

Land and the Living Roots of Language: From Rights to Reconciliation

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Abstract: Included in the Calls to Action of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission are several Calls pertaining to Indigenous languages. However, the terms of Western discourse on rights, and on language itself, risk obscuring the fundamental connections between language and land that Indigenous Elders and scholars have insisted on. Drawing on a diverse literature, I argue that language is, indeed, bound up with the ways in which we inhabit the living world, and that genuine reconciliation requires rethinking language policy and management from this perspective.

Keywords: Aboriginal languages, environment, land use, stewardship, reconciliation

Résumé : Entre autres appels à l'action de la Commission de vérité et de réconciliation du Canada, plusieurs touchent les langues autochtones. Cependant, les termes des discours occidentaux sur les droits et la langue risquent d'occulter les liens fondamentaux entre la terre et la langue, liens sur lesquels des Aînés et des chercheurs ont pourtant insisté. En m'appuyant sur de nombreuses ressources, je montre que la langue est étroitement liée à nos manières d'occuper les terres et que, pour qu'une vraie réconciliation soit amorcée, il est nécessaire de repenser les politiques linguistiques et les politiques d'aménagement linguistique dans cette perspective.

Mots clés : langues autochtones, environnement, utilisation de la terre, intendance, réconciliation

Resumo: Entre as campanhas da Comissão da Verdade e Reconciliação do Canadá estão diversas ações ligadas às línguas indígenas. Contudo, os termos do discurso ocidental sobre direitos e mesmo sobre língua ameaçam encobrir as relações principais entre a língua e a terra nas quais os Anciãos Indígenas e pesquisadores têm insistido. Com base em ampla revisão de literatura na área, argumentamos que a língua está, de fato, vinculada aos modos como habitamos o mundo e que a verdadeira reconciliação solicita que se repense a política e a gestão linguísticas a partir desta perspectiva.

Palavras-chave: línguas indígenas, meio ambiente, uso das terras, administração das terras, reconciliação

Resumen: Entre los llamamientos a la acción de la Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación de Canadá se encuentran muchos que atañen a las lenguas Indígenas. Sin embargo, si el tema se aborda a partir del discurso occidental sobre las cuestiones de derechos y de las lenguas, se corre el riesgo de no tener en cuenta la conexión fundamental entre la lengua y la tierra, relación esta que tanto han resaltado los líderes mayores y los investigadores Indígenas. Partiendo de referencias diversas, en este artículo afirmo que la lengua está ciertamente imbricada en los modos en los que habitamos el mundo viviente, y que, para ser genuina, una reconciliación supone repensar la política y la gestión lingüística precisamente a partir de esta perspectiva.

Palabras clave: lenguas Indígenas, medio ambiente, uso de la tierra, custodia, reconciliación

Introduction: A Little Context

A quarter-century ago, I began my learning journey with the First Languages of Canada in a small office in Ottawa's Byward Market. It belonged to Ruth Norton of the Sagkeeng First Nation, in Manitoba, who was serving as the Director of the newly formed Languages and Literacy Secretariat of the Assembly of First Nations. Ms. Norton had recently overseen the publication of a major report, *Towards Linguistic Justice for First Nations* (AFN), which offered the first overview of the state of First Nations languages by a national organization. I had gone to interview her, but after an hour of conversation she asked me to do some background research for her—work that became a booklet called *A Guide to Language Strategies for First Nation Communities*. The questions we tackled in that short publication have stayed with me ever since.

Ruth and I did some more work together, in particular a report on Aboriginal language policy for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which was in the midst of its fact gathering at the time (Norton and Fettes, *Taking Back the Talk*; revised and expanded as Fettes and Norton, "Voices of Winter"). But the AFN was running into both political and financial difficulties, and a short time later the Languages and Literacy Secretariat was dissolved. The five-volume RCAP report came out in 1996, prompted a few conferences and editorials, and then vanished from public view. But I had been hooked. Through the years since then, although I have been involved in a wide range of teaching and research in education, the quest to understand language revitalization at a deeper level has stayed with me (e.g. Fettes, "Stabilizing What?"; *The Linguistic Ecology of Education*; "Growing into Language").

