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Aboriginal Performance Cultures and Language Revitalization: Foundations, Discontinuities, and Possibilities

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"Time and time again, respondents spoke about how language and art practices are interconnected and interrelated, and that the concepts within the language are interwoven or linked to art practices. […] We heard that the most popular use of Aboriginal language is, by far, in the disciplines of dance, music, song, and performance. The level of interaction between the arts practice and the languages reveal the interconnectedness of the cultural aspect of the territory and the Aboriginal nation(s)" (Sinclair and Pelletier 2012:15, 17).

Introduction

This literature review surveys a broad selection of documents published by scholars, agencies and departments of the government of Canada, and artistic practitioners between 1988 and 2014, which are relevant to the intersection between language revitalization, public policy, and Canadian Aboriginal theatre and performance[1]. Specifically, this review addresses the question of how Aboriginal art and performance culture(s) can contribute to institutionalized language revitalization efforts in Canada, through their use of threatened Aboriginal languages. My research has only identified one scholarly publication that directly addresses the role of performance in language revitalization (Carr and Meek 2013). A traditional literature review is therefore out of the question. Rather, I have drawn from a wide range of scholarly and governmental sources which indirectly

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[1] Throughout this review, I will refer to 'Aboriginal' peoples, languages, performance cultures, etc. While 'First Nations' has emerged as a preferred term in public discourse, and the current Canadian federal government has signaled its intent to transition from the term 'Aboriginal' to 'Indigenous,' the term 'Aboriginal' continues to legally encompass the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities within the geographical jurisdiction of the Canadian government.

address performance and language revitalization, in order to a) illustrate the absence of performance from the available literature on language revitalization, b) identify broad trends in scholarship and policy, and c) provide a foundation for further research. Broadly speaking, the texts and documents surveyed fall into three categories, although these inevitably overlap with and inform one another.

1. Research projects, written reports, and policy recommendations produced by various government departments and agencies. As Sinclair and Pelletier observe, there are no federal laws that govern language revitalization in Canada (2012); hence, institutional perspectives must be sought out from less formal sources.

2. Academic perspectives on language revitalization in Canada. As mentioned above, there is virtually no scholarly literature that directly addresses the question of performance in language revitalization. Surveying the relevant scholarship remains worthwhile, however, in that it defines the spaces where new work can intervene.

3. Perspectives on Aboriginal theatre, arts, and performance cultures in Canada. Here, the distinction between academic and government sources blurs considerably, as the relevant sources include essays written by theatre professionals, as well as reports released by Canadian arts agencies, including the Canada Council for the Arts and the National Arts Centre.

Methodologically, this review is structured around two key government documents: the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (R.R.C.A.P.), a 4,000 page document which drew on four years of research and consultation with Aboriginal communities,

and the 2005 Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (T.F.A.L.C.). It is impossible to neatly periodize any field of literature without making serious intellectual impositions; at the same time, one of the most useful features of a literature review is the identification of trends or patterns. My decision to structure this survey around two *clusters* of documents is an attempt to balance these two methodological imperatives. Rather than a chronology, I have chosen two key government documents, and traced a network of texts related to language revitalization which radiate outwards from each. While it is impossible to identify a single moment of change, there is a substantial shift between these two documents in the discourse surrounding language revitalization. Whereas the 1996 R.R.C.A.P. consciously drew upon Joshua Fishman's groundbreaking scholarship on 'language shift' (which inaugurated language revitalization as a field of study within linguistic anthropology), the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. appealed for language revitalization on the basis of what Glen Coulthard terms a "politics of recognition" (2014:3). Clustering scholarly and governmental documents around these two crucial reports illustrates changing dynamics of language revitalization, and the possibilities for intervention offered by new work on art and performance cultures.

Language, Performance, and The 1996 R.R.C.A.P.

Joshua Fishman's 1991 *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* is considered the foundational text for scholarship in the area of language revitalization (Hinton 2003:49), or in Fishman's terminology, "reversing language shift" or *R.L.S.* (1991:2). *Language shift*, defined as a threat to the "intergenerational continuity" of "speakers, readers, writers and even understanders" undermines a language's existential

viability, and its ability to serve as the foundation for indigenous identity and community (Fishman 1991:1,4). Fishman describes the destruction of a language as "an abstraction which is concretely mirrored in the concomitant involvements and intrusions, the destruction of local life by mass-market hype and fad, of the weak by the strong, of the unique and traditional by the uniformizing, purportedly 'stylish' and purposely ephemeral" (1991:4).

