssinnooni) is for all of us. This is an acknowledgement that we all come from this colonized version of ourselves but can resist, reclaim and rebuild as a Nation.

Finally, it is my dream that this project may contribute, in a small way, to the Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) field in the Blackfoot language context, “Because of the lack of communicatively oriented materials for many Indigenous languages, documentation-oriented works such as dictionaries, grammars, and narrative collections, produced by linguists serve as the main basis for teaching” (Hammine, 2020), But contributions like videos are needed. Wilson (2008) argues “new Indigenous scholars have introduced Indigenous beliefs, values and customs into the research process, and this in turn has helped research to become much more culturally sensitive to Indigenous peoples” (p. 15). If my story can help, inspire, or guide just one Blackfoot language learner - student, or if one or more Blackfoot language word survives, then my project would have served its intended purpose. I am grateful.

Context

The Blackfoot language is part of the Algonquin language family and is spoken by the Blackfoot people or Niitsipi “Real People” of southern Alberta and northern Montana USA. Our traditional territory stretches from the northern borders of the North Saskatchewan River to our southern borders in Yellowstone National Park in Idaho, and from the backbone of the world (Rocky Mountains of Alberta) to the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan in the east. Blackfoot Confederacy consists of four separate and distinct tribes. These four tribes constitute all of the Blackfoot people in today’s North America or Turtle Island. (Note * the list is not in any particular order)

- Amskapii Piikani also known as Browning, Montana (1) Montana, USA (15,560 enrolled members) (Blackfeet Nation, n.d.)
- Piikani (2) Alberta, CANADA (3,600 enrolled members) (Piikani Nation, n.d.)
- Kainai (3) Alberta, CANADA (12,978 enrolled members) (Canada, 2024)
- Siksika (4) Alberta, CANADA (7,800 enrolled members) (Siksika, 2024)

It is worth noting that Amskapii Piikani which is located in Montana USA, are referred to as “Blackfeet” while the other three nations (Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika) are located in Alberta Canada are referred to as “Blackfoot” It is also worth noting that Amskapii Piikani (USA - Blackfeet) and Piikani (Canada - Blackfoot) are one and the same people. The confusion created by labels such as Blackfeet and Blackfoot, American and Canadian; create a divide or a ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality, this is the damage done by

colonial structures and languages such as English when the reality is terms like Blackfeet and Blackfoot are colonial terms. We traditionally called ourselves “Niitsitapi” or “real people”. All Original People of Turtle Island have their own names in their own languages.

The research project filming took place on the Piikani Nation in Alberta, Canada from January 6th to February 28th, 2025. During this time of the year, the winter, there are several ceremonies that take place within the community. One of those ceremonies was scheduled to mark the beginning of my research, a ceremony of blessing/cleansing to guide my hand and make my intentions known to my Elders. However, due to unforeseen circumstances this particular ceremony had not happened. The reasons for this included protocol surrounding a community loss and scheduling of Elders to perform or officiate the ceremony.

However, I had the opportunity to attend another naming/blessing ceremony for a non-profit startup with a couple of my colleagues on the Piikani Nation. It was during this ceremony that I had communicated to my Elders my intentions of my research and had wanted their blessing to carry forth my research. With their approval and blessing the ceremony had concluded. I had departed with some direction and inspiration.

To start principle photography, myself and Elijah Provost hiked in the timber limits of the Piikani Nation (located north of the reserve, near the Head Smashed-in Buffalo Jump) made an offering and meditated. The following day, we decided to do a 10-mile run to signify to our bodies the learning ahead that will be wrapped up in this project. It was long, uncomfortable, and painful but this served as a reference point to which our bodies were able to perform. This was a very strong metaphor for my language skills.

As with most Indigenous communities, each community is a web of relationships, friendships, relatives, stories, and collective histories and experiences. These dynamics of collective experiences and inter-relations are particularly felt when a loss occurs in the community. A loss in the community is a sobering reminder of the current conditions of our community; these reminders are strong and frequent. It is not uncommon for Indigenous communities to collectively observe grieving practices, office closures, healing ceremonies, and feasts, to name a few.

During my eight-week research window, my community, the Piikani Nation experienced two losses, one of which was an immediate relation to my Elder/language teacher William Big Bull. This tragic event paused our learning and teaching (production/filming) together for several weeks. I had used this time to allow William to connect with his family, while I figured out how to best support him and his wife. After a short time, I had re-established contact with William and made time to visit and connect with him and his wife on a personal level.

We engaged over food, I like to think that these dinner visits served to strengthen our relationship and heal and encouraged me to carry forward. After several visits and dinner appointments, we made the choice to proceed with filming. It is important to acknowledge that I experienced some discomfort about my learning journey, specifically the language and the perceived wounds that came forward. It is also worth mentioning that my teacher, William, was supportive and kind in his delivery of the language and encouraging of me to make time and space to process my feelings. Manatowa-Bailey (2024) focuses on trauma in ILR work (languagewellbeing.net) by identifying Internal

Awareness, Reflection, Setting Boundaries, and Creating Systems. These strategies are helpful in coping with intergenerational trauma wounds.

