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Taking Back the Language:

*Revitalizing Hidatsa, Mandan and Arikara
on the Fort Berthold Reservation*

By Paul Boyer

On the cover: The title of this report, *Taking Back the Language*,
was translated into Hidatsa by Bernadine Young Bird.
Photo by M. Readey.

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About Voices of Language

Voices of Language is a series of reports examining how Native communities in North America are working to sustain and revitalize their threatened indigenous languages. Funded by a generous grant from the National Science Foundation, Voices of Language focuses on the work of individual educators and activists. By telling their stories, we hope to provide inspiration and insight for others taking part in this young movement.

About Native Science Report

Native Science Report is an online journal of education and policy, exploring the role of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics within tribal and Native-serving colleges, as well as the communities they serve. Additional articles and reports related to language revitalization can be found at:
nativesciencereport.org

Preface

There are many remarkable stories told in the following pages. One of the most remarkable recounts the day Bernadine Young Bird, in her first year of teaching, gave an informal “quiz” to her sixth graders. She asked them to identify their tribe and the name of their reservation.

It should have been an easy test; after all, the school was located on the Fort Berthold Reservation of North Dakota and most of her students were members of the Hidatsa, Mandan, or Arikara tribes. Yet only a few correctly identified their home and heritage. Steeped in John Wayne movies, some of the children said they were Cherokee. Some didn’t know they lived on a reservation.

Young Bird’s story reveals the context of reservation life in the early 1970s. After being subjected to the federal government’s assimilationist policies and experiencing a century of English-only schooling, members of the Three Affiliated Tribes were on the verge of forgetting not only their history and language, but also their very identity as a Native people.

Young Bird was shocked. And angry. She blamed the schools for taking away knowledge and denigrating values that once made the reservation’s three tribes strong and self-reliant. But she also knew that she was part of a new generation of educators who could help restore what was lost. As she says in the following pages: “So my position was always, you took it away, you have to give it back-- through the same system.”

Out of this awareness, Young Bird and other tribal educators established some of the first Native language enrichment programs in the nation. With funding from the recently passed Bilingual Education Act, they brought the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara languages into public school classrooms and encouraged children to both know and respect their heritage. It was, at the time, a radical agenda.

Four decades later, few challenge the value of incorporating Native culture and language into the public school curriculum. Today, both Hidatsa and Arikara are taught as required courses in several tribal schools and all three languages are taught at the reservation’s tribally controlled college. “It’s a fight we won,” New Town School District Superintendent Marc Bluestone told us.

This is a significant accomplishment. However, many tribal educators—including Bernadine Young Bird—wonder if they are doing enough. While many students learn vocabulary and some can maintain simple conversations, reservation schools are not yet graduating fluent speakers. Although most schoolchildren now know the name of their tribe and the name of their reservation, the languages continue to fade.

At this critical moment, the Voices of Language project visited the Fort Berthold Reservation to examine how the community is responding to this loss. After nearly a half century of work, how do Young Bird and others view their accomplishments? What more is needed to save their languages? How optimistic are they that the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara languages can be saved? More deeply: What, in their view, is at stake? A variety of perspectives and several new projects are discussed in the following pages.

Voices of Language is part of an ongoing effort by the online journal Native Science Report to document the rapidly growing movement for indigenous language revitalization in North America. Supported with funding from the National Science Foundation, the project began with a series of site visits to tribal and Native communities across North America that are working to maintain their ancestral languages. This report, *Taking Back the Language*, documents what we saw and heard in one of these communities—the Fort Berthold Reservation. Information is based on interviews conducted by Paul Boyer, editor of Native Science Report and the project's principal investigator, and Dr. Gerald "Carty" Monette, past president of Turtle Mountain Community College and a senior associate at the Tribal Nations Research Group.

The Voices of Language project does not argue for one particular approach to language revitalization. Rather, its purpose is to capture the goals and insights of people who, for a variety of reasons, value their language and, in some cases, have made language revitalization their life's work. Collectively, we feel that their stories capture the creativity, commitment, and challenges found in the emerging language revitalization movement. For community members, we hope this series will offer both inspiration and practical insights. For non-Indians, we hope the reports will help explain why languages matter and why revitalization is not an exercise in nostalgia, as critics have long claimed, but a way to build a strong future. As Bernadine Young Bird emphasized many times during our visit, language is an integral part of identity. "You cannot separate it."

Introduction

It's a cold, overcast day in White Shield, North Dakota, but inside Delilah Yellow Bird's classroom, it's bright and cozy. A scented candle flickers on a windowsill and a large television plays video of logs burning in a fireplace; it doesn't generate any heat, but feels warming nonetheless. The mood is informal and welcoming.

Several work tables are scattered about, each covered with books, computers, and various projects-in-progress. Around one, a half-dozen third graders, filled with the barely contained enthusiasm and energy familiar to any elementary schoolteacher, are working on the day's lesson. At Yellow Bird's gentle prodding, each stands in turn to share a single word:

"Sápat," offers one.

"Wiináxtš," says another.

"And how do you say 'hello?'" Yellow Bird asks.

"Nawáh."

"And if someone knocks at your door?" Yellow Bird raps her hand on the table. *Knock, knock, knock.* "What do you say? Nice and loud if you can."

A burst of responses.

"And if I give you a glass of water? What do you say?"