While this passage betrays the author's anxieties with the globalizing world of the early 1990s, it also points to his underlying justification for efforts to reverse language shift. For Fishman, language and culture are fundamentally interwoven: language extinction entails the loss of traditional lifestyles, patterns of thought, and ways of being in the world. In his articulation, R.L.S. – commonly described as *language revitalization* in more contemporary literature – is profoundly political. "R.L.S. is an indication of dissatisfaction with ethnocultural (and, often, with ethnopolitical and ethnoeconomic) life as it currently is, and of a resolve to undertake planned ethnocultural reconstruction" (Fishman 1991:17).

By contrast, the *Declaration of First Nations Jurisdiction over Education*, published in 1988 by the Assembly of First Nations (A.F.N.), does not make an explicit connection between language and cultural vitality. Under the heading "Aboriginal Languages" the document advocates for a series of changes in federal policy, including "official status [for Aboriginal languages] within Canada, constitutional recognition, and accompanying legislative protection" (Charleston 1988:16). This contrasts sharply with Fishman's focus on "the intimate family and local community levels" rather than "'higher level' […] processes and institutions" (1991:4). Consequently, the *Declaration* distinguishes between *language* and *culture*. While it is necessary to "teach cultural heritage and traditional First Nations skills with the same emphasis as

academic learning" (Charleston 1988:15), Aboriginal languages themselves are not described as either key components or *vessels* of culture.

While a number of scholars had begun to pay attention to dying and endangered languages during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Fishman succeeded in consolidating the field of study and communicating the importance of R.L.S. to other academics and policy makers. One of the key documents in the contemporary history of Aboriginal peoples and the federal government is the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which provides the nucleus for the first cluster of texts surveyed in this review. David Newhouse describes the R.R.C.A.P. as a benchmark for subsequent negotiation: "We used to ask, when presented with proposals from governments: 'is this just the [highly controversial, and ultimately abandoned 1969] White Paper in disguise?' […] Now we will say: 'How does this accord with the R.C.A.P.?'" (2007:298).

Tellingly, the R.R.C.A.P. adopts Fishman's model of R.L.S. in its recommendations regarding Aboriginal language death. Volume 3, titled *Gathering Strength*, addresses the "fragile state of most Aboriginal languages and the prospects for and means of conserving them" (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:564) under the broader rubric of Arts and Heritage. From the beginning, language is understood as crucial to culture, both as the means by which culture is transmitted and as a component of culture in its own right. "Language is the principal instrument by which culture is transmitted from one generation to another, by which members of a culture communicate meaning and make sense of their shared experience." (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:563) Indeed, this perspective is reflected in the organization of the volume itself: Section 6.2, which addresses language, is situated between sections which address cultural heritage and the relationship of Aboriginal people to communications media (Sections 6.1 and

6.3, respectively). At the same time, this perspective raises important questions about the report's ideological commitments regarding language. By privileging the role of language in culture, does the report address the historical abuses of the residential school system and of federal language policy, or does it unconsciously reiterate a European language ideology that conflates national and linguistic identity?

Like Fishman, the R.R.C.A.P. recommends that countering language loss must begin at an interpersonal and community level, in order to restore intergenerational transmission. Indeed, Fishman's eight stage model for reversing language shift is directly quoted in the R.R.C.A.P., and provides the template for their subsequent recommendations (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:573-4, 577-8). One of the most substantial recommendations calls for the Canadian government to fund the National Language Foundation which was proposed by the A.F.N. in their 1988 *Declaration* (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:578). This foundation would fund academic research and the development of classroom-based language learning materials, alongside "traditional approaches to language learning such as language/cultural camps" (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:578). Interestingly, this set of proposals does not see support for literary or performance cultures as a possible component of language revitalization, and the later recommendations for arts and cultural funding do not address the possible use of Aboriginal languages (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:602). It is also interesting that the authors of the R.R.C.A.P. chose to integrate the A.F.N. proposal for a national language foundation into the broader academic framework of language revitalization.

