



# Living Earth Community

## Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing

EDITED BY

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# 15. Indigenous Language Resurgence and the Living Earth Community

Mark Turin<sup>1</sup>

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Endangered languages and the communities that speak them are under extreme stress. Even conservative estimates paint a picture of near-catastrophic endangerment levels and possible collapse, with half of the world's remaining speech forms ceasing to be used as everyday vernaculars by the end of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> The pressures facing endangered languages are as severe as those recorded by conservation biologists for flora and fauna, and in many cases more acute.<sup>3</sup> Yet linguistic endangerment is by no means a natural or inevitable process, the unfortunate by-product of modernization. Rather, the marginalization and erosion of local and Indigenous languages is the direct result of colonization and the racist policies that accompanied it. Across the world

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- 1 This contribution has benefitted greatly from generous feedback from fellow participants at the original workshop that brought us together, in particular, Jeannette Armstrong, Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim. In addition, I am grateful to Aidan Pine for the many deep conversations we have shared and collaborative writing projects that have helped to refine the points contained in this contribution, in particular: Aidan Pine and Mark Turin, 'Language Revitalization', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. by Mark Aronoff (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.8>
  - 2 Michael Krauss, 'The World's Languages in Crisis', *Language*, 68.1 (1992), 4–10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.1992.0075>
  - 3 William James Sutherland, 'Parallel Extinction Risk and Global Distribution of Languages and Species', *Nature*, 423.6937 (2003), 276–79, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature01607>

and through a variety of efforts that have included education initiatives, punitive legislation, and intentional neglect, colonial authorities have instituted language policies that sought to weaken traditional cultural practices, assimilate Indigenous populations, and gain access to their land and resources.

Colonial authorities have used the power of language and the language of power to further their own strategic ends. In some cases, and seemingly paradoxically, this involved supporting Indigenous languages; in most cases, however, they sought to erode them. In the first instance, believing in the inherent superiority of Christian theology, many missionary linguists focused on translating scripture into Indigenous languages. In Papua New Guinea and other regions of the Asia Pacific, scholars and administrators actively strengthened Indigenous languages through standardization programs that involved grammatical descriptions and the compilation of dictionaries and other pedagogical tools.<sup>4</sup> The goal — in many cases — was for local languages to be harnessed to transmit and disseminate an imagined Christian modernity. In other instances, as in Canada, settler-colonial authorities observed the unique relationship that existed between a language and the land on which it was spoken, and focused their attention on breaking this relationship apart by destroying the language and forcibly relocating communities far away from their traditional territories.

To this day, Indigenous communities around the world make use of traditional place names to ascribe current or historical meaning to places and spaces that are locally resonant and historically important. These powerful toponyms encode lived experience and traditional ecological knowledge in an ancestral language in a way that is almost impossible to translate into a more dominant national or international language. By disconnecting the language traditionally used to refer to a specific site, and by introducing new place names in a colonial language (the terms ‘New Zealand’ and ‘British Columbia’ serve as enduring examples), the relationship that local peoples have with their land was rendered opaque and further attenuated. Having weakened this connection to

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4 S. Wurm, P. Muehlheausler, and D. Laycock, ‘Language Planning and Engineering in Papua New Guinea’, *New Guinea Area Language and Language Study*, 3 (1977), 1157–77.



land, the colonial goal of relocating communities in order to extract resources from their territories became more achievable.

Yet, for as long as efforts have existed to impose colonial languages on Indigenous peoples as a means of reshaping their identity, these same processes have been vigorously opposed by speakers of these languages. Pushing back against the decoupling of language from landscape, and asserting the uninterrupted continuity of a living earth whose community is sustained and nurtured by the intergenerational transmission of traditional cultural knowledge, Indigenous peoples find themselves at the front lines of environmental struggles that intersect with de-colonial forms of political activism. Opposition to externally imposed language policy takes many forms, from active resistance to passive non-compliance. Everyday forms of resistance have included the direct avoidance of colonial education programs by concealing children and evading census enumerators, to more contemporary and structured efforts in support of language revitalization, reclamation, and the renaming of traditional territories.

