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Resisting rhetorics of language endangerment: Reclamation through Indigenous language survivance

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Abstract

Hill (2002) (and the robust discussions it inspired) demonstrated the importance of looking carefully at the rhetorics used by academics when discussing Indigenous and endangered languages. Fifteen years later this still remains a subject of concern. In this article I examine how three related strategies are increasingly employed in both academic and public domains: *Linguistic extraction* is the process of discussing languages and language reclamation movements removed from the personal lives, communicative practices, and embodied experiences in which they inherently are embedded, while the *erasure of colonial agency* minimises the historical and ongoing causes of language endangerment and dormancy, sometimes to the extent of misattributing agency for such realities onto Indigenous communities themselves. *Lasting* is a discursive process through which Indigenous populations are framed as ‘vanishing’, first by defining Indians based on a singular characteristic, and then lamenting the passing of the ‘last’ Indians assumed to have had that single defining characteristic (O’Brien 2010). I explore the implications of these rhetorics for both endangered language movements and the communities at the center of those movements, with a particular emphasis on the discursive tactics that resist these strategies which are utilised by Indigenous community members and language activists.

Keywords: language endangerment, language reclamation, Indigenous, rhetoric, language survivance

1. Language endangerment rhetorics¹

From *BBC News* and the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post* to Vodafone promotional materials, endangered languages are an increasingly pervasive topic in the media. The rhetorical strategies deployed are intended to raise public awareness about language endangerment. These strategies are the focus of this paper, which draws on a corpus of articles and online posts from the past decade published in established, English-language newspapers, media outlets, and magazines with wide, multi-national circulation in both digital and print formats, and increased dissemination through social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook. The rhetorics discussed here come from examples of media coverage of language endangerment with the highest circulation, identified by the number of reader subscriptions for print media, and the number of accesses, shares, ‘likes’, and reposts for digital formats. I focus on media discussions of language endangerment, because, as Nancy Rivenburgh (2011:704) notes in her examination of how English-language media frame the causes and implications of language endangerment: ‘For better or worse, people rely heavily on media to understand how these global phenomena touch their lives’.

Specifically, I examine rhetorics surrounding language endangerment and their implications for Indigenous communities in North America and for many endangered language communities more broadly, where they create a status quo that Meek (2011:55) argues ‘constantly presents barriers, challenges, or constraints that need to be destroyed, unpacked, and deconstructed, or just changed.’ In doing so, I join a growing number of scholars who examine closely the rhetorics surrounding Indigenous languages and their impact on public and community conceptualisation, language reclamation efforts, and even language policy in order to begin to unpack these discourses (Hill 2002; Leonard 2008, 2017; Meek 2010, 2011; Perley 2012).

Hill (2002) asked academics writing about language endangerment ‘who is listening, and what do they hear?’ as a means of interrogating the underlying assumptions and entailments of language advocacy rhetoric in order to ensure that we do not ‘distress and alienate’ the communities we advocate for and with (Hill 2002:120). Fifteen years later, we have several answers. As this article will show, the world was listening. It responded through the creation of new policies and in some cases an ideological shift away from shaming and

¹ I would like to thank the editors Wesley Y. Leonard and Haley De Korne for their insight and astute feedback, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. Thanks also to my colleagues in the Soc-Cultural/Linguistic Anthropology reading group at UIUC and to Jenanne Ferguson for their comments on various stages of this article.

devaluing language diversity to a valorisation of those same languages.² At the same time, the rhetorics identified by Hill now extend from academic papers and grant proposals into mainstream media discourses about language endangerment and the affected communities. The three themes Hill identified are: ‘universal ownership’, ‘hyperbolic valorisation’, and ‘enumeration’. *Universal ownership*, as Hill defines it, is the positioning of endangered languages as belonging to everyone, especially the target audiences for language advocacy, ‘who must be convinced that they “possess” this particular form of wealth and are somehow responsible for it’ (Hill 2002:121). A related process is *hyperbolic valorisation* through which languages are framed as ‘resources’ that have ‘value’, utilizing economic metaphors such as languages being ‘treasures’ or ‘priceless’. Finally, *enumeration* involves the ‘essentialization and individualization of a language as a sort of unit’ (Hill 2002:127), and heavy reliance on statistical representations to describe endangered languages at a global scale. Critically, Hill does not argue that all uses of these themes are bad, but rather that researchers should consider their rhetorical strategies carefully, including alternative frameworks of representation such as a rhetoric of human rights.