According to the R.R.C.A.P., the Canadian government is directly responsible for the contemporary decline of Aboriginal languages, and consequently for their revitalization as well. "In our view, Canadian governments have an obligation to support Aboriginal initiatives to conserve and revitalize Aboriginal languages and as much as possible to undo the harm done to Aboriginal cultures by harshly assimilative policies" (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:564). Language revitalization is therefore seen as necessary to prevent the further decline and loss of Aboriginal languages, but also to address historical wrongs.

Those historical wrongs figured prominently in the vibrant Canadian Aboriginal theatre scene that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. While Aboriginal playwrights and performers had been active since the 1940s (Schäfer 2013:20-1), "the real breakthrough of Native theatre in Canada came with Cree playwright Tomson Highway" (Schäfer 2013:24). His widely celebrated play *The Rez Sisters*, first produced at Native Earth Performing Arts in 1986, inaugurated what theatre scholar Henning Schäfer has described as a decade-long "golden age" (2013:24) of Aboriginal theatre in Canada.

Aboriginal languages occupy an ambiguous position in the writings of playwrights who were active during this vibrant moment for Aboriginal performance culture: if federal support for language revitalization stopped short of funding language use in performance, contemporary performers were equally ambivalent towards the use of Aboriginal languages. The pattern that emerges in these two very different literatures is a careful segregation between language revitalization and cultural revitalization.

Tomson Highway directly addressed his decision to write in English in a 1987 essay titled *On Native Mythology* Highway attributes the success of Aboriginal playwrights to theatre's unique ability to adapt themes and performance styles inherited from a rich oral tradition (2005:1). "The only thing is, this mythology has to be reworked somewhat if it is to be relevant to us Indians living in today's world" (Highway 2005:2). For Highway, reworking traditional mythology entails the use of contemporary technology, a balance

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between urban and rural settings, and, crucially, minimizing the use of Aboriginal languages in performance:

> "The difficulty Native writers encounter as writers, however, is that we must use English if our voice is to be heard by a large enough audience: English and not Cree. The Cree language is so completely different and the world view that language engenders and expresses is so completely different – at odds, some would say – that inevitably, the characters we write into our plays must, of necessity, lose some of their original lustre in the translation" (2005:2).

This passage raises an interesting tension between two possible approaches to incorporating Aboriginal languages in theatre: is it more worthwhile to strengthen an Aboriginal language by incorporating it into theatre and performance, or to Anglicize Aboriginal theatre in the pursuit of a broader audience? While Highway recognizes that language communicates a culturally unique worldview, the political objective of his work lies in confronting and educating a broader Canadian public, and affirming the mythological "dreamworld" (2005:3) of Aboriginal peoples in a widely accessible language.

Drew Hayden Taylor more overtly confronts the cultural legacy of residential schools in a 1996 essay titled *Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada* Taylor, who succeeded Tomson Highway as the creative director for Native Earth Performing Arts, echoes Highways' suggestion that Aboriginal theatre represents the "next logical step" (2005:61) for a storytelling culture grounded in orality, spoken words, and bodily gestures. However, he also claims that theatre offers a unique venue for cultural revitalization: while "Christianity, […] the government, the residential system etc." sought to

assimilate Aboriginal culture, "it is incredibly hard to eradicate the simple act of telling stories" (Taylor 2005:62). While essentially restating a point Highway had made nine years earlier, Taylor is much more explicitly politicizing Aboriginal theatre in the context of colonial oppression; I would argue that his more pointed references to historical and political realities are inseparable from the contemporary R.R.C.A.P. consultation. By framing performance as a uniquely resilient art form, the contemporary vibrancy of the Aboriginal theatre scene becomes inherently political. For Taylor, theatre is inspired by, and confronts, historical and ongoing oppression, while at the same time being performative of the resilience and revitalization of Aboriginal culture by virtue of its very existence.