The emergence of the Caribbean linguistic mosaic can be seen as an anti-colonial response predicated on ‘the need to speak and not be understood by the downpressors (slave masters, elite of society)’.<sup>5</sup> Viewed in this light, the creation of a *patois/patwah* or *creole/kweyol* can be read as a linguistic manifestation of a moral objection to the imposition of a hegemonic identity advanced by an imperial state, a perspective further substantiated by the Métis of Canada, who ‘moulded the aboriginal and settler languages into coherent patterns which reflected their own cultural and historical circumstances’.<sup>6</sup>

Universities and municipalities in Canada are increasingly introducing statements that acknowledge Indigenous lands, treaties, and peoples, and also engaging in highly visible renaming practices that replace colonial-era names of buildings and places (usually named after deceased, white, male officers and administrators) with terms that are more locally resonant and relevant.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, the City of Vancouver

5 Aaron Barcant, ‘Language and Power!’ *Convergence*, 4 (2013), 46–54, at 51, <http://convergencejournal.ca/archives/484>

6 Michif Languages Conference, *The Michif Languages Project: Committee Report* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation, 1985).

7 See Rima Wilkes, Aaron Duong, Linc Kesler, and Howard Ramos, ‘Canadian University Acknowledgement of Indigenous Lands, Treaties, and Peoples’, *Canadian*

released the thoughtfully-compiled ninety-one-page *First Peoples: A Guide for Newcomers*.<sup>8</sup> Growing out of the Vancouver Dialogues Project (2010–13), an initiative to create more opportunities for understanding between Aboriginal and immigrant communities, the guide addressed the need for clear information in simple language about the First Peoples in Vancouver. Four years later, and as part of Vancouver's efforts toward reconciliation, city leadership consulted with members of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations on whose traditional, ancestral and unceded territories the urban metropolis now sits in order to introduce a series of Indigenous place names for prominent landmarks. The plaza adjacent to the Queen Elizabeth Theatre is now šxw'łexən Xwtl'a7shn, a name linked to the plaza's past use as a gathering place for the Walk for Reconciliation. The Vancouver Art Gallery's north plaza has been named šxw'łənəq Xwtl'e7énk Square, which refers to a place for a cultural gathering such as a wedding or funeral.

Universities and colleges are likewise engaged in these decolonial acts of toponymy. In 2016, the degree-granting Langara College was gifted the traditional Musqueam name snəwəyəl leləŋ meaning 'house of teachings', with the term snəwəyəl referencing advice that is given to children to guide them into adulthood and build their character. This was the first time a British Columbian First Nation bestowed an Indigenous name on a public, post-secondary institution, and the Musqueam name is visible on all Langara College signage and communications. The University of British Columbia (UBC), where I teach, and the Musqueam First Nation entered into a high-level Memorandum of Affiliation in 2006 to further the sharing of knowledge and the advancement of Musqueam and Aboriginal youth and adults in post-secondary education. This Affiliation agreement further strengthened the long-standing partnership between Musqueam and UBC's First Nations and Endangered Languages Program which was initiated in 1997 as part of the university's commitment to community-based collaboration with First Nations peoples. The primary purpose

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*Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 54.1 (2017), 89–120, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12140>, for an illuminating discussion of the five general types of acknowledgement.

8 Kory Wilson and Jane Henderson, *First Peoples: A Guide for Newcomers* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2014), <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/First-Peoples-A-Guide-for-Newcomers.pdf>

of the partnership has been to promote the development and use of *hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓*, the Musqueam Central Coast Salish language, through collaborative research and teaching initiatives. In the nearly two decades since it began, the partnership has produced several formal research papers, a series of elementary resource books, and a full complement of text and interactive online materials that support four levels of *hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓* language courses for post-secondary credit. These courses are open to both university and Musqueam students and serve as a powerful model for reconciliation.

My university has an uncomfortable history when it comes to relations with Indigenous communities and the ethics of appropriation. Totem Park Residence, a first-year dormitory that houses over 2,000 students, comprises eight houses with Indigenous ‘names’. The original six house names — Nootka, Dene, Haida, Salish, Kwakiutl, and Shuswap — were selected in the 1960s without community consultation. As Sarah Ling compellingly argues, while they ‘were intended to honor local BC First Nations’, these names, ‘along with intellectual property of the communities they represent, have long been misused, misrepresented, and appropriated due to a lack of context and education provided about them. Many of these names are also misnomers’.<sup>9</sup> In 2011, in a process led by Sarah Ling and Spencer Lindsay, both undergraduate students at the time, two new student residences were gifted names significant to the Musqueam Nation — *həmləsəm̓* and *q̓ələxən* — through a collaborative and respectful process that incorporated Indigenous protocol and provided rich learning opportunities for student residents.