Building on Hill’s framework, I examine three additional related strategies that are increasingly deployed in both academic and public domains, and which are evidenced in the corpus of popular and scholarly texts reviewed in this paper: linguistic extraction, erasure or misattribution of colonial agency, and ‘lasting’. *Linguistic extraction* is the process of discussing languages and language reclamation movements extracted from the personal lives, communicative practices, and embodied experiences in which they are inherently embedded. The *erasure of colonial agency* minimises historical and ongoing causes of language endangerment and dormancy, sometimes to the extent of misattributing agency onto Indigenous communities themselves. *Lasting* draws on O’Brien’s (2010) identification of the discursive and semiotic process through which Indigenous populations are framed as ‘vanishing’, and applies it specifically to practices within the context of Indigenous and endangered languages. It is replicated in discussions about ‘last speakers’ and over-emphasis on declining speaker populations (Muehlmann 2012) rather than new speakers and positive language reclamation effects. By examining these widely circulating rhetorics, within studies of broader colonial framings of Indigenous people within Native American and Indigenous studies, I will demonstrate how such rhetorics both draw on existing trends within settler societies and continue to influence them. Then, I will ‘listen’ to a different body of

² This valorisation is nearly always at the level of ‘languages’ and often does not apply at the level of dialects and other language variation.

rhetoric – produced by members of endangered language communities and in ethnographic accounts of language reclamation – in search of discursive strategies of linguistic survivance that resist colonial tropes and neo-colonial desires of language-as-resource extraction.

1.1. Linguistic extraction

The first trend that emerges in media coverage of language endangerment is linguistic extraction, i.e. defining, analysing, and representing languages and the people connected to them separately from the complex socio-historical, political, and deeply personal contexts in which they actually occur. Linguistic extraction, then, renders languages into extractable objects that can be collected, preserved, utilised, and even admired. Critically, linguistic extraction is not solely the collection of endangered and Indigenous languages in ways that often render them inaccessible to their communities, but also the presentation of languages as objects, or data, without their complex and varied human contexts. In his analysis of both popular and scholarly literature about endangered languages, Moore (2006:297) asserts that it ‘summons its readers to an encounter with these languages as monuments in a sculpture garden of human cognitive achievements, objects of wonder and appreciation’. Like the natural resources and ‘treasures’ with which they have been frequently aligned, Indigenous and endangered languages – as a whole or in their component pieces – are frequently utilised in processes labeled ‘mining’ and ‘harvesting’ by researchers within this extractive framework. This literal and metaphorical extraction from context is itself a colonial enterprise and often a cornerstone of Western science – one that removes people from homelands, loots objects from graves in the name of science and education, and disassociates products from those who labour to produce them. In other words, it celebrates the *empire* in *empirical*. Extraction is the foundation of *enumeration* identified by Hill, where qualities of languages or people are counted and then detached from their larger dynamics.

Linguistic extraction also happens in valuing linguistic data over the speakers from whom it comes, and the communities and contexts in which it is produced. Take, for example, this representative excerpt from a *National Geographic* article on ‘Languages racing to extinction in 5 global “hotspots”’ (Lovegren 2007:1) setting up the backdrop for the story’s focus on language endangerment:

In the last 500 years, an estimated half of the world’s languages, from Etruscan to Tasmanian, have become extinct. But researchers say the languages of the world are now vanishing faster than ever in recorded history. More than 500 languages may be spoken by fewer than ten people.

In this article, which had over 8,000 ‘likes’ and around 2,000 ‘shares’ on Facebook alone, decontextualised enumeration allows for the available numbers to appear randomised, as though in a world with thousands of languages, all are equally at risk of endangerment; or, in a community with 500 speakers and a population of 50,000, any individual out of 100 might be a speaker. In reality, these numbers are embedded in particular (but interrelated) geographic, socio-economic, familial, and historical contexts. Their rhetorical presupposition reveals another level of extraction frequently utilised in media discussion of language endangerment: the erasure of factors that shape language shift. In Lovegren (2007) no rationale is given for why the last 500 years might be a significantly different moment in language transmission, even though it coincides with the period of European and American colonialism and globalisation.

A 2014 ‘op-doc’ piece ‘Who speaks Wukchumni?’ in the *New York Times* has a similar representation of language endangerment in its introduction to a short documentary about a fluent speaker who wrote the first comprehensive dictionary of the language (Vaughan-Lee 2014):

Throughout the Unites States, many Native Americans languages are struggling to survive. According to Unesco, more than 130 of these languages are currently at risk, with 74 languages considered ‘critically endangered.’ These languages preserve priceless cultural heritage, and some hold unexpected value – nuances in these languages convey unparalleled knowledge of the natural world. Many of these at-risk languages are found in my home state of California. Now for some, only a few fluent speakers remain.

The short article then describes the documentary’s primary subject, Marie Wilcox, without a single mention of *why* so many Native American languages are ‘struggling to survive’. This form of linguistic extraction erases the very causes, historical and ongoing, of language endangerment. In the context of seemingly transparent numbers outlining the ‘crisis’ or ‘epidemic’ of language endangerment and a sudden, if de-historicised valuing of Indigenous languages by a global public, readers are left with the looming question – why?