And so it continues for several more minutes. Some answers are confident; others less so, but goodwill and encouragement keeps everyone happy and engaged. After thirty minutes, the children walk out into the sleet and continue their school day in other parts of the building.

For these third graders, it's just another school day. But what they don't yet realize, or only dimly grasp, is that they are part of a larger and still-unfolding effort within the Fort Berthold Reservation to save their ancestral language. This small tribally run school in the remote southern corner of the reservation is, in fact, the only school in the country—therefore, the only school in the world—where the Arikara (also known as Sahnish) language is taught as a required course. For thirty minutes twice a week, all children, from kindergarten through eighth grade, are introduced to the language, culture, and values of the Arikara people. An additional year of study is required for graduation from high school.

For educators on the Fort Berthold Reservation, the work of language revitalization does not end here. As the home of three distinct tribal groups, similar school-based efforts exist for two other languages. To the west, Martha Bird Bear teaches Hidatsa in the Mandaree School District. To the north, meanwhile, Hidatsa is also part of the curriculum in schools serving New Town, the center of reservation commerce and tribal government. Additionally, the tribes' small college—Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College (formerly Fort Berthold Community College)—teaches both Arikara and Hidatsa, as well as Mandan (the reservation's third language) through the introductory or intermediate levels. All of this work reflects a significant commitment for a tribe with a total membership of over 15,000, many of whom live off the reservation.¹

Through these school-based programs, most children on the Fort Berthold Reservation are exposed to one of the reservation's three languages during their first years of schooling, and many have the option of continuing study in high school and beyond, for those who enroll in the tribal college. No less remarkable, much of this work has been ongoing since the early 1970s, when language enrichment programs were first developed. Several of the teachers we met helped create the programs we observed.

...our conversations with teachers, school administrators, and tribal leaders revealed a deep concern that they are not doing enough.

Yet our conversations with teachers, school administrators, and tribal leaders revealed a deep concern that they are not doing enough. Despite decades of work, all three languages have continued to decline. Speaking candidly after her third graders left the room, Yellow Bird lamented the erosion of the Arikara language despite the school's ongoing efforts. Arikara is still heard, though it's limited to "a lot of nouns and slang," she said. "But to tell a story all the way through in Arikara? I don't think they could do it. Tomorrow we'll have Veterans Day, but I don't think we could have anyone go out there (during the ceremonies) and talk in Arikara through the whole event. To me, that's fluent," she said. "But I haven't seen anyone do that."

Mandan is equally endangered, with one fluent speaker remaining. Among the three languages, Hidatsa is considered the strongest, with approximately one hundred fluent speakers. But all are adults and most are elders, which suggests that established programs are not yet building fluency or reintroducing the language into homes, where it can be passed from parent to child.

This lack of progress is forcing language leaders to rethink current approaches to instruction. Beyond what is taught in schools, many argue that a more comprehensive and coordinated promotion of the languages is needed. Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara need to be made a priority across the reservation—in homes, where languages are traditionally taught; in public gatherings, where languages are used and gain prestige; and in government offices, where tribal priorities are established. What is most needed, some say, is a far-reaching language *policy*.

Time is growing short, all agree. The question is, what—with limited time and limited resources—can be done, now, to sustain the tribes' three languages and, with it, their identity as a distinct and sovereign nation.

Chapter I

Before America was a nation, the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara were prosperous and powerful tribes, occupying a vast tract of land straddling the Missouri River. The Hidatsa and Mandan, arriving first, built thriving economies based on agriculture and commerce; by the early 1700s, European traders and trappers described fortified villages, some with a hundred or more earth lodges. The Arikara, moving up from what is now Nebraska, established their own villages at the mouth of the Grand River to the south.²

At their apex, each tribe had many thousands of members. But contact with Europeans also brought smallpox, which first reached the Mandans in the mid-1700s and returned with debilitating regularity for more than a hundred years. The worst epidemic occurred in 1837, killing one-third of the remaining Arikara, half of the Hidatsas, and about 90 percent of the Mandans.³ Populations declined to a few dozen or, at most, a few hundred. Abandoning empty villages, small bands of survivors lived as refugees, wandering across the northern Plains.⁴

By 1845, however, remnants of the Mandan and Hidatsa diaspora returned to their homeland and agreed to live, not simply as neighbors and allies, but as a single community. Picking a site along a distinctive crook in the Missouri River, they created a new settlement, which they named Like-a-Fishhook. Eighteen years later, the Hidatsas and Mandans were joined by the surviving Arikara, who fled their own villages to escape Sioux attacks. The three distinct tribes were now a single political entity, although each retained its own language and cultural traditions.