Language plays an intriguing role in Taylor's essay. While he describes cultural revitalization as "getting our voice back" (Taylor 2005:62), that project does not overtly include getting his *language* back. In fact, he partially attributes his own gravitation to theatre to his imperfect education in the English language:

> "The spotty education that has been granted Native people by the government and various social institutions has not been great. This is one of the reasons I became a playwright: I write as people talk, and the way people talk is not always grammatically correct – therefore I can get away with less than 'perfect' English" (Taylor 2005:61).

Once again, this passage speaks to a fairly durable separation between language and culture. Ultimately, Taylor is concerned with specifically cultural degradation and revitalization: if language revitalization is conceived as a separate project altogether, then language death does not necessarily threaten culture. Projects aimed at cultural revitalization can bracket

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language, and language revitalization will not appreciably impact cultural renewal.

Language, Performance, and the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. Report

As I suggested in the introduction to this review, my decision to distinguish between two *clusters* which emerge from the literature, rather than between two *periods*, is an effort to address the conceptual pitfalls of periodization. With that qualification, the literature which I have clustered around the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. Report is characterized by three broad departures from the cluster surrounding the 1996 R.R.C.A.P.:

1. The appearance of discourses consistent with what Glen Coulthard describes as a 'politics of recognition'.
2. A discursive nexus between Aboriginal languages, cultures, and land.
3. A gradually emerging interest in the relationship between Aboriginal performance culture and Aboriginal languages.

The most important document to follow the 1996 R.R.C.A.P. is the 2005 Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (hereafter the T.F.A.L.C. Report), whose full title is *Towards a New Beginning: A Foundational Report for a Strategy to Revitalize First Nation, Inuit and Métis Languages and Cultures*. Created in 2003, the T.F.A.L.C. was tasked by the Minister of Canadian Heritage to develop a new national strategy for language revitalization, in consultation with Aboriginal communities and elders. To a large extent, the community-driven focus of the T.F.A.L.C. was intended as a response to Aboriginal critiques of earlier heritage language legislation, which was considered unacceptably centralized, and insufficiently consultative (Patrick 2013:298-9). Although the T.F.A.L.C. Report itself is sharply critical of "what it considers to be a serious underestimate of

the time needed to carry out its mandate in a respectful, complete and dignified way" (2005:15) the process was nevertheless quite extensive. The T.F.A.L.C. Task Force itself consisted of ten experts in language revitalization, was advised by a Circle of Experts who provided working papers and presentations, and consulted fifty-one First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Elders (T.F.A.L.C. 1005:119-23).

The report makes a series of twenty-five recommendations, which in many ways reiterate the substance of earlier policy proposals. For instance, Recommendations 17 and 18 call for a permanent Aboriginal Languages and Culture Council, which would assume the central role in language policy and funding occupied by the federal Ministry of Canadian Heritage (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:x). This proposal is virtually identical to recommendations made by the R.R.C.A.P. in 1996, and in 1988 by the Assembly of First Nations. There is also clear evidence of Joshua Fishman's ongoing influence on Canadian language revitalization policy. While the Task Force saw its report "as the first step of a 100-year journey" (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:viii), it also recognized the need for immediate action in support of critically endangered languages. Fishman's scholarship in language shift is cited as a "template for revitalizing declining and endangered languages" (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:85); in fact, like the R.R.C.A.P., the T.F.A.L.C. Report recommendations for language revitalization initiatives are modeled on the eight-stage approach he elaborated in 1991.

While the T.F.A.L.C. inherited many of its substantive proposals from documents published during the 1980s and 1990s, its discursive and political framing clearly departs from the precedent of that earlier cluster. The 1996 R.R.C.A.P. framed Aboriginal language revitalization as a necessary step towards reconciliation by foregrounding the history of assimilation and abuse; by contrast, the T.F.A.L.C. Report closely links language to national identity and territorial rights.

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As Donna Patrick observes, the Supreme Court of Canada has narrowly defined Aboriginal culture in terms of traditional hunting and fishing practices, thereby excluded language use from the definition of cultural practice (Patrick 2013:299). The 2005 T.F.A.L.C. Report strategically essentializes Aboriginal culture in order to rhetorically link Aboriginal languages with national identity, spiritual practice, and the land itself. Part III of the T.F.A.L.C. Report, *Our Languages and Our Cultures: Cornerstones for Our Philosophies* includes the most explicit articulation of this new, 'territorialized' rhetorical strategy:

> "We came from the land – this land, our land. We belong to it, are part of it and find our identities in it. Our languages return us again and again to this truth. This must be grasped to understand why the retention, strengthening and expansion of our First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages and cultures is of such importance to us, and indeed, to all Canadians. For our languages, which are carried by the very breath that gives us life, connects us daily to who we are" (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:10).