The long view of human language shows us that language shift and change – especially shifts into language dormancy – do not simply occur outside of sociopolitical factors; thus, we know that languages are dynamic, and inherently in motion through intergenerational transmission that moves them forward through generations and spaces. Borrowing conceptually from Newton’s first law of motion, we can posit that languages tend to remain in motion – being transmitted to subsequent generations – unless an external force is applied to them. Omitting those forces from discussions of language endangerment leaves out a critical piece of the equation and contributes to

the larger pattern of erasure originating in settler-colonialism – this omission is particularly problematic when such forces are still actively at work. Here, linguistic extraction is the gateway rhetorical process to the erasure of colonial agency and the misattribution of agency onto endangered language communities for their own linguistic demise, discussed in the next section.

1.2. Erasure of colonial agency

Such erasure or deflection of colonial agency is not limited to linguistic endangerment. As Deer (2015:x) notes in her analysis of sexual violence in Native American communities within the United States, the term ‘epidemic’ is often applied to describe the egregious numbers of violent sexual assaults against Indian women:

Using the word epidemic deflects responsibility because it fails to acknowledge the agency of perpetrators and those who allow the problem to continue. The word also utterly fails to account for the crisis’s roots in history and law. Using the word epidemic to talk about violence in Indian country is to depoliticize rape. It is a fundamental misstatement of the problem.

Here, Deer argues that the dominant discourses surrounding the pervasive sexual violence against Native American women, particularly framing it as an ‘epidemic’, erases the agent(s) and causes(s) of those realities; to present violence as naturally occurring not only ‘depoliticises’ the problem, but also absolves culpable parties of any responsibility. Similarly, the erasure of the sociohistorical dynamics which shape every aspect of language endangerment – especially as they relate to settler colonial nation states and their overt and covert policies aimed at destroying language transmission – then, is, to quote Deer, ‘a fundamental misstatement of the problem’.

While the role, and agency, of colonial powers is erased, the assignment of agency is not absent from media discussion of language endangerment. In fact, the blame for the plight of Indigenous languages is often ascribed to the communities themselves, or individuals within them. This is perhaps most visible in the metaphor of ‘language suicide’, which posits that a group that loses its language may do so by choice (Denison 1977). However, as Crawford (1995:24) notes, the ‘suicide’ frame of language death ‘explains little about the social forces underlying such choices. Whether deliberate or not, the notion of language suicide fosters a victim-blaming strategy’. Media representations frequently use language denoting that full (de-historicised) agency regarding the future of languages lies with endangered language communities. The title of the previously-cited *National Geographic* 2007 article, ‘Languages racing to extinction’, brings to mind a competition for fun

or sport toward language attrition. Linguists working on language documentation are quoted describing the context in which language shift occurs (emphasis mine):

[Gregory] Anderson, of the Enduring Voices Project, agreed that social pressures play a prominent role... ‘Language endangerment happens when a **community decides** that their language is **somehow** a social or economic impediment,’ he said.

[K. David] Harrison said children are often the ones **who decide to** effectively **abandon** a native tongue. ‘Children are little barometers of social prestige,’ he said.

‘[I]n most cases, languages die a slow death, as people **simply abandon** their native tongues when they become surrounded by people speaking a more common language.’

In these statements, communities ‘decide’ their languages are ‘somehow ... impediments’, causing them to ‘simply abandon’ them. Language shift and language acquisition are represented as fully agentive choices linked only to ‘social prestige’ and ‘social pressures’ or some kind of unknowable impediment, and, while the inclusion of ‘social pressures’ hints at external factors, the final and repeated emphasis places agency on the community. The placement of agency on children here is particularly problematic when we consider that children are often the primary target of linguistic violence and regimes of cultural genocide (e.g., boarding schools, child welfare act, removal policies³), while simultaneously having the least power within the sociocultural language dynamics in which they are represented as ‘simply’ making such choices.

Children are not the only people within endangered language communities singled out as the agents of language attrition in the media. In communities where endangered languages are spoken fluently by few people, particular individuals are often identified as the cause of the decline of language

³ For more information about Native American boarding schools in the United States, see the overview in Archuleta et al. (2000), and accounts of specific institutes in Cobb (2000), Lomawaima (1994), Sakiestewa Gilbert (2010), and Whalen (2016). For an in-depth examination of residential school experiences in Canada, see Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). For an introduction to the Child Welfare Act across multiple colonial contexts, see Briggs & Dubinsky (2013) and the *American Indian Quarterly* special issue 37(2) on Native Adoption in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia.

transmission. Perhaps the most widely discussed example is the (partially fictionalised) story of two speakers, Manuel Segovia and Isidro Velázquez, of the Indigenous language Ayapaneco in Mexico. A 2011 *Huffington Post* article about the now infamous feud between two men presents the situation as follows (emphasis mine):

Though the language has been spoken in what is now Mexico for centuries, there are only two people left who can speak Ayapaneco fluently. Like so many other indigenous languages, it's at risk of extinction – **even more so because**, as the *Guardian* reports, **the last two speakers are refusing to talk to each other**.