Life was not idyllic; smallpox periodically returned and hunger was keenly felt, especially in drought years. But for at least thirty years, life in Like-a-Fishhook remained much as it had before the arrival of Europeans. Reports from traders, government agents, and missionaries through the 1870s portray a village that was largely self-contained and self-governing. "Few Indians spoke any English or saw any reason for learning it," historian Roy Meyer wrote. "The ceremonial life continued, with minor changes, as it had done ever since the first white contacts...The kinship system and social organization were largely intact, and many of the articles of daily use by the Indians—bullboats, mat and baskets, wooden bowls, horn spoons and ladles, hair brushes of porcupine quills and stiff grass, bone whistles and so forth—were still being used."⁵

By the last years of the nineteenth century, however, the federal government's increasingly aggressive assimilationist policies were fundamentally transforming life within the community. After passage of the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, families were relocated to individual homesteads, where they were expected to till their own land, milk their own cows, and merge into the American economic system. Within two years, Like-a-Fishhook, the last occupied earth lodge village in the northern Plains, became a virtual ghost town, and the tribes' communal and cooperative life came to an end.⁶

At the same time, missionary groups and the federal government began building a network of day schools and boarding schools to advance the work of “Americanization.” On the Fort Berthold Reservation, which had only one school in the 1870s (and was often closed for lack of students and instructors), there were five by 1892. That year, fifteen children were also attending four different boarding schools, as far away as Pennsylvania and Virginia. Boys were taught to be farmers and tradesmen; girls learned homemaking. All were told to abandon their traditional dress and no longer speak their ancestral languages.

Educators complained about uncooperative parents and “run away” students; superintendents withheld food to enforce compliance with compulsory attendance policies. As the decades passed, however, the impact of their work did reshape tribal life. In 1891, the Indian Service’s annual report found that most Fort Berthold tribal members wore “citizens’ dress” “wholly” or “in part,” and among the 1,112 tribal members, 202 could read English and 306 could “use English enough for ordinary conversation.”⁷ Just over a decade later, the superintendent was ready to declare success. “The ‘blanket Indian’ has disappeared from this reservation,” he asserted in his report for 1902. Most tribal members were adopting the “garb of the white man,” he wrote, and many were now living in “houses worthy of the name.” English was also gaining a firm hold in the community. “The young men are able to transact all necessary business without the assistance of a third party,” he said. “They take great pride in being able to write, and lose no opportunity to show their ability.”



THESE REPORTS GLOSS OVER THE EXTENT TO WHICH DEEPER VALUES AND TRADITIONS were being sustained, including continued use of tribal languages and habits of self-reliance. But it is also true that tribal members were finding ways to adapt in this new era. By the 1930s, the reservation was viewed as a model community by the federal government, its members praised for their sobriety, thrift, and industry. They were even considered a good credit risk; tribal ranchers participating in a Depression-era agricultural loan program had the lowest default rate in the nation.⁸



Lake Sakakawea

Nora Packineau

These accomplishments did not protect the tribes from the federal government's decision to build the world's fifth-largest earthworks dam in the middle of the reservation and create America's second-largest manmade lake. Started in 1947 and completed six years later, Garrison Dam was called a marvel of engineering and a symbol of progress, but it drowned thousands of acres, including whole villages and 97 percent of the reservation's fertile bottom land, the tribes' agricultural base. This happened within living memory and, even now, emotions run high when the topic is raised. The "consultation" promised by federal officials was a sham, many say; the decision to build was a foregone conclusion. And little effort was made to aid in the relocation of homes that were lost. For white residents—engineers, construction workers, business owners—a planned community called New Town was built on a bluff at the lake's northern tip. But tribal members were scattered to the reservation's edges, another dispersal to the margins.



BERNADINE YOUNG BIRD DIDN'T SEE THE WATER RISE, but she can vividly recount the stories told by her parents and grandmother. Sitting in a conference room of Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College, where she teaches and serves as language coordinator within the Native American Studies Department, she described "the waves and water and fireworks" set off in celebration while her family and relatives watched, powerless, from the banks. "They wailed and they cried as they saw the water creeping up," she said. Anger was felt as well.

For Young Bird, Garrison Dam was a turning point for the tribe, bringing what appeared to be a final end to its much-admired self-sufficiency. "They kept moving us and relocating us," she said, "but this last time was from our bottom lands where we were still gardening, [where] we had timber." Moved to the dry plains high above the river's ancient course, crops wilted and timber was scarce. "There was nothing here," she said.

Indirectly, the dam also shaped Young Bird's life. Her family was originally from the Little Shell area, a rural community where, even in the mid-twentieth century, language and cultural practices remained strong; English, she said, was rarely heard. But flooding forced relocation to New Town, the



A home being relocated after construction of Garrison Dam. Source: National Archives and Records Administration.

newly constructed community to the north. When it was time to start her education, she was sent to the local public school, which was located in the middle of town and served a predominantly non-Indian student body.

Her first day began with promise. She enjoyed the bus ride; she liked talking with her various relatives as they bounced over country roads. It was an adventure—and she was doing something that felt important. Coming from a family that valued learning, she knew that “education is a positive thing.” The bus ride ended. She got off and someone pointed the way to her classroom. That’s when everything went wrong. “The teacher was standing at the door and she said something and it suddenly occurred to me: How do I communicate with this woman?”

The teacher was white and spoke only English. Bernadine Young Bird, a five-year-old girl, spoke only Hidatsa.

“I don’t know how I got through that day, to be honest with you. It just seemed like a nightmare. All I could see was her face and a frown on her face, looking at me like I was just this strange little alien bug. That’s how I felt.”

Within a week, Young Bird began running away. She boarded the bus each morning, but when it arrived at school, she ran to the nearby BIA office, entered the little-used east door, and hid under a desk in an empty room reserved for tribal council meetings. If her grandfather (who served on the council) was around, she sat in the women’s bathroom. She did this all day, leaving only when it was time to go home. “That’s how terrified I was of that place and that woman,” she said.