While such examples are exciting and inspiring, in order to make sense of contemporary efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultural learnings, we need to understand the political and historical context that has shaped their marginalization. The use of the prefix ‘re’ in words such as revitalization, rejuvenation, revival, and resurgence points to the undoing of some past action or deed.<sup>10</sup> If the world’s linguistic diversity had not been ‘devitalized’ to begin with — through colonization, imperial adventure, war, and forced migration — there

9 Sarah Ling, ‘*həmləsəm̓* and *q̓ələxən* House Films Released!’, 19 February 2014, <https://ctl.ubc.ca/2014/02/19/həmləsəm̓-and-q̓ələxən-house-films-released/>

10 Aaron Glass, ‘Return to Sender: On the Politics of Cultural Property and the Proper Address of Art’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 9.2 (2004), 115–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183504044368>

would be less need for historically marginalized languages with ever-dwindling numbers of speakers to be 'revitalized' today.

The work of language revitalization is inherently multidisciplinary and political, with long-range cultural and social goals that extend beyond the immediate task of generating more speakers. Increasingly, language revitalization programs are as much focused on decolonizing education and plotting a path toward Indigenous self-determination as they are directed at reclaiming grammar and speech forms. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang point out in their foundational contribution, 'Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools'.<sup>11</sup>

Language loss does not occur in isolation, nor is it inevitable or in any way 'natural'. The process also has wide-ranging social and economic repercussions for the language communities in question. Language is so heavily intertwined with cultural knowledge and political identity that speech forms serve as meaningful indicators of a community's vitality and social well-being. More than ever before, there are vigorous and collaborative efforts underway to reverse the trend of language loss and to reclaim and revitalize endangered languages. Such approaches vary significantly, from making use of digital technologies in order to engage individual and younger learners to community-oriented language nests and immersion programs. Drawing on diverse techniques and communities, the question of measuring the success of language revitalization programs has driven research forward in the areas of statistical assessments of linguistic diversity, endangerment, and vulnerability. Current efforts are re-evaluating the established triad of documentation-conservation-revitalization in favor of more unified, holistic, and community-led approaches.

The growing recognition of the legacy of colonial oppression of Indigenous languages has also motivated a realignment of the discourse around language endangerment. The majority of languages spoken across the world have endured punitive policies that actively sought to eradicate them. Their continued use to this day — even if only by a handful of speakers in some cases — is indicative of the resilience

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11 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 1–40.



of communities in the face of continued oppression. Commonly used terms that highlight the ‘endangered-ness’ of a language — we may think of words such as ‘weak’, ‘loss’, and even the word ‘endangered’ itself — overrepresent diminishment and underrepresent the resurgent strength of communities of speakers who have never stopped using their ancestral languages.

The currency of terms such as ‘vanishing’ and ‘disappearing’ not only forecloses the possibility of revival and renewal but communicates an apparently agentless process in which language loss is both inevitable and naturally occurring. Such terminology both effaces the intentionality of colonial policies that legislated marginalization and undermines the efforts of those working to reclaim their languages. When speaking and writing of ‘endangered languages’, then, it is crucial to remain attentive to the words that are used and to seek balance in highlighting ongoing community revitalization efforts on the one hand, while historically contextualizing the increasingly vulnerable state of most Indigenous languages on the other.

With language reclamation and revitalization increasingly situated as an expression of self-determination and political empowerment, some language communities are developing a terminology for discussing endangerment and revitalization that is in itself empowering. One example is a movement to refer to languages without any current native or first-language speakers as ‘sleeping’ rather than ‘extinct’.<sup>12</sup> While the distinction might appear unnecessary or even naively aspirational to researchers not closely involved in such work, all terminology has both symbolic value and political impact. The biological extinction of a species has a mono-directional finality that linguistic ‘extinction’ does not. As Indigenous linguist Wesley Leonard poignantly notes, ‘the paradox of speaking an extinct language is not imaginary’.<sup>13</sup> The designation ‘sleeping’ rather than ‘extinct’ points to the potential of a language to be reclaimed and revived after it has lost its last

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12 Leanne Hinton, ‘Sleeping Languages: Can They Be Awakened?’, in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, ed. by Leanne Hinton and Kenneth Hale (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 411–17, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004261723\\_032](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004261723_032)

13 Wesley Y. Leonard, ‘When Is an “Extinct Language” Not Extinct?’, in *Sustaining Linguistic Diversity: Endangered and Minority Languages and Language Varieties*, ed. by Kendall A. King et al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), pp. 23–33, at p. 28.