Scheduling days and locations to meet with the featured subjects was at times challenging. During this time Elijah Provost was committed to full-time work in the community in the capacity of cultural support. His demanding position required him to coordinate and attend several ceremonies and community events, in light of the community losses we experienced, his duties to his leadership role in the Blackfoot Societies took priority. We did manage to get several hours of background footage and several short interviews during our production period.

Methodology

This research project is a story within a Blackfoot framework and is primarily intended for an Indigenous audience, specifically to the Blackfoot peoples and done with an approach that is rooted in Blackfoot values “Innákootsiyssini” Respect and most importantly “Aáhkowaitapiyssini” - The collective, the tribe – conscience. These values point to the importance of the collective, not the individual, which is a departure from the western individual philosophies that focus on the self. My methods are rooted in Blackfoot protocols and processes with the collective Blackfoot conscience at the center of my focus; I am responsible for my own learning and usage of the language within my family and community.

I am doing this research through a narrative inquiry lens: “Narrative inquirers, working within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, can begin their inquiries either with engaging with participants through telling stories or through coming alongside participants in the living out of stories” (Clandinin, 2006, p 47). This lens was combined with Indigenous methodology, a re-telling of who we are through the reclamation of language in order to tell my story, primarily to my future children, and for future generations of Niitsitapi. Therefore I am accountable to my ancestors (past) my family and community (present) and the next generations to come (future). In the Blackfoot worldview, self-actualization cannot begin unless I am to be situated in community (place) therefore the Blackfoot worldviews means that our accountability transcends space and time. Battiste explains;

In other words, the context is derived not from theory from academics but from peoples and collective and related to place.

When one is connected to community and to place, the relational

aspects of communities, people, families, and their context become the important elements of how to proceed with knowledge search and production. (Battiste, 2013, p. 74).

To ensure that my participation in the project is central to the meaning-making process I have completed this narrative inquiry in the form of an autoethnographic documentary film. Bastien (2004) explains “Self is that part of one’s identity that provides the source for decision-making in life. It creates meaning out of experiences and provides motivation for behaviour.” Kovach articulates:

Autoethnography is an approach with its foundations in ethnographical research and brings together the study of self (auto) in relation to culture (ethnography). Within this approach, self-reflection moves beyond field notes to having a more integral positioning within both the research process and the construction of knowledge itself. (Kovach, 2021, p.33).

In order to make meaningful connections with myself, the purpose of the project, and the target audience; this project necessitates vulnerability and the articulation of the self in relation to recovering cultural identity, reversing colonization and navigating and reconciling two opposite worldviews.

Methods

The primary tool for creating a documentary film is a digital video camera. I have used my personal cell phone to capture the video, a tripod to hold the cell phone, a field digital audio recorder and a condenser microphone. I have also used the video editing software Adobe Premiere Pro and an external hard-drive for asset (video/audio, pictures, musical compositions) management.

Conclusion

This eight-week research program was intended to capture the process of how I approached my Blackfoot language learning journey. I made stronger relationship connections to my (Elder) teacher, community, and family, which is the basis of my language learning journey. Most important was that I became re-connected or became familiar with the land, the land of my ancestors, and all the seen and unseen relations.

As I reflect on this project, I am bound to reflect on the success and challenges I experienced. Success in this instance is that I am able to share a small part of my language learning journey, that I am able to articulate the feelings of inadequacy that come with learning and the share the connections I am able to make. However, in the spirit of the project I cannot help but think of the irony in which the project is delivered: digital audio/video technology, entirely in the English language.

For numerous reasons, those who attempt to fit Indigenous epistemologies into Western cultural conceptual rubrics expressed through the English language are destined to feel the squirm.

Thus, we must consider the paradigm (and theory) factor in research methodologies. (Kovach, 2021, p. 30).

This project has brought about a renewed commitment with myself and has given me new insights on the depth of the language that I had not known prior to this. It has also reinvigorated William and Elijah's participation upon their first screening of the first draft.

One major point I have discovered about this project was that much of my time, energy and effort was focused on the production and delivery of this research project, such as arranging meetings, filming, editing, and writing, rather than second language acquisition (SLA). On several occasions this research project, more specifically editing, had taken priority over ceremonies and meetings with Elders and other language learners. The irony of these instances is that the production of this research project was preventing me from experiencing meaningful learning opportunities. Or, in other words, the logistics of this project prevented me from my purpose in the story I was embarking on. This is a good example of the usage and function of time in both worldviews. One institution, the university, requires hard and fast deadlines to respect ones' own academic agenda and respect others time, and the other requires time and respect.

On a technical note, the export, or final rendered edit of the video has proven to be very difficult. After several last-minute edits and long-winded exports which has taken nearly 15-20 additional hours, I finally made a high-quality export. However, the upload of said high quality video proved to be even more technically difficult: the upload has taken over 30 hours to upload a high-quality render on YouTube.

This documentary is a product that I am very proud and happy to show my family and friends. It is my hope that this film will inspire, guide or give others permission to

pursue their language learning journey. I am grateful for the help and support of my family, and friends. The link to the video is here:

<https://youtu.be/wox7sCaFogM?si=W6iqStdWr72jdt5S>

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