This widely circulated and re-worked story was shared from the *Huffington Post* webpage over 3,500 times, and also became the focal point of a campaign and advertisement series by the British telecommunications company, Vodafone. The two fluent speakers of Ayapaneco are repeatedly identified as the reason Ayapaneco will not be spoken by future generations using a rhetoric that parallels the placement of all agency in language endangerment onto Indigenous communities (see Suslak 2011 for a response and thorough contextualisation of the Ayapaneco media coverage and its consequences). Phrasing like 'it's at risk of extinction ... because the last two speakers are refusing to talk to each other' directly links language dormancy – here problematically called 'extinction' (discussed further in section 1.3, below) – to the very late-in-life actions of two individuals whose personal feelings toward each other are of no consequence to a world desperate to extract valuable knowledge hidden within the treasure chest of Indigenous languages. From this external evaluative perspective, Indigenous people owe it to the rest of the world not only to provide aspects of their culture, life, and knowledge of the world to outsiders on demand, but also to be friends with anyone else involved in accommodating those demands.

The author of a 2014 BBC article took a similar approach to the title of her article about the language dynamics of an Indigenous community in California: 'The people who **want** their language to disappear' (emphasis mine). In it, she describes a small Native American community who has decided that language documentation by outsiders simply to preserve aspects of the language for scientific goals did not fit with their understanding of how languages should exist. After only three days visiting the community, which includes her relatives, the author, who is from Wales, concludes her discussion with: 'In the age of mass information, the **choice** of the Maidu shows that without **trust and engagement, valuable knowledge and understanding can be lost forever**' (emphasis mine). Here, the 'choice' of the Maidu is combined with an additional extraction in terms of language endangerment and loss disconnected from the conditions of the Maidu community. Such articles never lament the decline or demise of Indigenous

sovereignty or autonomy, the loss of political, economic, or geographic stability and power, or even the strong correspondence of language attrition with the actual necropolitical⁴ dynamics in marginalised communities. In fact, as I discuss in the next section, Indigenous (language) death is only noteworthy when it is the ‘last’.

1.3. Lasting

Marie Wilcox, Manuel Segovia, and Isidro Velázquez are all part of an increasingly publically circulating discourse about ‘last speakers’ of Indigenous and endangered languages. Of the rhetorical strategies in news media discussed in this paper, ‘lasting’ may be the most prevalent. Historian and Native studies scholar O’Brien (2010) coins the term *lasting* for the discursive process through which Indigenous populations are framed within local New England histories as ‘vanishing’ by defining Indians based on a singular characteristic – full blood quantum in the case of nineteenth century New England. Lasting, then is a process of what Irvine & Gal (2000) call iconisation (rhematisation) and erasure. First, specific individuals or characteristics are made iconically representative of larger wholes – be they groups, languages, or cultures. Erasure happens in two concomitant processes: (1) other characteristics or people that could be representative of the larger whole are erased; and (2) the larger whole is erased through the countdown, or ‘lasting’, of those iconic few. Lasting is, then, a specific configuration of hyperbolic valorisation and enumeration.

The reporting of last speakers of endangered languages is a centuries-old genre of counting down to the inevitable end of Indigenous people, assuming an unavoidable loss of culture, space, and eventually, existence. Consider the first words of Thurman’s (2015) *New Yorker* article, ‘A loss for words: Can a dying language be saved?’ (emphasis mine):

It is a singular fate to be the last of one’s kind. That is the fate of the men and women, nearly all of them elderly, who are – like Marie Wilcox, of California; Gyani Maiya Sen, of Nepal; Verdona Parker, of Oregon; and Charlie Mungulda, of Australia – the last known speakers of a language.

⁴ Mbembe (2003:14) defines necropolitics as ‘the relationship between sovereignty and power over life and death’. In other words, necropolitical dynamics are those in which a sovereign – often colonial – power is capable not only of deciding when and how a subject dies, but also includes the right to enslave others, the right to impose social or civil death, and other forms of cultural and political violence.

While each individual represents a particular type of speaker within much larger communities, they are presented as ‘the last of [their] kind’. Such rhetoric directly reflects 17th century descriptions of the ‘last of’ tribes in New England, as well as popular accounts such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (Cooper 1888), *The Last of the Dogmen* (Hershey et al. 1995), and *Ishi the Last Yahi: A Documentary History* (Heizer & Kroeber 1979), where specific individuals (historical or fictional) were held up as the last of their community, thereby marking the extinction of whole groups of Indians, and all Native Americans more generally. This technique is used to make spectacularly famous (and famous spectacles of) individuals, like Ishi, deemed to be the ‘last’. Thus, *National Geographic* hosts a webpage that invites readers to ‘See and Hear Last Speakers of Dying Languages’, *Wikipedia* lists 59 individuals from around the globe in a ‘List of last known speakers of languages’, and, as mentioned above, various online news outlets circulated a story throughout 2011 and subsequent years titled: ‘Last two speakers of dying language refuse to talk to each other’.