Meanwhile, activism and scholarship on behalf of Aboriginal languages has grown apace. There is now a substantial literature, written by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, and a much wider range of methods and materials available to people working at the grassroots level. There have also been some important policy statements, and one of these serves as a jumping-off point for this paper. It involves, among other people, my former boss and mentor, Ruth Norton, who in 2004-2005 was one of ten members of a federal Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, established to provide guidance to the Minister of Canadian Heritage on the formation of a national Aboriginal language strategy. Six months after the Task Force issued its report, *Towards a New Beginning*, the minority Liberal government was replaced by a Conservative minority government with sharply different priorities, and work on the national strategy ceased. However, the report itself can still be readily accessed online, and it remains, as the subtitle says, a "foundational" document for developing public policy on Aboriginal language issues in Canada.

The following paragraph is drawn from the report's Executive Summary:

The most important relationship embodied by First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages is with the land. "The land" is more than the physical landscape; it involves the creatures and plants, as well as the people's historical and spiritual relationship to their territories. First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages show that the people are not separate from the land.

They have a responsibility to protect it and to preserve the sacred and traditional knowledge associated with it. (Task Force ii)

In this paper, I want to argue for taking those words at face value. “The most important relationship” – not something contingent, or one consideration among many, or a cultural preference, but a statement of fact about Indigenous languages; an ontological observation. I anticipate, however, that this will not be an easy notion for many readers. Our habitual ways of thinking and talking about language, in English as in other modern Western languages, are not well suited to imagining them in this way. So I will try to lead us there bit by bit, starting by unpacking some more familiar notions, and eventually working our way back to the Task Force and its recommendations.

A good place to start might be another set of recommendations that have received a lot more attention and take-up across the country. These are the 94 Calls to Action issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the end of its seven-year study of the impact of residential schools on Canada’s Aboriginal people. Among other forms of mistreatment and oppression, Indigenous languages were forcibly suppressed in schools, both inside and outside the classroom, and as a result many of the traumatized survivors chose not to pass the languages on to their own children. Consequently, the Calls to Action include a section specifically directed at restitution with regard to languages. The three main Calls on this topic, numbers 13-15, run as follows:

13. We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.
14. We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles:
 - i. Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.
 - ii. Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties.
 - iii. The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation.
 - iv. The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.
 - v. Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.
15. We call upon the federal government to appoint, in consultation with Aboriginal groups, an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner. The commissioner should help promote Aboriginal languages and report on the adequacy of federal funding of Aboriginal-languages initiatives. (*Truth and Reconciliation 2*)

Attentive readers will note that land is not mentioned here. Whatever the TRC thought of the Task Force’s claims about “the most important relationship” embodied by the

languages, it chose to focus in this section on more familiar ways of addressing injustice and inequality. Call 13 frames Aboriginal languages as an issue of (human) rights; Call 14 positions them as a semi-autonomous domain of legislation and redistributive action; Call 15 proposes an oversight mechanism. These are tried-and-true methods of putting a social issue on government agendas. In itself, this is no cause for criticism; we would expect the TRC to be choosing its words carefully, aiming for maximal policy impact. But we may surely wonder whether something has been lost in this process of translation, something the Task Force saw fit to make its lead-in theme a decade earlier.

Ripples from the TRC's choice of how to frame the issues can be seen in documents such as the Glendon Truth and Reconciliation Declaration on Indigenous Language Policy, a primarily academic initiative stemming from a conference in February 2016 at the Glendon Campus of York University. The Declaration takes the TRC's Calls to Action as its point of departure, elaborating on their implications both for the federal government and for post-secondary institutions. Seen in a context of the historic neglect of Indigenous languages in both contexts, such added attention and support is a welcome development. And yet the discourse initiated by the Calls and elaborated in the Declaration is largely that of Western liberal governance, a way of thinking about human beings and the conditions in which they can flourish that has some significant limitations (e.g. see Taylor). The TRC, we may assume, had no intention of restricting the ways in which Indigenous languages might be considered and addressed by Canadian institutions; its recommendations are intended as a floor, not a ceiling. And yet, by encouraging us to think about and deal with Aboriginal languages in analogous ways to our management of English, French, and various "heritage" or "minority" languages, it may be having precisely that effect.