This rhetorical strategy departs significantly from the approaches taken during the 1980s and 1990s. Although both the T.F.A.L.C. and the R.R.C.A.P. frame language as the central component of Aboriginal worldviews and identities, the T.F.A.L.C. links language revitalization to land, and thus to a wider conversation surrounding ongoing territorial disputes, in a way that was simply not part of the earlier discourse. This maneuver allows the authors to deploy Canada's national and international commitments regarding the environment, cultural diversity, and biodiversity in support of language revitalization. If, as the T.F.A.L.C. argues, Aboriginal languages are uniquely grounded in particular physical spaces and environments, then language death threatens our collective ability to understand and protect "Canada's biodiversity" (2005:72).

In one sense, this seems highly creative use of discourse and framing to strengthen the argument in favour of Aboriginal language revitalization. Certainly, this maneuver has become increasingly common in contemporary language revitalization discourse (Patrick 2013:300), and is one of the characteristics that defines what I have called the *second cluster* of literature. However, the process of embedding language revitalization discourse in the politics of territorial claims simultaneously embeds Aboriginal languages in what Glen Coulthard terms a *politics of recognition*. In *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, he "takes 'politics of recognition' to refer to the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to 'reconcile' Indigenous assertions of nation-hood with settler-state sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identity claims in some form of renewed legal and political relationship with the Canadian state" (2014:3). According to Coulthard, this model of negotiation between Canadian governments and Aboriginal peoples simply rearticulates the logic of colonialism and territorial dispossession (2014:22). Tellingly, this politics of recognition is inseparable from the T.F.A.L.C.'s discursive nexus between land, language, and identity. The T.F.A.L.C. Report is prefaced by a series of guiding principles, which includes the following statement:

> "We believe that Canada must make itself whole by recognizing and acknowledging out First Nation, Inuit and Métis

languages as the original languages of Canada. This recognition must be through legislation and must also provide for enduring institutional supports for First Languages in the same way that it has done for the French and English languages" (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:3).

Two observations are necessary. First, the discourse of the T.F.A.L.C. differs substantially from the literature clustered around the publication of the R.R.C.A.P. a decade earlier. In that time, the nexus between land and language, and the discourse of recognition, replaced the R.R.C.A.P.'s historical argument as the dominant rationale for language revitalization. While the T.F.A.L.C. echoes the R.R.C.A.P. in blaming Canadian governments for the decline of Aboriginal languages, this argument has been superseded. Indeed, the T.F.A.L.C. Report's first three recommendations call for "the link between languages and the land," for the "protection of Traditional Knowledge," and for "legislative recognition, protection and promotion" (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:ix).

The second observation is crucial for the purposes of this review: cultural production, and particularly performance art and theatre, remain a low priority for the authors of the T.F.A.L.C.. In fact, the arts have an even lower rhetorical profile than they received in the 1996 R.R.C.A.P.. The only specific references to the arts are found in Appendix H, where the authors reproduce the objectives of the U.N.E.S.C.O. *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Objective 13 calls for the "preservation and enhancement" of "oral and intangible cultural heritage," fifteen for the "mobility of creators, artists, researchers, scientists and intellectual," and sixteen for fair copyright laws (T.F.A.L.C. 2005:135-6). Nine years earlier, the R.R.C.A.P. critiqued the "expectation that

Aboriginal artists should produce traditional or recognizably 'Aboriginal' art forms" (R.R.C.A.P. 1996:600). While it is impossible to assign causality, Aboriginal performance cultures received even less attention alongside the emergence of a discourse of recognition.