There are three elements of the lasting of endangered languages that are of particular importance. Firstly, those identified as the ‘last’ speakers of languages are only very specifically understood as ‘speakers’ in a narrowly defined way: *native speakers* (those who learned the language from birth/childhood); *monolingual* (speaking only the language of interest); *fully fluent* (those able to participate in any and all domains of language use and communication in the language); *mentally sound*; and with a particular *heritage* (ethnic and/or cultural origins within the communities associated with the language). However, these are not the same criteria applied to the classification of ‘speakers’ of non-endangered languages, and such a narrow restriction of who gets counted as a speaker, or a holder of linguistic expertise and knowledge, erases those who fit one or more, but not all of the listed qualities. As Leonard & Haynes (2010:279) point out, researcher determinations of who is, and is not a speaker ‘without having come to understand what being a speaker means within the cultural context extends the historical colonialist practice of imposing Western ways of knowing without acknowledging that other ways of knowing exist’. Furthermore, narrow, linguistically-derived definitions of speakerhood effectively erase bilingual speakers and learners, and exclude potential members of multilingual communities (De Korne 2017).

The second element of concern is the direct connection between *lasting* and the already critiqued discourses of some endangered and Indigenous languages as dead. As enumerations go, ‘last’ is a superlative, and it evokes to the same level of irreversible finality as ‘dead’ (see King & Hermes 2014; Leonard 2008; Meek 2011; Perley 2012). In nearly all classification systems for language vitality and endangerment, the end point is extinction – borrowing from ecological and biological discourses. The UNESCO 2003 *Language Vitality and Endangerment Report*, for example, divides language

endangerment into a six degree scale, with ‘Safe (5)’ being the most robust with no threat of endangerment, and ‘Extinction (0)’ being the least, defined as: ‘There is no one who can speak or remember the language’ (UNESCO 2003:8). This discourse of extinction has been challenged by groups whose languages were previously classified as extinct, such as Myaamia and Wampanoag, but have since re-gained speakers. As Miami linguist and language activist Wesley Y. Leonard (2011:137) points out, the problem with the category of extinct, is that ‘extinct means forever’. Once classified as extinct, as the Myaamia language was, it is extremely difficult for existing language practices to be recognised as legitimate – or even existing at all. In contrast, language activists call for the term ‘dormant’ or ‘sleeping’ to be used for languages that do not currently have living speakers – a semantic frame that assumes such a status may only be temporary. Perley (2012:145) suggests shifting the metaphor from *dead* to *dormant* or *sleeping* is powerful enough to ‘provide new hope for sleeping languages, as community members conceive emergent vitalities for their heritage languages as they awaken them’. I believe that same consideration to the metaphorical framing of ‘last’ may prove equally powerful, and the converse to be equally detrimental.

The third element of these rhetorical strategies to consider is that they contribute to ‘depictions of [I]ndigenous languages as shifting toward nonexistence in direct correspondence to shifts across generations of speakers’, where ‘younger generations are depicted as failing to acquire a language, in this case their ancestral or heritage tongue’ (Meek 2011:51). As such, these rhetorics contribute to what Meek identifies within media depictions of Indigenous language dynamics as the ‘doom-and-gloom’ narrative of Indigenous languages as doomed, their communities having ‘failed’ to maintain them (ibid:53). Such tropes leave endangered language communities in seemingly impossible positions. On the one hand, bilingual and multilingual speakers and contexts are usually rendered uncounted, the ‘Invisible Man’ (Wells 1924) in the village of language reclamation. And, when new speakers emerge against great odds in communities already slated as dead, their last speaker gone, those communities must then argue against the archive of coverage to declare their language ‘un-dead’, reminiscent of the pivotal scene in James Whales’ 1931 film adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, during which Dr. Frankenstein declares repeatedly, ‘It’s alive!’ Much like Dr. Frankenstein, Indigenous language communities with re-awakened languages are then tasked with convincing the town mob, or readers of news media, of the realness of their accomplishment’s existence – often with the same effect. Much like the Invisible Man or Frankenstein’s reanimated human, re-awakened languages – with their (often bilingual) new speakers and regular use – cannot completely escape the pervasive expectation of the Vanishing Indian (language) trope, and are perceived as unnatural at best, and, at worst, monstrous.