Let us begin to try to think beyond that frame.

Discourses of Power

To begin with, consider for a moment the assumptions and practices embedded in the way we use nouns to speak of "a language" and "languages", as if they were discrete things. English practically forces us to do this, but many languages treat language varieties as adverbs. For example, the word Inuktitut—the common term for the Eastern Arctic dialect of the Inuit language—literally means "like an Inuk," "in an Inuk way", or simply "like a person", as to speak Inuktitut is to speak like a human being (Dorais 3). But this understanding is lost as the word moves into English and its typical modes of discourse. Inuktitut in English not only functions grammatically as a noun; it is taken up in our ways of talking about language *as if it were a thing*—a "fixed code", as Roy Harris puts it (6). And associated with those ways of talking are distinctive practices designed to make languages more thing-like, that is, more homogenous and predictable: establishing standards, compiling dictionaries, writing textbooks and curricula, *teaching* people how to speak (Davis 41). We are familiar with this developmental paradigm—perhaps too familiar. We may have ceased to consider the possibility that it entails losses as well as gains.

The fact is that languages are not things in some ontologically objective sense. What we refer to as “Canadian English”, for example, is a constellation of stylistic norms for the learner of the “standard”, a shifting mosaic of regional, class- and ethnicity-based varieties when observed in its social context, and a subtle ever-turning kaleidoscope of individual and group speech patterns for speakers going through their daily lives. There is no mode of description that captures the fact that “Canadian English” refers to all these things at once—to an entire ecological system of communicative strategies rooted in time and place, history and relationship.

In the Canadian context, English and French are, among other things, languages of power, used in myriad contexts where the use of other languages is disadvantaged or excluded. They are, moreover, connected to written standards that have evolved through centuries of use in legislation, in government, in an industrial economy, and so on. The compromises and complexities involved in naming and treating French and English as things have already been worked out and assimilated into the cultures of those collectives—always, always, to the benefit of some speakers over others: urban over rural, highly educated over less educated, native speaker over non-native speaker. We have made our peace, you might say, with this way of managing language, despite its inequities and inadequacies. We accept the fact, whether consciously or not, that who gets to decide what counts as English in Canada, and what it *means* to count as English in Canada, is in the final analysis a question of power.

Now power can be a useful thing. When, as in the TRC Calls to Action, or the Glendon Declaration, we use this same metaphorical trick to speak of Aboriginal languages, and particularly when we call for formal measures such as the passage of an Indigenous Languages Act, or the development of diplomas and degrees in Indigenous languages, we are claiming power on behalf of the owners and users of those languages. Seen in the light which the framers undoubtedly intended, this is unambiguously a move towards greater equality and inclusion in Canadian society.

But power, as we all know, is also dangerous. Particularly dangerous are forms of power that have emerged from colonialism. US feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde famously claimed that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (99). And this of course is also one of the main themes to be found in the groundbreaking work of Michel Foucault: that power inheres in what he called “epistemes” or “regimes of truth”, that is, taken-for-granted ways of understanding and defining the social world.

That our current ways of talking about and managing language are a product of colonialism is surely uncontroversial. Ivan Illich, for instance, has traced the long history of “taught mother tongue” in European cultures, linking it both to shifts in the Catholic Church towards a top-down paternalism and to the spread of centralizing imperialism by Spain and other colonial powers (see “Taught Mother Tongue” and “Vernacular Values”). From another angle, Benedict Anderson in his well-known work *Imagined Communities* portrays standard colonial languages as essential to the emergence of modern nationalism. Meanwhile, linguistic philosophers and historians such as Oxford’s Roy Harris have shown how closely allied linguistics has been to the Western imperial project.