first-language speakers — an opportunity that is not available to the dodo or a dinosaur. While bringing a language back from sleeping to having a community of fluent speakers is a phenomenon that has been uncommon in human history, there are recent examples, such as the remarkable and compelling case of the Wampanoag (Algonquin) language, which was sleeping from the late nineteenth century until revitalization efforts resulted in fluent child speakers of the language in the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup>

For peoples like the Myaamia (Algonquin), who have no first language speakers left, ‘the ultimate goal of this work is to eventually be able to raise our children with the beliefs and values that draw from our traditional foundation and to utilize our language as a means of preserving and expressing these elements’.<sup>15</sup> Rather than some ideal, end-state fluency, it is the sustained effort of communities that shape and determine the goal and success of any language revitalization project. As all who are engaged in language revitalization can attest, the work is never complete: success starts when revitalization efforts begin and doesn’t end until efforts themselves cease.<sup>16</sup>

Elders and youth in Indigenous communities are actively using and harnessing emerging technologies to strengthen their traditions and languages; Indigenous peoples are creators and innovators (not just recipients or clients) of new technologies, particularly in the domain of cultural and linguistic heritage. While technological efforts in the 1970s included specially modified typewriters and custom-made fonts to represent Indigenous writing systems, communities are now making use of digital tools — online, text, Internet radio and mobile devices — to nurture the continued development of their respective diverse Indigenous languages and cultures. Yet, such interventions are not without risks and consequences. Digital technologies cannot and will

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14 *We Still Live Here: Âs Nutayuneân*, dir. by Anne Makepeace (2010).

15 Daryl Baldwin, ‘Miami Language Reclamation: From Ground Zero’, *Lecture Presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> Speaker Series at the Center for Writing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. 28, <http://writing.umn.edu/lrs/assets/pdf/speakerpubs/baldwin.pdf>

16 Leanne Hinton, ‘Leanne Hinton: What Counts as “Success” in Language Revitalization?’, 55:44, posted online by The University of British Columbia, *Youtube*, 3 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNIUJxri3QY>. This talk was part of the Future Speakers: Indigenous Languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Series, held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2015.

not save languages. Speakers keep languages alive. A digital dictionary itself won't revitalize an endangered language, but could assist the speakers who will. At the same time, technology can be as symbolically powerful as it is practically useful, and can carry considerable political weight. In the English-dominant world of cyberspace, Indigenous communities are engaging with, disrupting, and re-imagining digital practices. By generating digital visibility and legibility, Indigenous communities claim a 'presence' online, and exert control over the terms of Indigenous representation rather than risk misrepresentation.

As a practice, language revitalization takes many shapes. Some of the earliest language activists were the children and students who, risking corporal or psychological punishment, continued to speak their languages in residential and boarding schools and at home with their families. Since the retraction of explicit bans on speaking Indigenous languages in public in many countries, some of which have only been lifted within the last few decades, language revitalization has become noticeably less subversive.<sup>17</sup> Many language revitalization programs now receive support from band councils, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic foundations, and even governmental bodies and programs.

Recalling the central relevance of language to many other aspects of community well-being, the transformative healing nature and holistic benefits of language revitalization have much wider impact and relevance than linguistic vitality alone.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous language revitalization speaks as much to 'hard' indicators of health and well-being as it does to 'soft' indicators of culture and identity. As the Sto:lo/Xaxli'p educator and writer Q'um Q'um Xi'em (Jo-ann Archibald) said to Aboriginal educators at *Oral Traditions: The Fifth Provincial Conference on Aboriginal Education* in 1999, while 'we need to preserve

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17 Eric A. Anchimbe, 'Functional Seclusion and the Future of Indigenous Languages in Africa: The Case of Cameroon', in *Selected Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. by John Mugane et al. (Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project, 2006), pp. 94–103; Mekuria Bulcha, 'The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization in Ethiopia and the Conflict Over the Status of "Afaan Oromoo"', *African Affairs*, 96.384 (1997), 325–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a007852>

18 D. H. Whalen, Margaret Moss, and Daryl Baldwin, 'Healing through Language: Positive Physical Health Effects of Indigenous Language Use', *F1000Research*, 5 (2016), 852, <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.8656.1>

our oral traditions, we also need to let them preserve us'. Important new studies demonstrate the interrelatedness of language and community well-being. A recent Canadian study showed a compelling correlation between Indigenous language use and a decrease in Aboriginal youth suicide rates in British Columbia.<sup>19</sup> Such statistical research helps to highlight the multidimensional nature of language revitalization and its cross-sector impact on the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