In 2007, the Assembly of First Nations released a National First Nations Languages Strategy which offers an interesting contrast to the T.F.A.L.C.. While it too is framed via a) a language of spiritual and national identity, and b) a discourse of political 'recognition', its substantive recommendations differ significantly from the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. Report. The 2007 A.F.N. Strategy advances two central policy objectives: first, that "First Nations have jurisdiction over First Nations languages which are recognized and affirmed consistent with Section 35 of the Constitution Act" and second, that "First Nations seek legislated protection via a First Nations Languages Act" (A.F.N. 2007:9). Subsequently, the report lists five major components of a language revitalization strategy, which include fostering more positive attitudes towards First Nations culture and language, and increasing the role for First Nations languages in education (A.F.N. 2007:9).

This policy-first approach contrasts strongly with the recommendations made by the T.F.A.L.C.. While both the A.F.N. and the Task Force call for increased Aboriginal jurisdiction over Aboriginal languages and funding, the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. was far more concerned with developing community-level initiatives. While its twenty-five recommendations certainly called for substantial engagement between Aboriginal and Canadian governments, and for substantial changes in the structure, funding, and jurisdiction of language policy, the T.F.A.L.C. also stressed the "need for a community-driven revitalization strategy" (2005:63). Genealogically, the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. traces its roots to the 1996 R.R.C.A.P., which proposed a language revitalization strategy

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largely inspired by Joshua Fishman's research in language shift. By contrast, the 2007 A.F.N. Strategy shares many of the policy concerns articulated in the 1988 Declaration of First Nations Jurisdiction over Education, which, as discussed above, took a very different approach to the crisis in Aboriginal languages. In other words, the tensions within the literature produced during the 1980s and 1990s are replicated in more contemporary policy proposals. While it is natural for institutions to draw on their existing literature, the fact that current A.F.N. policy on language revitalization is rooted in a report that predated the emergence of language revitalization as a field of study at least partially accounts for its policy-driven approach.

Despite substantial differences in policy, the 2007 A.F.N. Strategy also deploys a discourse of political recognition, albeit inconsistently. "The core elements of our strategy are to ensure the revitalization, recognition and protection of our languages through sustainable investment, capacity building, promotion and preservation" (A.F.N. 2007:7).Yet, on whom is the burden of recognition placed? This wording seems meaningless in a way that suggests that 'recognition' has become a reflexive part of the contemporary language revitalization discourse. Out of seven concrete strategic recommendations, however, none explicitly echo the language of recognition (A.F.N. 2007:9). This inconsistency might suggest ambivalence towards the politics of recognition, but considering the very liberal, rights-oriented approach taken in the first policy objective, it seems more likely that 'recognition' has become an obligatory part of the contemporary discourse.

As with the T.F.A.L.C. Report, the 2007 A.F.N. Strategy refers to artistic production and performance culture only in passing. The A.F.N. Strategy simultaneously affirms the A.F.N.'s right to jurisdiction over language policy, and calls for an expanded role for government

support and funding. "Government support of language by support of culture, heritage, the performing arts, media and other mechanisms that support language, culture and traditions" is listed as one of the "functions required of the Government of Canada" (A.F.N. 2007:20). Once again, this formula reiterates a static view of Aboriginal languages – they are useful to the *preservation* of "culture and tradition", but not to a dynamic performance culture.

Despite the dynamism of Aboriginal theatre during the 1980s and 1990s, and into the twenty-first century, neither the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. Report, nor the 2007 A.F.N. Strategy, envision a significant role for theatre or performance cultures within the wider project of Aboriginal language revitalization. The literature which I located within the first *cluster*, whether produced by institutions, scholars, or performers, consistently demarcated between language revitalization and cultural renewal. By contrast, the 2005 T.F.A.L.C. Report energetically links language revitalization to land rights; however, doing so in the context of 'heritage' and 'tradition' excludes the possibilities offered by a dynamic theatre culture. The 2007 A.F.N. Strategy's rights-based approach effectively prioritizes political negotiation; rather than demarcating between language and culture, it deprioritizes both.