Now you may protest, perhaps, that the concept of linguistic rights is intended precisely to push back against the imperialist imposition of standard languages of ruling, in the same way that human rights discourse in general aims to defend the freedom and wellbeing of individuals in the face of threats from the state (see Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson). In what sense could calls for Aboriginal language rights, or an Aboriginal Languages Act, be said to employ “the master’s tools”? And what meaningful dangers to Aboriginal languages and communities themselves might accompany the ascendancy of such a discourse?

Let me postpone that question for a moment, in favour of another one. What does it mean to be a speaker or a user of a language—a rights holder, let us say, in the language rights framework?

A Relational Paradigm

A common metaphor for becoming a language user is “acquiring” a language. Indeed, “language acquisition” is the most widely used name for the field of study that looks at how people learn languages. But of course, language is not really a thing you can pick up and own. Instead, I suggest we might more realistically see language as a kind of imaginative and communicative environment—one that is inextricably woven with the natural and cultural environments. According to this view, we don’t *acquire* language; we *grow into it*, we *learn to dwell in it*, in the same way that a bird or an animal grows into a niche, a habitat, a territory.

Now note what has shifted when we start to talk about language as an environment rather than as an individual possession, presumably one carried around in our heads. If our goal is language protection and revitalization, we need to start thinking about how to protect and revitalize *an environment*, and about our *relationships* with that environment. The discourse of languages as things encourages a focus on language as a thing in itself, and on individuals as possessors of that thing. The discourse of languages as environments embedded in the living world encourages a focus on language as deeply relational and on individuals as complexly situated within those networks of relations.

This is surely a picture recognizable to readers familiar with Aboriginal epistemologies. I am reminded of an illustration offered by Rupert Ross, the author of *Dancing with a Ghost* and *Returning to the Teachings*, in a recent talk at Simon Fraser University. If a Western scientist wants to learn about a plant, he suggested, they remove it from the ground, examine its leaves, stem, roots, flowers, etc., and this for them is what it means to come to know that plant. If an Aboriginal Elder wants to learn about a plant, they leave it where it is and observe the other plants that grow around it, the insects that crawl over it, the animals that eat it, the way it grows and withers through the seasons, the way it bears fruit and seeds and how those are dispersed, and in that way come to know the plant. That is, in Aboriginal ways of knowing, context and relationship tend to come first; in Western ways of knowing, they tend to come last.

Now we are perhaps starting to get a sense of how a discourse invoking an image of languages as things people carry around in their heads may be misaligned with what we are trying to protect and to revitalize. As we choose “language” as the

thing to focus on, its connections to the rest of the world start to fade from view. Tellingly, this is what tends to happen when we bring languages into schools as well. We like to say that language and culture are intertwined, but what we encounter in classrooms often carries only the faintest echoes of a living culture, and almost no sense of the more-than-human world and places that sustain that culture.

Contrast this with the following dialogue between Derek Rasmussen, a non-Aboriginal educator who has lived and worked in the North for years, and Tommy Akulukjuk, an Inuit friend from Pangnirtung. The dialogue appears in *Fields of Green* (McKenzie et al.), a collection of essays, poems and other writings on environmental education.

Derek first:

In Nunavut, the land speaks Inuktitut.