Noting her absence, the school called her parents, who were baffled. “Well, she’s going to school every day,” they said.

Her hiding place was soon discovered and she was returned to the first-grade classroom, where, along with her classmates, she was put to work completing phonics worksheets. “That’s another wonderful memory of my first year of education,” Young Bird said—“getting those huge red F’s on my papers.”

Eventually she learned English. “I suppose it was poor English,” she said, “but I could speak.” No credit to the teacher, though: “I don’t recall her teaching me. I think I learned it from my little friends, my little relatives there. Some of them knew the words [and] I would ask them, for instance, a simple thing, like ‘How do you tell her...?’” If the teacher asked her a question she turned to her classmates for a translation.

“So I think that’s how we did it because I got through the year somehow. I didn’t run away anymore. I couldn’t.” But the scarring effect of that first year remained. “I hated that woman for many, many years,” she said.



LATER, AS AN ADULT AND, IN TIME, A TEACHER, YOUNG BIRD’S UNDERSTANDING became more nuanced. “I’ve since then forgiven this poor woman because as a teacher now, I put myself in her situation,” she said. Young Bird came to understand that her experience reflected the larger story of America’s approach to Indian education, which conspired in many ways to make Native children feel like unwanted and unloved strangers in their own homeland. “That’s the way it was handled,” she said. “They knew that there were Indian children there. They knew they spoke no English, but they didn’t prepare for us.”

And it continued. In third grade, Young Bird was sent to Wahpeton Boarding School (now called Circle of Nations School) at the eastern edge of North Dakota where, if anything, the diminishment of her own language and identity was even more keenly felt. Students were told not to speak their ancestral languages, and punished if they did. “They used to call it ‘Indian,’” Young Bird recalled. “They didn’t say, ‘Stop speaking Hidatsa.’ [They would say], ‘Stop speaking Indian.’”

“I was too young to feel offended, but I do remember feeling like why can’t I?”

After three years at the boarding school she returned home and completed high school in New Town. By the time her schooling ended she was, as she put it, “a pretty good American.” She spoke English, she knew her American history and all that is celebrated by the public school curriculum about the nation’s founding. “We were a product of American public education, just like everyone else,” she said. But these lessons came at a great price. Many who passed through this system no longer had the skills or confidence to use their language. Many, too, internalized the message that their language and cultural heritage were “backward,” even shameful, and not worth saving. In the span of a single generation—between the early postwar years and the late 1960s—the tribe was on the cusp of losing not only its language, but also its identity as a cohesive and distinct people.



Bernadine Young Bird

Nora Packineau

Just how much was lost became clear when Young Bird, recently graduated from college, began her teaching career in the early 1970s. Wondering how much her sixth graders knew about their own identity and heritage, she developed a short quiz. Questions were not hard; they included “What reservation do you live on?” and “What is your tribe?” Yet most children were stumped. Some didn’t know they lived on a reservation and many guessed that they were Cherokee or Navajo—names they heard from Hollywood westerns, Young Bird speculated. Out of twenty-seven students, only three or four correctly identified their own tribe.

Young Bird blamed schools for this lack of awareness. But, as an educator, she also believed that schools could be the solution. “It was taken away,” she said. “So my position was always, you took it away, you have to give it back—through the same system.” This conviction that education must be turned into a force for the renewal of culture and language shaped Young Bird’s career.

Chapter II

Others agreed and, by the early 1970s, tribal educators found a way to pursue their agenda through the recently passed Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which was the first federal legislation to support culturally based enrichment programs and instruction in languages other than English. Native Americans were not the intended target of the legislation; it was, at first, widely viewed as civil rights legislation for the Hispanic community. However, tribal educators saw its potential. Even the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in a paper commissioned in 1971, called bilingual education “a promising development” and quoted testimony by psychologist John Bryde, presented before the Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, that cultural awareness should be encouraged, not suppressed in the educational system. “The Indian youngster is an Indian,” he said. “You have to start with his Indian awareness and build on it.”⁹

On the Fort Berthold Reservation, bilingual education funds allowed schools to hire Native language speakers as teacher aides and to develop culturally based academic enrichment programs. While these programs were relatively small, they “started creating awareness that ‘Hey, we have a language. We have a culture,’” Young Bird said. At a time when many children barely knew they were Indian, this was groundbreaking.

Today, Native culture is openly celebrated in most of the reservation’s schools—in murals, posters, announcements of upcoming cultural events, and, of course, mascots: Both White Shield and Mandaree are “Home of the Warriors.” But the changes are, perhaps, most pronounced in the New Town School District (“Home of the Eagles”), where all grades are located in the same, though greatly expanded, building where Bernadine Young Bird had her traumatic first day. There, we met with Marc Bluestone, the school district’s superintendent, a gregarious “tell it like it is” administrator who is also a member of Three Affiliated Tribes.



Marc Bluestone

Nora Packineau

Bluestone’s supporters—of which there are many within the reservation—say he has done much over his career to address the needs of Native students and make room for tribal culture and language. Sitting in an empty classroom and joined by two of the school’s language and culture teachers, he listed some of the many culturally focused programs the school now offers. A back-to-school pow wow in the fall is a major event, he said, and a variety of special events are offered during the year: clanship nights, knowledge bowls—“things like that.” An Indian club makes presentations in

“non-Indian areas so they can learn more” and the school organizes an annual hand game tournament.