If theatre and performance culture has continued to be absent from the institutional literature on language revitalization, what role has it played in the relevant academic literature? My survey of language revitalization scholarship between 2002 and 2013 suggests a growing, if uneven, interest in the performative aspects of language transmission. In 2003, Leanne Hinton published a literature review titled *Language Revitalization* in the *Cambridge Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. Her review consolidates and summarizes the research which had followed Joshua Fishman's groundbreaking publications in the early 1990s, surveying legal documents, language learning curricula, applied

research in language learning and revitalization, and theoretical and empirical research (Hinton 2003:48). The literature she cites does not address the arts or cultural production, much less performance or performance cultures. However, as Carr and Meek observe, a 2002 article in the journal *Anthropological Linguistics* was among the first academic papers to theorize "the significance of incorporating performance into language revitalization efforts" (2013:193).

In that article, titled *Dynamic Embodiment in Assiniboine (Nakota) Storytelling*, author Brenda Farnell posits that oral performances convey meaning through the interplay of speech and bodily gestures; in other words, that "processes of entextualization and traditionalization […] can occur through visual-kinesthetic gestures as well as speech. […] The emphasis here on the moving body as a crucial feature of human agency defines this approach as a dynamically embodied theory of discursive practices" (2002:38). To examine the connections between speech, gesture, and space, Farnell filmed a series of stories performed by an Assiniboine elder, who communicated via a combination of English, Nakota, and a signed language called *Plains Sign Talk* (2002:40). Farnell proceeded to transcribe Plains Sign Talk using the Laban script, "a set of graphic symbols for writing body movement" (2002:38); by juxtaposing her gestural transcription with the spoken component of each performance, she argued that body speech and gesture were crucial to communication.

Farnell's article has proven influential in the field of language revitalization. Her case study, in which performance proved essential to one elder's use of her language, has provided other scholars with the theoretical basis from which to argue that successful language revitalization should recognize the importance of embodiment and performance to Aboriginal languages (Carr and Meek 2013). Her work is not beyond criticism, however. First, Farnell

consistently describes her interlocutor, an eighty-four year old elder named Rose Weasel, in unnecessarily endearing language, referring to her "girlish laugh" (2002:41), for instance. While Farnell clearly meant to convey Weasel's genuine pleasure at sharing her stories (Farnell 2002:41), overstating the point becomes problematic, if not patronizing. Second, while Farnell's fieldwork and theoretical observations are very useful, her methodological decision to transcribe Weasel's gestures using the Laban script buries her contributions in unnecessary technicality. Subsequent references to her work (Carr and Meek 2013) sidestep this approach altogether.

In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard advocates for a "resurgent politics of recognition" (2014:18) that includes the need for "Indigenous people [to] begin to reconnect with their lands and land-based practices" (2014:171). His land-oriented politics resonates strongly with the discourse of language revitalization articulated by the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, which, as discussed above, drew a direct line between Aboriginal territory and languages. In her 2013 article, *'We Can't Feel Our Language': Making Places in the City for Aboriginal Language Revitalization*, Natalie Baloy raises an important question in the face of this territorial rhetoric: if Aboriginal languages and language revitalization are tied to territory, what are the implications for the increasing proportion of Aboriginal persons who live in urban environments? How can Aboriginal language revitalization be adapted for the specific needs of urban dwellers?

Drawing upon work with the Squamish community in Vancouver, British Columbia, Baloy offers three central challenges and solutions for language workers and learners. "First, language workers and learners must work against the sometimes subtle but pervasive idea that a strong aboriginal identity and an urban

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lifestyle are mutually exclusive" (Baloy 2011:516). Second, she advocates for "placing language" in urban centers, by recognizing the diversity of Aboriginal languages and peoples in an urban setting, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of "local peoples, their land, and their languages" (2011:516). Finally, she suggests a number of concrete strategies for "making spaces" (2011:516) for Aboriginal languages in the city.

Crucially, these concrete recommendations include incorporating cultural expression into language learning. A wide range of academic and community interlocutors suggested that cultural activities involving song and dance were significantly less intimidating for new language learners (Baloy 2011:534-5). According to Baloy, a variety of ongoing Aboriginal language song classes and dance groups have sprung up in urban Vancouver, while cultural events like powwows have increasingly worked to incorporate a strong language component. Encouragingly, cultural groups and events combine "motivation to learn an aboriginal language" (Baloy 2011:535) with an accessible peer group of language learners. Finally, song and dance offer a powerful pedagogical tool for adult language learners. "Teaching in that formal setup we use for learning languages….doesn't give those students an opportunity to practice and carry it on. But with songs, some of the words can stick with them for the rest of their lives" (Baloy 2011:535).