2. Indigenous language survivance

These complex and ever-changing language and identity dynamics highlight current tensions in efforts to draw attention to barriers to Indigenous language use and transmission. They also demonstrate the importance of engaging with endangered language rhetorics in ways that do not replicate pre-existing discourses that may ultimately maintain settler colonial desires to quantify, regulate, and erase Indigenous communities. It should be noted that the rhetorical strategies of ‘linguistic extraction’, ‘the erasure of colonial agency’, and ‘lasting’ can probably all be found to some extent within Indigenous and endangered language communities themselves. However, they are not the only ways in which such communities understand, or represent, language endangerment and language reclamation efforts.

In this section, I ‘listen’ to an alternative body of rhetoric produced within endangered language communities, by Indigenous scholars, and by ethnographers of Indigenous and endangered language contexts, and discuss what it might offer scholars and language activists. The examples in this section provide direct alternatives to the common rhetorics discussed above: they are organised around each of the strategies they counter. Firstly, the centering of languages within social contexts, individual lives, and embodied experiences provides counter-strategies to linguistic extraction. Secondly, the explicit discussion of the ethno-national histories and political realities that have shaped and continue to shape language realities works against the erasure of colonial agency. Finally, by including a wide range of speakers and potential language users (including bilingual speakers, language learners, and others supporting language reclamation), definitions of language contexts and communities that emphasise what Vizenor (1999) terms ‘survivance’⁵ are used in favor of narratives of lasting. However, these counter-narratives and framings, and resistive strategies often occur concomitantly; in other words, more than one trope may be countered within the same statement, practice, or policy. Alternatives to models favoring linguistic extraction also usually emphasise not only the historical and social causes of language endangerment, but also the very personal impacts it has on Indigenous and endangered language communities left out of extractive representations of language dynamics. When discussing language endangerment, the majority of endangered language communities with which I have had contact are quick to situate their languages and linguistic realities within historical, social, and geopolitical contexts; they point out the role of colonial governments in the historical and current precarious states of their languages. They also include a wide variety of relevant participants in those language dynamics beyond just first-language speakers.

⁵ A portmanteau of ‘survival’ and ‘resistance’, *survivance* emphasizes moving beyond narratives of Indigenous tragedy and dominance.

Indigenous communities and scholars working in language documentation and reclamation regularly emphasise the importance of contextualising endangered languages, or the description, in detail, of the robust geographic, linguistic, spiritual, and social dynamics of languages, of language activists, and of language reclamation projects. For example, Leonard (2017) addresses the contextualizing power of using community definitions of critical terms by showing how accepted definitions of ‘language’ within academia (and the interconnected areas of dictionaries, etc.) can differ dramatically from the definitions provided by Indigenous people who work closely with language(s). Here he questions assumptions in Linguistics that separate the body from the mind, stemming from the field’s origin in the Western philosophical canon where language is a product and function of the mind (and therefore not the body). The Indigenous people he interviews do not share this definition of language, and, critically, do not necessarily have one definition. Instead, they frame language as a basket, a life narrative, and even the key to the afterlife. Such Indigenous definitions are critical to broader discussions of language, particularly when the languages under consideration are from Indigenous communities. Far too often, they involve discussing, and, more egregiously, evaluating language projects and the communities in which they occur without consideration of the lived realities of those in the middle of those projects. This practice leads to arm-chair theorising of what could, would, and should be done in ways that often forget that participants are parents, partners, community organizers, and so on, who must carve out time *for*, and physically *get to*, language classes and programs. Perspectives which take this personal reality into account, such as Hornberger’s (2017) in-depth portraits of three Indigenous language activists, help to contextualise language reclamation beyond the dominant trend of focusing on analysing grammatical features or enumerating speakers.

The rhetorical strategies found in the work of authors in this volume are echoed by other members of Indigenous and endangered language communities who offer repeated calls to situate language as personal – as located within the Indigenous self. In this area, I am reminded of the piece by Mojave poet, Natalie Diaz (2014), entitled *If what I mean is hummingbird, if what I mean is fall into my mouth* which begins:

In Mojave, the words we use to describe our emotions are literally dragged through our hearts before we speak them – they begin with the prefix *wa-*, a shortened form of *iowa*, our word for heart and chest. So we will never lightly ask, *How are you?* Instead, we ask very directly about your heart. We have one way to say that our hearts are good, and as you might imagine if you’ve ever read a history book or lived in this world, we have many ways to say our hearts are hurting.

The government came to us first in the form of the Cavalry, then the military fort (which is why we are called Fort Mojave), and finally the boarding school. The government didn't simply 'teach' us English in those boarding schools – they systematically and methodically took our Mojave language. They took all the words we had. They even took our names. Especially, they took our words for the ways we love – in silencing us, they silenced the ways we told each other about our hearts.