The school also sponsors programs that help sustain traditional skills and, by way of example, Bluestone described an elective class in the “art of boiling beef.” Large community gatherings—especially funerals and wakes, he explained—depend on people who know how to process and prepare large quantities of meat. It’s a job managed by the tribe’s men, yet the skills involved are now sustained by only a few elders. The school is teaching five or six high school boys, including Bluestone’s son, how to keep the practice alive.

The conversation, rather reserved up to this point—we’re just getting to know each other—suddenly turns lively as everyone in the room starts sharing memories of past gatherings, stories about the community’s acknowledged expert in meat preparation, and detailed explanations about the process: cleaning the utensils, cutting the meat, managing the fire, keeping it going for the six or more hours needed to cook a side of beef. There are fatherly jokes about keeping the boys safe from sharp knives and propane flames. It’s clear that this one activity matters a great deal to everyone and, amid laughter and stories, it’s easy to see how much the school, by supporting this activity, has truly changed since Bernadine Young Bird was a student.



BUT THESE CULTURAL CLASSES ALSO HIGHLIGHT HOW MUCH the *community* has changed. When Young Bird was a child, the New Town public school was an outpost of mainstream American culture and values, set in the middle of a reservation that, for all the changes imposed since the late nineteenth century, still had its languages and still passed important traditional knowledge from parent to child. Now the roles are reversed: As traditional knowledge and cherished skills are lost within the community, the school is increasingly viewed as a repository of eroding cultural knowledge, the one institution capable of preserving and sharing what the tribes are losing. While advocates of language and culture often argue that schools need to reflect the values and wisdom of Native communities, their actual role, increasingly, is to *reintroduce* knowledge and values no longer sustained by traditional means.

Following this mandate, the school offers classes and activities that would surprise and, quite possibly, shock students in non-Native communities. In the past, Bluestone said they offered a “pallbearer

As traditional knowledge and cherished skills are lost within the community, the school is increasingly viewed as a repository of eroding cultural knowledge, the one institution capable of preserving and sharing what the tribes are losing.

class," to teach "what needs to be done if you get selected to be a senior pallbearer to bury your relative." Other classes focused on the tribes' family relationships, "making sure that they knew the clanship system." These courses were offered, he said, because "a lot of our kids, they don't have [that knowledge] in the home anymore. They don't know... So if there are things that we can ingrain in them now, then maybe we have a chance to continue the process."

This leads the conversation to the topic of language. The dominant non-English language of the New Town area is Hidatsa, which is still spoken by elders and some older adults. But all agree that fluency declines with age and that the language is no longer being taught to children, most of whom grew up in English-only homes. This means that the language is now included in the curriculum for many of the same reasons that pallbearer, clan system, and beef boiling classes are offered—to pass on unique knowledge that many feel is vital to the identity of the tribe, yet no longer transmitted in the home.

However, teachers and administrators are the first to point out that existing classes are not capable of sustaining the Hidatsa language because, until very recently, language classes did not teach conversation or grammar. And here Bluestone places part of the blame on bilingual education. While it was used to introduce culture and language within the school system, he felt it ultimately "helped kill the language in some respects."

He continued: "Because what did we do? We started with everybody can say 'a cow,' everybody can say 'a dog,' and everybody can say 'a house.' But they couldn't do the conjugation of verbs, and that's how you teach a language... It was so rudimentary in the sense that our kids could do nouns," he said, "but they couldn't speak the language. We have not produced one native speaker yet because we didn't start conjugating verbs until the last couple of years."

Bluestone contrasted this approach with conventional instruction in any other foreign language. "If you pick up a Spanish textbook, any entry level Spanish textbook or French textbook, they conjugate verbs right away: 'we went,' 'we came,' 'I'm going,' 'you're going.'" In this way, even first-semester students learn rudimentary conversational skills. Yet for decades, he said, the Hidatsa language program remained locked in its word lists: "'dog,' 'cat,' 'cow.'"

He tempered his criticism by noting that the schools' first Title VII programs were groundbreaking. Before bilingual education, "none of the schools would entertain Native culture," he said. In that sense, "I think it was pretty cool doing what we did." As Young Bird argued, these early efforts claimed a space for language and culture in a traditionally hostile educational environment. "Bilingual education opened the door to vocabulary, to some of the cultural things," she said. "At least our children knew they had a different language." But she agreed that, in the end, "bilingual education was not there to develop fluency." Students were not given enough class time; grammar was not a priority. "The structure was not there to learn that," she said.



THE LIMITED GOALS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION WERE NOT THE ONLY BARRIERS to the development of robust Hidatsa language programs. Bluestone also pointed out that, as a public school administrator, his priorities are necessarily shaped by state education policies and, in recent decades,

by increasingly prescriptive federal mandates. While the topic of our conversation was language and culture, Bluestone unapologetically stressed that he must also focus on the core academic curriculum. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), especially, drives school reform efforts, so he is under pressure to add more and more advanced math and science courses. Improving student scores on standardized exams is, of course, a daily concern. And he is trying to do this in a poorly funded school system that, like many reservation schools, has difficulty attracting and retaining experienced teachers. Working with the tribal college, located only a few blocks away, Bluestone recently added dual-credit AP calculus, composition, and social studies classes to the high school's course list, all part of an effort to "strengthen what we have for our kids."