While Baloy is optimistic about the language learning opportunities offered by cultural activities, her article does suggest some limitations. First, her focus on song and dance groups and community events like powwows means that theatre and performance cultures do not feature in her research. More serious is the "concern that singing and dancing provide only surface exposure to language learning" (Baloy 2011:535). In their 2013 article *The Poetics of Language Revitalization: Text, Performance, and Change*, Gerald Carr and

Barbra Meek offer possible responses to both of these limitations, through their significantly more nuanced approach to language revitalization and performance. Whereas Baloy focused on the celebration of cultural heritage through song and dance, and the resulting opportunity to create an accessible language learning environment, Carr and Meek examine both language learning and revitalization in the context of performance theory, and specific instances of language learning enabled by theatrical performance.

Carr and Meek's most important theoretical contribution is their application of the idea of *breakthrough* in performance to describe language revitalization. They follow anthropologist and performance theorist Dell Hymes in distinguishing between reporting and performing culture. To take an Aboriginal storyteller as an example, if reporting culture means providing an account of a traditional narrative – essentially relaying the events – then "the notion of breaking through to performance refers to a storyteller's shift to […] truly performing it as verbal art, a shift that is evidenced by verbal cues" (Carr and Meek 2013:195). This bears significant resemblance to Brenda Farnell's idea of dynamic embodiment, in that a storyteller is understood as 'performing' when her speech and bodily gestures become equally important and meaningful. They go further, however, by emphasizing the need for a performer to inhabit and embody the cultural practices, traditions, and epistemology within which the story was/is told, in order to successfully communicate the narrative in its spoken and gestural entirety.

This idea of 'breakthrough' into performance "offers a remarkably apt frame for understanding what is at stake and what is desired" (Carr and Meek 2013:196) for language revitalization. If the use of a language constitutes the ongoing performance of an identity, then the gold standard of language revitalization would be a speaker's ability to fully inhabit the

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cultural context of that language – that is, her experience of a breakthrough into performance. According to Carr and Meek, the "goal of language revitalization efforts is to transform individual articulations from reporting, or model reproduction, to performing, production with all the inherent variation and creative capacity that performance entails" (2013:196).

One of the serious weaknesses of Farnell's earlier theory of dynamic embodiment was the absence of practical, pedagogical application. The strength of Meek and Carr's article is their dual focus on theory and application. Theoretically, their insights into language revitalization are shaped and informed by performance: practically, they evaluate the role of performance, storytelling, and theatre in language learning programs developed by the Kaska community of the Yukon Territory. The reciprocity between theory and application suggests that the field has continued to mature.

Conclusion

Over the last three decades, the discursive terrain of Aboriginal language revitalization in Canada has been highly contested by scholars, performers, policy makers, and Aboriginal governments. Consistently, Aboriginal theatre and performance culture has occupied an ambiguous position within this literature. During the 1980s and 1990s, a strict conceptual division between language and culture meant that language revitalization and performance were mutually exclusive in the literature produced by Aboriginal performers on the one hand, and policy makers on language revitalization on the other. In many ways, the policy recommendations made during the 2000s reiterate work accomplished a decade earlier. Joshua Fishman's research has proved rhizomatic, for instance, heavily influencing the authors of the R.R.C.A.P., and reappearing in the 2005 T.F.A.L.C.'s extensive reliance upon its precursor. However, substantial shifts appear between

the first and second *clusters*, notably in the transition away from an approach that distinguishes between language and culture, to one that binds them both the logic of land claims. At the level of Canadian and Aboriginal government policy, this discursive shift has left even less room for performance and theatre within the wider project of language revitalization. As the academic study of language revitalization matures, however, scholars have become increasingly interested in the potential offered by performance theory, and the use of performance in pedagogy. Carr and Meek's excellent research in the Yukon Territory, for instance, strongly suggests that integrating performance, especially theatrical productions and storytelling, into language pedagogy can contribute immensely to the success of language revitalization programs. Considering the ongoing tragedy of Aboriginal language loss, further research into the potential symbiosis between Aboriginal theatre and language revitalization is both promising, and necessary.

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