At the same time, we need to situate language work in the wider context of biocultural diversity, which Luisa Maffi helpfully defines as 'the diversity of life in all its manifestations: biological, cultural, and linguistic, which are interrelated (and possibly coevolved) within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system'.<sup>20</sup> Over the last decades, researchers in previously unrelated fields have begun to explore exciting correlations between human and biological worlds, specifically in relation to language. There is an emerging consensus between scientists and humanists that biodiversity and linguistic diversity go hand-in-hand: areas rich in one are usually rich in the other. Scholarship in this field emphasizes that the diversity of life comprises not only the variety of species and cultures that have evolved on earth, but also the diverse human languages that have developed over time. An integrated biocultural approach highlights the importance of languages in not only the communication and transmission of cultural values, but also in maintaining traditional knowledge and ecological practices. By extension, a biolinguistic perspective argues for the centrality of language in mediating human-environment interactions and mutual adaptations.

The Federal Government of Canada and its research councils are beginning to provide targeted resources to explore the intersection of language, well-being and health. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke to the Assembly of First Nations in December 2016, pledging to introduce a federal law to protect, preserve, and revitalize First Nations, Inuit,

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19 Hallet, Darcy, Michael J. Chandler, and Christopher. E. Lalonde, 'Aboriginal Language Knowledge and Youth Suicide', *Cognitive Development*, 22 (2007), 392–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2007.02.001>

20 Luisa Maffi, 'Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability', in *The SAGE Handbook of Environment and Society*, ed. by Jules Pretty et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), pp. 267–77, at p. 269, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607873.n18>

and Métis languages: 'We know [...] how residential schools and other decisions by government were used to eliminate Indigenous languages. We must undo the lasting damage that resulted [...] Today I commit to you our government will enact an Indigenous Languages Act'. Working with leaders from First Nations communities who have been advocating and calling for such legislation for decades, the Trudeau Government finally introduced Bill C-91, *An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages*, into law in 2019.

The bitter irony of the current context is inescapable: colonial governments have since colonization marshaled their economic, military, and administrative might to extinguish Indigenous voices. Now, in the eleventh hour, they are looking to resource that which they first set out to destroy. Benign neglect would have been less damaging than two centuries of violence followed by a last-minute U-turn. Will citizens of settler colonial nations hold their government to account and demand that effective and progressive Indigenous languages legislation be enacted?

We need to listen to and learn from Indigenous communities, honor their processes and goals, and support community-led revitalization programs through respectful partnership. Indigenous communities know their needs better than anyone, and acknowledging this place-based expertise is a step towards reconciliation. Indigenous communities need better resourcing for language instructors to promote stronger learning outcomes, language retention and trust. Indigenous communities must be supported to set their own goals, as these are more attainable, more credible and have a higher chance of fulfillment than any imposed from outside. Indigenous communities need more funding, dispersed in a better way, to plan strategically over the long term. Communities must not be positioned as competitors for resources and visibility, but rather have dedicated funding streams that will enable long-term sustainability.

As ever, leadership is coming from the grassroots. From September 2015, all students in kindergarten through Grade 4 (ages 10–11) in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, have been learning Sm'algayax. 'We are on traditional Tsimshian territory and Sm'algayax is the language of the territory', Roberta Edzerza (Aboriginal Education Principal for her District) told CBC Radio One. 'We are so proud and we would like



to share our language and culture with everybody. It's one avenue to address racism. Education is key. Learning the language and sharing in the learning and the culture'.<sup>21</sup>

While the alarms bells have sounded and the threat of languages ceasing to be spoken remains a reality for increasing numbers of communities, the indomitable human spirit in the face of adversity should not be underestimated. Language communities across the globe have proven throughout history that the odds *can* be beaten and that the effects of colonization are surmountable. Indigenous communities need dedicated and longterm resources to design and implement their own research agendas, learning goals, and success criteria for language revitalization and reclamation work. Through engaging in collaborative linguistic and cultural revitalization work, building partnerships, and nurturing communities of practice at academic, governmental, and grassroots levels, the tide can be turned and more languages will join the ranks of Hawaiian, Māori, Myaamia, and Wampanoag.

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21 'Students in Prince Rupert to Learn Indigenous Language', *Daybreak North*, CBC Radio One, 9 June 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/students-in-prince-rupert-to-learn-indigenous-language-1.3108265>

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