Looking at this larger educational mandate, Bluestone emphasized that language and culture classes are only one part of the curriculum. Indeed, he was reluctant to give them any special status. "We're real careful about what we say," he said. "This is just one small portion of who we are and where we came from...this is just one small portion of the big thing that's called school for us."

The balancing act, to some degree, reflects the school district's demographics. While the Native population of New Town has grown since Young Bird was a girl, non-Indians comprise a sizable percentage of the student body. Bluestone made it clear that he does not pander to the non-Indian population. Indeed, his stance is pro-tribal and, if a non-Indian parent opposed his or her child's participation in a culturally focused class, they would get little satisfaction from the superintendent. Bluestone's response to criticism: "Parshall [a town to the east] is that way. Stanley is that way. Mandaree is that way...Don't come in and tell us how to run our school system. That's what I tell them." He says this with the confidence of a long-time administrator with a supportive board and, as he mentioned several times, enthusiasm for his impending retirement.

Such confrontations are rare, however. Language and culture classes are now fully integrated into the elementary school curriculum and are no longer controversial. "We won the K through eight fight," he said. But there are bridges he won't cross. By high school, language is an elective, and Bluestone opposes making it a graduation requirement. "I can't see a win-win for me pushing that. I think the fight is too..." He pauses and reframes his response: "Our community is too large." He is thinking about more than non-Indian

Language and culture classes are now fully integrated into the elementary school curriculum and are no longer controversial.

students. Dealing with unhappy Native students unwillingly placed in a language class simply because of scheduling problems is one of Bluestone's administrative headaches. He would rather have students enroll out of interest.



STUDENT ATTITUDES BECAME AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR DISCUSSION the following day when we traveled south to the town of Mandaree. There we met with Martha Bird Bear, the school's full-time Hidatsa language teacher. After twenty years in the classroom, she has a wealth of experience, though it was clear that she was discouraged. Reflecting on the prospects for the language, she said, "I think I'm more worried now." Most fluent speakers are gone, she said, and even those who know the language don't use it. "Like my relatives; I talk to them in Hidatsa but they answer me in English."

But what she found most troubling was lack of interest among students. At Mandaree, like White Shield, language is a required course through eighth grade and an additional year is required in high school. This means that each day, especially in the higher grades, Bird Bear is working to engage an often reluctant audience of young adolescents. Like many teachers, she wonders if it's worth it. "I keep thinking, 'Well, what am I doing here, because they're not listening and it seems like they don't want to learn,' or they've just got their minds on something else. It bothers me when they don't take Hidatsa seriously."

Some days, it just seems to be a fight over cell phones. "They're supposed to put their cell phones in there"—she pointed to a basket at the front of the room—"and they're not doing that either." The universal dilemma of students texting and web surfing during class is not solved simply because a language is at stake.

Of course, some students are interested, want to continue their studies, and do make progress. Bird Bear recalled several who, she felt, built conversational skills. One young woman began in her kindergarten class, participated in a short-lived immersion program, and now speaks in complete sentences. "She'll put in a lot of English words, but still, she's good if you're talking." She is even teaching her grandmother to speak Hidatsa. Another student who graduated ten years ago is still in touch. "If she doesn't know how to say a word or something, she'll call me and we'll go over it." While not yet restoring fluency within the young adult population, Bird Bear's classes are clearly offering a foundation for those who are actively interested and choose to continue their studies.

She did all this without the benefit of a textbook or any ready-made teaching materials, which did not exist until very recently. Instead, she developed her own lessons, worksheets, tests, posters, and flash cards. "I would get pictures from magazines or calendars or whatever," she said. Her work was made even harder by the lack of a standardized orthography. "I didn't have anything [to go by] so I was writing my own things on paper, trying to spell it the way it sounds, but it's pretty hard," Bird Bear said. She relied on the English alphabet to create spellings that approximated the distinctive Hidatsa pronunciation.

Both of these limitations are now being addressed. A week before our visit, Bird Bear started using a new textbook developed by the Language Conservancy, a Native language education and advocacy center based at Indiana University. Working under contract with the Three Affiliated Tribes,

it also produced flashcards, apps, posters, workbooks, and other support material. Through the same affiliation, the Language Conservancy developed a new Hidatsa alphabet, which is based on twenty-five letters and letter combinations (such as "Aa," "Oo," and "Sh") as well as a distinctive symbol for the glottal stop. It omits several consonants found in the English alphabet, including F, J, L, and S.

Bird Bear liked the new textbook, especially its focus on conversation. "I start out with 'Dosha'—'hello'—and then keep adding on," Bird Bear said. "What is your name? 'My name is...,' those kinds of things, and then complete sentences." On the other hand, the Hidatsa alphabet is somewhat disorienting. For example, "Hidatsa" is spelled "Hiraaca" under the new system, reflecting the distinctive sounds assigned each letter. This is hard for people who imprinted on the phonetics of the English alphabet. Bernadine Young Bird, who participated in the conversation, noted that some elders were balking at the change and that even open-minded speakers have to be won over. Bird Bear agreed: "It's pretty hard for me."

Bird Bear's wish list as a teacher focused on relatively modest additions to the curriculum. She volunteered, for example, that the school needed a male language instructor since there are some gender-based differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, especially for family terms. Beyond that, she wished that students would practice the language outside of class—and that they had opportunities to do so. She agreed, too, that more focused instruction—possibly through some kind of immersion

program—would be helpful, especially if it started in kindergarten, when children are primed for language learning and don't struggle with pronunciation. The school briefly had a grant-funded K-3 immersion program, which she felt was a success, though it ended when the money ran out.