What I mean is that the land (and sea) evolved a language to communicate with (and through) human beings, namely an indigenous language that naturally “grew” in that area over thousands of years of interaction between the elements and the human and plant and animal beings. Now, this might sound like an obvious point for Inuit to discuss, but it isn’t that obvious to most folks like me who grew up in the South without any intimate or necessary interaction with the nonhuman environment. Instead, we southerners usually take for granted a view of language as a dislocated phenomenon that develops in an isolated way inside the brains of human beings without any necessary influence from their environment. What environmental vocabulary and grammar arose from the indigenous interaction with the land? I recall that when I first started working with NTI [Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated], the then-executive director, Hagar Idlout-Sudlovenick told me of an Inuktitut program with the elders of her hometown, Pond Inlet. The twist in this program was that the elders would only teach Inuktitut out on the land—not in a classroom. The elders from Pond said that too many of the Inuktitut terms were disappearing, and that the only way to resuscitate the appropriate vocabulary was out on the land where the objects to be named could be found. (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 279-280)

Now Tommy:

I think one of the huge differences between young Inuit and older Inuit now is that we, the younger generation, have been taught that Inuktitut needs rigid guidelines or things to follow. We have become more dependent on books, and, how to say, Inuktitut is put into books—taking away the real essence of the language. Imagine: my father learning everything through listening and experiences of his language, never being told that the language is supposed to be this way. And here I am, just one generation away, having been taught highly through books and instruction about the workings of my language. Through southern eyes, I am

supposed to be better educated and have more knowledge because I was taught through something they consider solid, but if an Inuk compares my language with my father I am at an infant level. School (as it seems) taking away kids into schools for most of the day from their parents, to teach Inuit Inuktitut has more eroded the actual language and made it into phrases and small talks rather than being the teacher of senses and experiences like the real language is. (This is what the elders in Pond Inlet were realizing: losing the real essence of the language.) Inuktitut, to me, is to feel the working of the nature; through Inuktitut I can feel the weather, the warm sun, and describe it that way. (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 282)

Notice what Tommy says here: “taking away the real essence of the language”. This essence surely lies in meaning, meaning born of direct experience, ongoing experience in fact, or in another word—relationship. When we learn a language in the context of deep communication with the world, and therefore necessarily in relationship with a particular place in that world, that language means differently.

When I first started thinking about these issues, and particularly when I was working on my PhD thesis on the linguistic ecology of education, I became particularly interested in language’s influence on the imagination. It seemed to me then, and indeed it still seems to me, that part of the school system’s destructive impact on Aboriginal languages and cultures has to do with educating students into an imaginative view of the world in which they are invisible or marginal. This worldview does not have to be taught explicitly, for it is implied in the whole selection and organization of the curriculum, in the general lack of effort to ground learning in the places, cultures and identities where students’ lives are rooted. And the language of schooling, taught mother tongue in Illich’s phrase, is the essential medium in which this imaginative dislocation takes place.

Let me cite a short passage from Illich’s “Vernacular Values” to give you a sense of how deep this dislocation (or colonization, to use another term) may go. Here he contrasts taught language with the vernacular—the language of the grassroots, free from intervention.

Vernacular spreads by practical use; it is learned from people who mean what they say and who say what they mean to the person they address in the context of everyday life. This is not so in taught language. With taught language, the one from whom I learn is not a person whom I care for or dislike, but a professional speaker. The model for taught colloquial is somebody who does not say what he means, but who recites what others have contrived. In this sense, a street vendor announcing his wares in ritual language is not a professional speaker, while the king’s herald or the clown on television are the prototypes. **Taught colloquial is the language of the announcer who follows the script that an editor was told by a publicist that a board of directors had decided should be said.** Taught colloquial is the dead, impersonal rhetoric of people paid to declaim with phony conviction texts composed by others, who themselves

are usually paid only for designing the text. People who speak taught language imitate the announcer of news, the comedian of gag writers, the instructor following the teacher's manual to explain the textbook, the songster of engineered rhymes, or the ghost-written president. This is language that implicitly lies when I use it to say something to your face; it is meant for the spectator who watches the scene. It is the language of farce, not of theater, the language of the hack, not of the true performer. The language of media always seeks the appropriate audience profile that the sponsor tries to hit and to hit hard. While the vernacular is engendered in me by the intercourse between complete persons locked in conversation with each other, taught language is syntonic with loud speakers whose assigned job is gab. ("Vernacular Values" part 3)

"The vernacular and taught mother tongue are like the two extremes on the spectrum of the colloquial," adds Illich. That is one way of thinking about it; another way might be in terms of the slippery slope. An Aboriginal language taught through books and in classrooms rather than through dialogue and on the land has already slid some way down that slope. Perhaps this is inevitable, and better than disappearing altogether, but surely only if we can keep in mind what has been lost, and strive towards regaining it.