Contextualisation here takes the next step of positioning language within bodies and lived experiences from which they cannot be extracted. In exploring how certain feelings are expressed in Mojave, Diaz describes multiple impactful experiences the community had with the U.S. military and government policies and their very personal and linguistic effects. This contextualisation resonates with moments in my own research. For example, during an interview with a first language speaker of Chickasaw in 2009, I asked the question 'what was it like to grow up speaking the language?' His response was to shift in his chair and pull up his shirt, showing me a three-inch scar, now six decades old, that was the result of a physical attack by three non-Native older boys who heard him speaking to his sister in their language. For this speaker and others, violence and struggle are not metaphors in understanding language shift and reclamation, and the body is not only a machine that produces and perceives semiotic codes; rather, it is the literal battleground on which conflicts are waged. Language, for Natalie Diaz and so many others, is 'pulled through the heart'.

Furthermore, as broader ideologies shift increasingly toward valuing Indigenous languages, many Indigenous people articulate the necessity of ensuring that the historical dynamics that associated speaking those same languages with shame, fear, and pain are not forgotten. They provide rhetorical strategies that explicitly locate language endangerment within colonial processes – often to deflect rhetorics of blame directed at individuals, generations, or even entire communities framed as agentively causing the endangered status of their own languages or negative ideologies associated with them. De Korne (2017) demonstrates how Zapotec language teachers in Mexico counter the disjunctures that emerge from the extraction of languages both from other languages and from the historical and current contexts in which languages overlap. Much like courses that teach students that English is a Germanic language with a direct (and singular) lineage from Middle and Old English, rather than an almost textbook example of a creole formed through the merging of grammatical structure from Germanic and vocabulary from French, Latin, Greek, and a plethora of Indigenous languages, 'true' languages in Mexico are imagined as distinct and easily isolated from each other, and Indigenous languages are quickly dismissed as 'inauthentic' for containing loan words or anything that might be considered 'code-mixing'. Of course, these purist

language ideologies are never equilaterally applied: Zapotec is deauthenticated for its contact with other colonial languages, while Spanish, with which it is usually contrasted, is authenticated as a ‘true language’ despite its own partial origins in Arabic, Greek, and – yes – Indigenous languages, including Zapotec. Instead, language activists not only teach Indigenous languages, but also make visible the disjunctures created through colonial agendas through which no actual speakers of Indigenous languages approximate the imagined ‘pure’ language (because these languages have never occurred in the monolingual vacuum in which they are imagined).

Locating language endangerment within colonial processes may also take the form of new genres of stories such as those connected to schooling experiences. Within my own research, I repeatedly encountered narratives such as the one below, from a Chickasaw woman whose family was involved in language reclamation across multiple generations – from parents who are fluent speakers, to a daughter and grandchildren currently learning the language. During an interview in Oklahoma in 2011, she responded to a broad question about her own experience with the Chickasaw language by providing the experiences of her mother and older generations in the community:

My mom didn’t ... you’ve probably heard this story down the line before ... Mom didn’t want us learning Chickasaw. She didn’t want us to learn the language. She spoke only Chickasaw when she went to school, and she went through a lot of embarrassment of, uh, people talking about her, making fun of her, and she learned English on her own in school. And it was really hard on her. So she didn’t, Mom didn’t want us goin’ through the embarrassment of what she went through – she said it was a White man’s world and you need to learn the ways of the White man. That’s why she never encouraged us to learn at all.

As she notes in her comment ‘you’ve probably heard this story down the line before’, narratives like hers are a very typical means of remembering the context of Indigenous language realities for previous generations as well as highlighting the very real circumstances that contextualise language shift. Similar narratives emerged in the recently completed *Truth and Reconciliation Report*, which details the impact of Canada’s residential school era on Indigenous communities. The report (Vol. 5:104-105) notes:

While the children taken to the schools tried to retain as much of their languages and cultures as they could, the multigenerational battle waged against them was too hard to resist. While initially Survivors could return to communities where their languages and cultures were still alive and vibrant, with each successive generation of Survivors, there was a greater weakening of

community cultural and linguistic strength. More often than not, the schools prevailed. Aboriginal students were forced to abandon their languages and cultural practices. They became alienated from their families, their communities, and ultimately from themselves. This damage was passed down through generations, as former students found themselves unable or unwilling to teach their own children Aboriginal languages and cultural ways.

Clearly, these stories of language shift offer an important counter-narrative to discourses that suggest that members of endangered language communities ‘simply abandon’ their languages, or that language shift and endangerment happen randomly throughout the world.

