

Heenetineyoo3eihiiho' / Language Healers

A Film Review

by Wilbur Norman

Of the 139 Native American languages still spoken today, more than half of these are at risk of going extinct in the next ten years.

Here's the scene: you are a young Native American student sitting in a class that is sixty percent native students and, although you are not supposed to be whispering to a classmate during a lesson, you are. While talking you use a few words from your native language that the white teacher, who does not speak your language, overhears. You are punished without benefit of a full hearing of your explanation. Does this remind you of incidents from 19th century Indian boarding schools? Try getting your head around the facts: a 12 year-old Menominee girl... in Wisconsin... in 2012.

My father once said to me, "If you don't retain your language, who are you?" What he meant was that if you don't have the use of your *native* language, along with any other, who are you *really*? He went on to say there are two grim kinds of defeat for a people. The first is when, as a group, you are conquered militarily. The second, more terrible form: when you then defeat yourself by losing your language, your culture, your heritage, your land – your identity. I had not thought of this paternal lecture for many years, until recently, when viewing the 2014 film *Language Healers*.

I do not know if Brian McDermott's film *Heenetineyoo3eihiiho' (Language Healers)* is the first to explore the issue of Native American's loss of their language. Regardless, his story of those striving to revitalize their mother tongue is as good an introduction as one could wish for as the issue presents itself in the United States.

Here's the blurb from the web site for the film:

In the film "we learn about the importance of Native languages and cultures in Alaska from a Yup'ik dog musher and a Tlingit carver of wood and metal. The film then takes us to a school in Wisconsin where we hear the story of a seventh grade girl who was recently punished for speaking a few words of the Menominee language. We learn more about the fight against language loss through visiting a Euchee (Yuchi) immersion school in Oklahoma where only four fluent elder speakers remain. We also meet National Geographic Fellow and Swarthmore College linguistics professor K. David Harrison who introduces us to his innovative online talking dictionaries project for Indigenous languages. Finally, we travel to Montana where Neyooxet Greymorning, an inventive Arapaho professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies, has been perfecting a method to quickly save these disappearing national treasures."
(<http://www.thelanguagehealers.com/>)

One of the most touching segments in the film concerns something I thought had been left behind in the last century. At the beginning of this review I provided the brief details.

Miranda Washinawatok was the student. She went to Sacred Heart Catholic Academy in Shawano, Wisconsin, located some six miles from the tribal reservation. A classmate had asked her for the Menominee words for “hello”, “thank you” and “I love you.” Apparently the teacher did not hear this part of the exchange, just the reply that included *posoh* and *ketapanen*. The teacher, said Miranda, “thought we were talking bad” and snapped, “You’re not to be speaking like that! How do I not know you are not saying something bad? How would you like it if I spoke in Polish?” (There is a report that the teacher had once before asked Miranda not to speak Menominee because she, the teacher, couldn’t monitor what was being said. It should be noted that Miranda’s grandmother is Director of the Menominee Language and Culture Commission.)

Miranda was on the school basketball team and was captain of the volleyball team. That evening’s basketball game was parents’ night. The assistant coach told Miranda that her teacher reported she had a “bad attitude” and “behavior problems.”

In 1869 President Grant’s “Peace Policy” toward Native Americans included the establishment of Christian-run Boarding Schools. Students were taken from their homes and placed into institutions that more often reminded one of barracks and penal colonies. Many youngsters did not survive. Americans were not alone in creating these institutions; you may have seen the moving, true story depicted in the Australian film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. In our northern neighbor the tragedy of such schools is current news. Only two weeks ago, in early June of this year, the Canadian Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report. Such schools were organized beginning in 1876 and existed as late as 1996(!), funded by the central government and managed by three main organizations: the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Churches. First Nations, Metis and Inuit children were required to attend either a day or a residential school. In the Commission’s report there was strong condemnation of the systematic abuse of power in the Residential Schools. There, as here, many students did not live through their ordeal.

The first thing many American schools did was cut the students’ hair (perhaps mimicking the military in treatment of recruits) and then wash those shorn heads in kerosene. One of the interviewees remembers the teacher drawing a circle high on the classroom chalkboard and making the interviewee stand on her tip-toes for ten or fifteen minutes to hold her nose in the circle. This was a punishment for engaging in Tlingit dances.

Professor K. David Harrison, a Swarthmore College linguist, National Geographic Fellow and author of *The Last Speakers. The Quest to Save the World’s Most Endangered Languages* (2010) is also featured in the film. Dr. Harrison has developed a project entitled the “Talking Dictionary.” With it, on a computer, one can listen to diction as a native speaker voices a word. One of the points the film does not go into, but that Dr. Harrison discussed when he visited Santa Fe last autumn, is that a community can, with the Talking Dictionary, control access to its database of spoken words. It is up to the community to decide whether they wish to allow outside access to the program. Some native communities have lost so much to the world around them that they are loathe to share what might be used in a manner not in keeping with their traditions. Words do count.

Another vignette of the film centers on the work of Neyooxet Greymorning, an Arapaho professor. He recounts having the experience of one day hearing a disembodied voice over his shoulder, asking, “What are you doing for your people?” It prompted him to get up and go to the library where he walked the aisles running his hands over the stacks of books. When he stopped his hand came to rest on a linguistics book. Although not part of his major course of study he eventually took every linguistic course his graduate school offered. His take is that people talking to people – to children, is how languages are learned. And he suggests time is running out; globally we are losing languages faster than we are losing animal species.

Proving how varied is the world of our human communication, in the Yuchi/Euchee segment we learn that Yuchi men and women each speak differently and that the language is not related to any other language so far as has been determined. This means one cannot go to a sister language to find this or that particular word or phrase structure. It is therefore incredibly important that the last surviving fluent speakers pass on their intimate understanding and use of the Yuchi language. Alas, the handful of remaining fluent speakers all appear to be women. Theirs is a heavy burden, indeed.

The stories in the film show us that there is a deep bond between language, land and culture. It would be more accurate to write, *the deepest of bonds*, for one cannot fully exist without the other; language *is* identity. “Languages are road maps to the workings of the human brain, repositories of history and culture, libraries of a people’s existence. Like an outdoor art commission, languages are site specific. The loss of any one of the world’s languages, many of which have no written vocabulary, is a loss that cannot be made right.” (W. Norman, “Extinction”, *ATADA News*, Winter 2013.)

In the same article I wrote “every 14 days [now closer to ten days] a language dies. By 2100, more than half of the... 7,000 languages spoken on Earth... will likely disappear.” (Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages and the National Geographic Society.) Shockingly, one of the five identified ‘hot spots’ for current losses of world languages is Oklahoma and the southwestern United States.

Language devastation is on the agenda, too. We have lost one-half of all historical languages in the last 500 years and are on the path to losing thousands more. There are about 6700 current languages (UNESCO) with around 2500 of those in danger of extinction. Five hundred are spoken by fewer than ten people... One of the instructive and surprising facts is that since 1950 the United States has lost 53 languages, a greater number than any other country. We have lost a total of 115 since our ‘discovery’ by Columbus. (W. Norman, *ibid.*)

Language Healers has won an award, creating a buzz around the film and is being shown at many cultural and academic symposia where the survival of languages is a hot topic. Try to attend a screening if you can.

Oh... and if you want to know what happened to young Miranda at her school, you can buy the DVD from Mr. McDermott on the film’s web site, www.thelanguagehealers.com for \$30.00!

Writer & Director:
Brian McDermott

On Screen Participants:
Rochelle Adams, Phillip Blanchett, Conrad Fisher and others

Year:
2014

Running Time:
40 minutes