Growing into Language

I suggested earlier that we might start to think of language as a kind of imaginative and communicative environment embedded in the living world. From such a perspective, growing into language and growing into the world are intertwined. One cannot grow fully into a language, particularly an Aboriginal language emergent from long human occupation of a particular place, without growing into that place as well; and, perhaps, vice-versa.

So what does this process entail? Over the last few years, through my work on imaginative and ecological education (e.g. "Senses and Sensibilities"; "Growing into Language"; "Imagination and Experience"), I've found it increasingly helpful to think in terms of three different modes of growing into the world. All of these are about the ways our kinship in and with the world, our inextricable embeddedness in a universe of particular relationships, can shape our imagination. I call them the modes of Participation, Realization, and Implication.

Participation points to the way the world invites us in. We become part of it simply by being present to it, by opening our senses, our hearts, and our attention to what it has to offer. No other intention is needed. As we become familiar with its offerings, however, we can learn to perceive it in new ways, to participate more fully. And we do this in two ways that are somewhat at odds. One kind of participatory imaginative understanding of the world develops through experiences that are sensory and embedded in personal history; another, related but distinctive kind of understanding develops through experiences that are linguistic and embedded in the community of people we live most closely in touch with.

As I said, these two kinds of understanding are somewhat at odds. We can't put into words everything we experience; words can be misleading or superficial in communicating what we know. On the other hand, what we get through listening to a story, for instance, can sometimes seem more real, more meaningful, than anything we've experienced personally. And it is also the case that each can add meaning to the other. We understand experience differently, and sometimes more deeply, when we make it into a story; and we understand language differently, and sometimes more deeply, when it speaks to (or is part of) our experience.

What I'm suggesting, then, is that growing into language, in the mode of Participation, involves precisely this kind of interweaving of stories and experience. The elders of Pond Inlet saw that this could best happen out on the land itself. In a very real sense, in such a setting, the land is a co-teacher of the language. The land offers the experiences that give life to the words. And in learning the language, in this fuller, richer sense, one is also becoming more fully a person of the land, a person attuned to what the land has to say.

Participation is in some ways the most immediate and straightforward mode of building a living relationship with the world, but it is not sufficient in itself. We do not only take part in the world, we seek to accomplish things in it—a personal achievement, a task at work, or a contribution to the common culture. This is the mode of Realization, in which our imagination is engaged not only by the mystery and depth of what already exists, but also by the promise of what does not, by what we could cause to exist through our own efforts. Here too there is a tension between the embodied acquisition of skills, in what we think of as the serious, practical world of work and other accomplishments, and the realm of hero tales, celebrity culture, true adventures and other linguistic depictions of what it means to be a doer and a maker. And these are kinds of imaginative understanding with a longer arc of development than Participation: they require sustained engagement in the context of a community that values them.

Growing into language thus involves growing into capability. And capability is entwined with the economy and culture of a community, which in turn are entwined with the economy and culture of the broader society. If that broader society disrespects the land, treating it simply as a source of extractable resources, and builds an economy in line with those values, that ultimately contributes to the weakening and loss of Aboriginal languages as surely as do residential schools. Conversely, the work of language revitalization needs to go hand in hand with the (re)building of a different kind of relationship with the land. Because of the ways in which economies and cultures overlap and influence one another, ultimately this entails working to shift the understanding of Canadian society itself about what it means to live on Indigenous ground.