Community efforts and narratives also offer counter-strategies to the dominant trend of lasting, which assumes an inevitable ‘count-down’ and end to endangered and Indigenous language speakers (Muehlmann 2012) and limited definitions of both ‘speaker’ and the contexts of language use and reclamation. From Wendat (Lukaniec 2015) to Miami (Baldwin et al. 2013; Leonard 2008) to Wampanoag (Baird 2013), researchers and Indigenous communities are demonstrating that languages can ‘awaken’ – even after periods of dormancy. These examples also demonstrate that individuals, groups, and communities can ‘save’ languages, not just lose them as popular media representation suggests. They also provide examples where declarations of language ‘extinction’ or ‘dormancy’ prove overly enthusiastic, such as those that declared Plains Indian Sign Language long-dormant, when in fact it was – and still is – known and used within a variety of communities throughout the United States and Canada (Farnell 1995). We are increasingly offered evidence that endangered language communities can, and do, pull together maintained community knowledge with language documentation resources and comparative linguistic analysis of related languages to create new generations of speakers and new contexts of language use. This includes genres – old and new – within Indigenous and endangered language communities often erased by dominant rhetorics of language endangerment focused exclusively on quantifications of ‘speakers’ and ‘languages’. The contributors to Kroskirty (2012), for example, each highlight the role of narrative and lesser-discussed genres like poetry in the language maintenance and reclamation efforts of Indigenous communities.

In these and other contexts, ethnographic examinations of language reclamation efforts have demonstrated that community language dynamics should include all participants: speakers, as well as the people actively learning, those supportive of language reclamation efforts, and even those directly connected to speakers and learners – a group I call ‘language affiliates’ (Davis 2016). Ferguson (2010) also observed that language learning and speaking dynamics were reinforced and maintained by both teachers and students during her ethnography of elementary school Dän K’è language

classes in Whitehorse, Yukon. Hermes & Engman (2017) found positive effects from a similarly broad grouping of critical participants in their five-year Anishinaabemowin documentation and description project, which included the (sometimes overlapping) categories of community members, researchers, a non-Indigenous linguist, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous second language learners. Equally important in this context is the demonstration that the identity categories of community members and language learners may, through experiences in language reclamation projects, become language transcribers, analysts, and stronger language experts over the course of months and years. In these contexts, language reclamation is being done by groups of people, sometimes by entire communities, rather than solely by the individual monolingual or fluent speakers represented in most speaker counts.

3. Conclusion

The questions driving conversations in mainstream media around language endangerment are predominantly:

- Why have languages become endangered?
- Why has intergenerational language transmission dwindled and stopped?
- Why are Indigenous people switching from heritage language(s) to more global languages?

In fact, this rhetorical framing is itself telling. It positions language loss as the exception, the marked outcome in the total possible realities. As linguistic anthropologist Shulist (2016:94) notes, ‘if the prediction of widespread language “extinction” ... evokes a view of one possible future, then efforts aimed at fighting against this prediction involve imagining, and working to create, an alternative one’. But what does imagining alternative futures look like? What happens when, knowing the extensive history of linguistic violence faced by Indigenous peoples globally, we expect that any Indigenous language is at risk? If we draw on the concept of Native *survivance*, defined by Vizenor (2008:11) as ‘an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry’ when discussing Indigenous peoples, particularly in the telling of stories about language endangerment⁶, here are the kinds of questions we might ask:

⁶ See Nevins (2013:1) for an excellent example.

- How is it even possible that Indigenous and endangered languages have been maintained for as long as they have been?
- What socio-cultural, historical, and political factors have facilitated language maintenance and use?
- What do examples of language maintenance under such extreme conditions teach us about potential strategies for continued language reclamation in our communities?
- What incredible levels of dedication and persistence are demonstrated by individuals, families, and communities engaging in language reclamation?

Overwhelmingly discourses of endangered and Indigenous language failure (Meek 2011) are largely attributable to what questions are asked, how, and by whom. The differences between the proposed questions above and the questions being answered in dominant rhetorics about endangered languages represent what Meek (2010:50) calls ‘sociolinguistic disjunctures’, or ‘points of discontinuity or contradiction, moments where practices and ideas about language diverge’. In these cases, the disjunctures exist between members of Indigenous communities, their languages, and broader institutionalised ideologies and representations about those communities and languages. Such representations or dominant discourses reach far greater circulation within broader publics, and may therefore disproportionately shape both public opinion and policy. However, as sociolinguistic disjunctures, the differences highlighted in this article also have the ability to ‘create opportunities for resetting patterns, for reschematizing some system of semiotic value, for transforming everyday communicative practices and expectations’ (Meek 2010:51). A rhetoric of Indigenous language survivance, then, would focus on Indigenous languages as elements embedded in communities, histories, and spaces rather than extracted from them. It would recognise that language endangerment does not occur in sociopolitical vacuums, and that to present it as such may promote the assignment of responsibility for contemporary realities on those who often have the least agency. Finally, it would recognise that language realities are contained within entire groups associated with a given language or languages, not just those identified as particular types of speakers. This resetting of patterns may be supported by asking new questions and reframing old stories in ways that demonstrate the full depth of the challenges facing Indigenous communities through recent years, decades, and centuries, while also highlighting the incredible extent of Indigenous language and cultural maintenance against all odds as a decolonial act of breath-taking resistance, resilience, and survivance.

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