"I was thinking of not coming back this year," Bird Bear said near the end of the conversation. But it was clear why she did: She loves the language, believes it matters, and knows she is needed. Yes, the older students are sometimes disruptive and there is way too much paperwork, but the kindergarteners make her laugh, she said, and she is frequently asked by former students and community members to help them when a prayer needs to be given or simply when a word needs to be remembered. As the number of speakers dwindles, her skills become all the more valuable.



Martha Bird Bear with her granddaughter.

Nora Packineau

Chapter III

As our visit to Mandaree wrapped up, Bernadine Young Bird thanked Bird Bear for her good work and all she has accomplished, despite limited support and resources. “What she’s doing is all we can do right now, and it’s great,” she said. “It’s a wonderful thing.” But Young Bird also acknowledged that a few teachers working alone in a few schools cannot save a language. “We have [Martha]; we have people who are in the system right now. But we’ve got to build on that,” she said. “We know there’s got to be more.”

How language advocates can build a wider and deeper base of support is not yet clear. During our visit, it was more often discussed as a problem to be solved. Young Bird framed the challenge as a series of questions: “What do we do next? How do we do it better? How do we help the people who are struggling right now—the handful of people in this community who know how serious this is? That’s one of the challenges we have right now, to put a fire under everybody.”

However, Young Bird is pursuing several strategies. The first was establishing a community language committee. The group’s first meeting, held not long before our visit, was well attended, Young Bird said. Focused on sharing stories and building awareness, the goal was simply to identify “what is going on right now.” Broad participation by members of all ages and from all corners of the reservation was a special priority.

Another important accomplishment, in Young Bird’s opinion, was passage of a tribal council resolution declaring a “State of Emergency” in the loss of the languages and cultures of the tribes.” The resolution, which Young Bird wrote and presented to the council on behalf of the language committee, asserted that the erosion of language and culture “has significantly diminished and weakened tribal values, pride, and positive tribal identities, thereby endangering the sovereignty and survival of the nation for future generations.” It also acknowledged that, to some extent, the tribe is complicit in this loss. Because the Three Affiliated Tribes “has no laws or codes recognizing the Nueta, Hidatsa and Sahnish languages as the official and national languages,” the resolution declared, the tribe “unintentionally [allowed] the continuing and devastating decline.”

The resolution directed the tribes’ business council to support revitalization efforts and formally recognized the language committee as an “advisory board” authorized to help coordinate revitalization efforts. However, it did not identify specific language revitalization strategies, nor did it authorize funding for any programs. This led the tribal chairman to muse, immediately after the vote, that he and his colleagues had just done something important—though he wasn’t quite sure what it was. Young Bird is the first to admit that it is not an action plan, but she clearly felt it has practical value by drawing attention to the issue of language loss. Young Bird hoped that, with this awareness, elected leaders will now provide the leadership and support needed to make language revitalization a true priority. Without “laws and codes” or, at the very least, some funding and incentives, the work of

schoolteachers and language committees, for all the goodwill they engender, will remain fragmented and incomplete.

Finally, language advocates are also working to increase the number of teachers and support the work of current language teachers through a summer language institute. Now in its third year, the “MHA Language Project” sponsors intensive language classes for adults, as well as workshops in the syntax and phonology of each language, taught by professional linguists from mainstream universities and several tribal communities. The long-term goal is to provide tribal members with a deeper grounding in language theory and instruction, with a focus on using textbooks developed by the Language Conservancy.

Sponsored by the tribe’s education department and supported by the tribal college, the three-week institute is based on a similar program offered on the Standing Rock Reservation. Young Bird, who serves as coordinator of the summer institute, attended that reservation’s program four years ago and found it “an eye opener.” Writing about her experience for the Language Project’s web site, she recalled, “They talked about grammar, tenses, plurals, all of those things. I had never thought about teaching the language like that before. But that’s the way we learned English. It made sense to me.”

The institute was originally envisioned as a professional development program for the reservation’s K-12 teachers. However, school administrators cannot require teachers to attend the summer program, nor are teachers compensated for attending, which greatly limited participation. Shifting strategies, the institute now focuses on teaching community members, on the theory that informal family-based instruction—a parent teaching a child, for example—is also a necessary part of the revitalization effort. Additionally, the program attracts tribal members living off the reservation who are eager to reconnect with their language and culture. Still, Young Bird clearly wishes that more professional teachers would take part and believes their absence illustrates the need for greater political leadership. Policies that encourage and support language learning are needed to overcome disinterest, disincentives, or simple inertia.

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ALL RESERVATIONS ARE AFFECTED BY SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FORCES that are beyond their control. Even the most geographically isolated community is connected to the “outside world” by television,

radio, the Internet, and social media. And, of course, there is constant movement on and off the reservations. Tribal members leave for work; many marry outside of their own tribe. Meanwhile, the homogenizing forces of American commerce infiltrate even small reservation towns. Though rare when I first started working with tribal communities thirty years ago, fast food restaurants are now common and casino resorts are nearly ubiquitous and (to be honest) a welcome respite from the ramshackle motels that were once my destination after a long day's drive.