So what *does* it mean to live on Indigenous ground? Ultimately this is a question of what I call Implication, the imaginative mode that involves coming to see how our actions and thoughts are connected to others and to the Earth by countless invisible strands of relationship. We are never fully independent; we share both the joy and the responsibility of being part of many larger wholes, which include both other people (most of whom we shall never meet) and an uncountable multitude of other life forms and processes (most of whom we shall never be aware of). In the modern Western

tradition, Implication is pursued through such fields as science, philosophy, and social criticism, which rely on language as an analytic and theoretic tool. Yet Implication can also be learned through the building of long-term relationships with places and people, in much the same way as Wendell Berry describes the development of a farmer's knowledge of a particular piece of land:

[T]he best farming requires a farmer—a husbander, a nurturer—not a technician or businessman. A technician or a businessman, given the necessary abilities and ambitions, can be made in a little while, by training. A good farmer, on the other hand, is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations of experience. This essential experience can only be accumulated, tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future. (Berry 45)

It is in this imaginative mode of Implication that systems of good governance are grounded, and recent centuries have seen the dramatic divergence of modern governance systems from the Indigenous “chthonic law” tradition that “is rooted and grounded in the land” (Zuni Cruz 318).

It is surely no coincidence that Derek Rasmussen and Tommy Akulukjuk, whom I cited earlier discussing the connections between language and land, are both involved in governance issues in Nunavut. Growing into language involves growing into awareness of, and responsibility towards, all one's relations; if language is indeed firmly hooked into the world, caring for the language entails caring for the land and all its fellow inhabitants. Again, this is very much in line with teachings expressed by Elders across Canada, but not easily reconciled with Western habits of thought and practice. From a Western perspective, it does not appear problematic to teach, discuss, and make policy with respect to language without referring in any way to environmental policy, or economics, or health. From an Aboriginal perspective, it is keeping these things apart that makes no sense.

A Language Policy for the Sacred and the Wild

Reconciliation is a word with many potential meanings. In the TRC's interpretation, it “is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 6). This sounds reasonable, but it begs the question of how that relationship is defined—who gets to set the terms of mutual respect.

Including Aboriginal language rights in Canada's legislative framework is a move towards reconciliation, certainly. I have argued, however, that it is still a move located within non-Aboriginal frameworks of thinking about and managing language. Such moves should not distract us from the more difficult, but ultimately more rewarding work of imagining new frameworks into being.

In the 2005 report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, Recommendation 1, subtitled “The Link between Languages and the Land,” reads:

That First Nation, Inuit and Métis governments and the federal, provincial and territorial governments enter into government-to-government agreements or accords on natural resources, environmental sustainability and traditional knowledge. The agreements or accords should recognize the importance for First Nation, Inuit and Métis people of maintaining a close connection to the land in their traditional territories, particularly wilderness areas, heritage and spiritual or sacred sites, and should provide for their meaningful participation in stewardship, management, co-management or cojurisdiction arrangements. (*Towards a New Beginning* ix)

This is good as far as it goes. Even in the Task Force report, however, there remains a gap between this vision of land stewardship and the subsequent recommendations specifically related to language. It may be that this gap contributed to the TRC picking up on ideas about a languages act and language commissioners while leaving the connections to the land unaddressed. As we have seen, however, the effect is to reinforce a parallelism between English and French on the one hand, and Aboriginal languages on the other, that may work to the latter’s detriment.

If, on the other hand, we start to think in terms of *language stewardship* going hand-in-hand with *land stewardship*, perhaps the gap can be shrunk. This idea has been articulated, for example, by Christine Schreyer, based on work on language maintenance with the Taku River Tlingit and the Loon River Cree. Both of these northern communities “have incorporated their languages in the land stewardship policies they have put in place, although only the Taku River Tlingit First Nation labels their policies as stewardship explicitly” (“Re-building” 40). The consistent use of Aboriginal place names, and the integration of local Aboriginal “culture, language and lifestyle” with land use planning and management, are central measures in these policy frameworks. Provided that the underlying attitudes and beliefs about language and land are more widely held, Schreyer suggests that “national language planning strategies need to consider the land as a renewed domain-of-use for Aboriginal languages and as a new *habitat* for language maintenance and revitalization” (*Reserves* 222).