Change is to be expected. But I was nonetheless unprepared for the pace of change taking place on the Fort Berthold Reservation. Thanks to the reservation's location atop Bakken shale and its unfettered support of "fracking" on the tribal land, New Town had, during our 2016 visit, the unmistakable atmosphere of a western boom town. Once empty roads were now filled with traffic, and lunchtime cafes were filled to capacity. Driving in from the east, I was momentarily disoriented by a new bypass, built to handle tanker trucks hauling fracking fluid to the countless wells dotting the horizon like exclamation marks. My hotel was so new the parking lot was not yet paved.

As a sovereign tribal nation, the Fort Berthold Reservation could limit or even prohibit fracking on its land. Several tribes across the northern Plains, responding to environmental and cultural concerns, did just that. But Fort Berthold's tribal council, focusing on economic benefits and comfortable with its longstanding participation in coal mining and other extractive industries, welcomed the boom, which has, in fact, generated significant income for the tribe. It also stimulated local economic development, especially in construction and the service economy.

Lured by ready work and high wages, the diversity of New Town's population was another surprise. Checking into the hotel, the friendly and conversational desk clerk told me he recently arrived from New Jersey, but confirmed that, yes, he was originally from West Africa. Later I heard him talking to a maid in French. That evening, the hotel bar's waitress brought me a plate of tacos and explained that she was from Oregon. The pay's good, she said, though she didn't know how long she would stay. When I returned a few months later, she was gone. The reservation is still rural, but it is neither isolated nor provincial. Indeed, it felt very much in the middle of things—a crossroads in the "global economy."

The Three Affiliated Tribes is determined to make the most of this wealth while it lasts. The *Bismarck Tribune* reported that, with income from oil leases, the tribe was embarking on an ambitious building spree. Along with a new drug treatment center, plans called for construction of a large water park, an excursion boat, and even a sandy beach on Lake Sakakawea. All of this will, it was hoped, attract more tourists, diversify the economy, and provide even more income. "Our goal is an economic one," the tribes' chairman said. "We want people to come, bring their money and spend it, too. That's how you change an economy."¹⁰

On the other hand, amid the hum of truck traffic, the machinations of drilling crews, and the rushed efficiency of fast food commerce, it can be hard to feel the power and depth of each tribe's cultural and linguistic heritage. I wondered how much the workers streaming in from New Jersey, Oregon, Texas, and Oklahoma knew about the reservation or its history. Did they even realize they were in another nation? How, and how well, is the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation sustaining its own identity, its sense of self? And what did it mean, I mused, that the only language other than English I heard spoken outside of a classroom during my visit was...French? Is

it really possible to imagine a time when the conversations heard in hotel bars, tribal council offices, and teacher lounges will be a harmonious symphony of Hidatsa, Arikara, and Mandan?

Bernadine Young Bird believes it is possible—and she is convinced that it is also necessary. While advocates of fracking and commercial development see the tribe growing stronger, Young Bird worried that its future is less certain. Focusing on a more culturally based definition of sovereignty, Young Bird argues that it's possible to grow richer as a community, but weaker as a nation. "Leaders are moving over to the American side, to the dollar," she said, leading to an embrace of mainstream American values "which are based on, in my view, greed." Restoration of the languages is urgently needed now, more than ever, precisely because it is a bulwark against absorption into a homogenized American culture and an economic system indifferent to the heritage and wisdom of its indigenous peoples.

It's an audacious dream and much needs to happen first. On the other hand, a great deal has been accomplished. Forty years ago, Young Bird reminded us, most children could not correctly identify their own tribe, and many adults felt only shame with respect to their language and culture. In the context of the times, the necessary first step was to rebuild respect for culture, to, as Young Bird said, "remind people that they had a language" and to carve out some space for both in local schools. All of this has been achieved. The emerging work of revitalization—to teach and sustain language fluency—builds on this foundation of awareness and advocacy.

Restoration of the languages is urgently needed now, more than ever, precisely because it is a bulwark against absorption into a homogenized American culture and an economic system indifferent to the heritage and wisdom of its indigenous peoples.

Endnotes

- 1 "Our Tribe," MHA Nation, Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.mhanation.com/>.
- 2 "MHA Nation History," MHA Nation, Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.mhanation.com/>.
- 3 Elizabeth Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), 323-325.
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- 7 United States. Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, for the Year 1891, The History Collection, University of Wisconsin-Madison, accessed September 22, 2017, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/History/History-idx?type=turn&entity=History.AnnRep91p2.p0078&id=History.AnnRep91p2&isize=M>
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- 10 Lauren Donovan, "Three Affiliated Tribes Launch Building Program," Bismarck Tribune, May 7, 2017, accessed August 10, 2017, http://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/three-affiliated-tribes-launch-building-program/article_80ec939b-fdf2-5524-bdb5-d66df4d8b6f6.html

About the Author

Paul Boyer is editor of Native Science Report. He is author of two reports on the tribal college movement for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and founding editor of *Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education*. Recent books and policy reports include *Capturing Education: Envisioning and Building the First Tribal Colleges* (Salish Kootenai College Press and University of Nebraska Press, 2015) and *Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science: The Integration of Native Knowledge in Math and Science at Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities* (Salish Kootenai College Press, 2010). He holds a doctorate in Educational Theory and Policy from The Pennsylvania State University.

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