In Aboriginal communities, linguistic habitat reclamation goes hand in hand with reclaiming stewardship over their lands. Unless Aboriginal communities have control over their lands it will be difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim the physical space and diversity of landscapes necessary to succeed in rebuilding domains of use for indigenous languages.

(Schreyer, “Re-building” 37)

Reconciliation in the domain of language, it turns out, is part and parcel of a deeper reconciliation with the land itself. And this is no easy matter, as Wendell Berry

acknowledges in *The Unsettling of America*, the influential book of essays from which I have already quoted. The ecological crisis, says Berry, is a crisis of character; a crisis of culture; a crisis of the modern systems of knowledge and production that we have invested so much in. Taking up the responsibility of stewardship means, often enough, learning to let go:

If we are to be properly humble in our use of the world, we need places that we do not use at all. We need the experience of leaving something alone. We need places that we forbear to change, or influence by our presence, or impose on even by our understanding: places that we accept as influences upon us, not the other way around [...]. We need what other ages would have called sacred groves. We need groves, anyhow, that we would treat as if they were sacred—in order, perhaps, to preserve their sanctity. (30)

And in Chapter 9, having used the intervening pages to relentlessly dissect the arrogance and greed at the heart of industrial agriculture, he writes:

{Orthodox agriculture} has drawn an ever stricter, straighter line between the domestic and the wild, crowding nature itself into the margins. For the complex biological wilderness of a healthy topsoil it has substituted a simple chemistry. It has plowed up fence rows and roadsides and waterways, bulldozed woodlands, drained and plowed marshes. [...] For the principle of diversity, in nature and in earlier agriculture, and for the principle of unity that includes and depends upon diversity, orthodox agriculture has substituted a dull, tight uniformity, not only ignorant of other possibilities, but scared of them, and vengeful in its ignorance. (180)

In response, Berry argues, we need policies that restrain the uniformizing tendencies of industry, and that encourage diversity to flourish on a local scale, sensitive to both human needs and the needs of the land. In agriculture, that would mean an agricultural policy that balances the power of big farms with the interests of small ones, in the interests of a healthier ecology overall. In the context of reconciliation, however, more is needed. Empowering First Nations for the responsibility of land and language stewardship implies, among other things, deliberately restraining the “orthodox” dominance of English and French in order to let local languages flourish, particularly those attuned to the landforms and lifeforms of particular places. This is a policy objective that simply cannot be attained through the concept of language rights, at least in its current form.

We have to stop focusing on language in isolation, and see it as bound up with the living world, with the sacred and the wild. This is a truth more apt to be voiced by poets than by policymakers. Robert Bringhurst, in *The Tree of Meaning*, puts it this way:

Life in the wild, for a language as for any living entity—animal, plant, fungus, protozoan, or bacterium—means a dependable and nourishing

interconnection with the rest of life on the planet. It means a place in the food chain. It means a sustaining, sustainable habitat. That perennial connection to biological and physical reality is what feeds and shapes and calibrates a language. In conditions of natural equilibrium, languages have ranges, no more permanently fixed than the ranges of plants and animals, but also no less vital, no less real. The native range of a language is the domain it keeps up to date with: a territory it inevitably shares but one it can't and doesn't take for granted. [...] A language severed from the world might go on talking, but the memory of its referents would fade, and its standards of truth and beauty would wither. After a time we would find it had nothing of substance to say. (161)

Protecting and revitalizing Canada's First Languages means honouring their connectedness with the land, with the territories into which they grew, and caring for the latter as "sustaining, sustainable habitats" for all indigenous lifeforms. Such an approach, I believe, would be closer to what the Elders have been trying to teach us, and what the Task Force told us over a decade ago. Taking up this work in earnest would take us beyond current formulas and gestures, towards a deeper reconciliation, not only with the First Peoples of this land, but with the land itself.

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