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Authors
Peterson, Leighton C.
Webster, Anthony K.

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Playing in the Slipstream

Leighton C. Peterson and Anthony K. Webster

> He demands that I find more ways to involve the children in activities, rather than just tell them his stories. My plan for passing Coyote stories is dissipated by its own aura of dormancy. If only it weren't for that coyote nose; now I must do everything all over.
>
> "Change," he says. "I am all about change," he continues. "Adoption. Adaptation. Improvement. Challenging the status quo. Now we're beginning to talk," he chuckles.[1]

Ah, Coyote. He has both a bad heart and a good heart. He is attractive—and a bit dangerous—precisely because he's so unpredictable. Like a slipstream. Yet somehow, he maintains a constant empathy for those around him. And he always teaches us something about life. Whether we recognize it or not, it's usually *very* important. An important lesson about morality, humanity, and the future. What Coyote is telling Rex Lee Jim—and what Jim the storyteller is telling us—is to get with the program. What you have been doing isn't working. You're becoming complacent. The conversation is too important, the task too urgent to follow too narrow a path.

And the task *is* urgent. The forms of racism, unconscious or not, that have made ready the misrecognition and denial of Indigenous humanity have not abated. The use of racist language ideologies to deny the achievements of Indigenous peoples still persist, and in their persistence do real harm, real violence. They erase and denigrate entire ways of speaking, as well as their speakers. But here, in this volume, we begin to

LEIGHTON C. PETERSON is director of the Office of Liberal Education and associate professor of anthropology at Miami University. He produced the documentaries *Weaving Worlds* and *Columbus Day Legacy*, among others, for US public television. His research has focused on Indigenous media practices and language vitality, Native American representations in documentaries, and conspiracy media ecologies. ANTHONY K. WEBSTER is a linguistic anthropologist who works with Navajo poets. He is the author of the books *Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics* and *Intimate Grammars: An Ethnography of Navajo Poetry* and coeditor of *The Diné Reader: An Anthology of Navajo Literature*. He lives in southern Illinois.

see stories not of failure but of possibility and imagination, and not naively uplifting but uplifting in the recognition of the world as it is and how it might yet be. The articles, as they say, stand on their own, and we want to simply make some particular connections across these papers, and relate them more directly to our original intervention. We were struck by the way speech play and verbal art were an important, recurring thread. We were also struck by the ways in which emergent socialites and inclusive community building were integral to all, be they explicitly noted or not. And so, as our commentary, we read these contributions through the lens of speech play and verbal art, and through the twin concerns raised here of "relanguaging" (Meek) and "emergent vitalities" (Perley). We find these frameworks by Meek and Perley to be particularly salient, as both have a particular resonance. Speech play and verbal art are often forms of relanguaging and emergent vitalities—if only we bother to recognize them as such.[2] Whether playing a board game, collaborating on a project, reposting memes, listening to radio, or chatting in a Mi Teleférico gondola, languages and ways of speaking are about living and sharing. And very serious play. And serious verbal art. And thus, they are all about the future.

"Now we're beginning to talk . . ."

Several years ago, in 2009, we organized a session at the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, meetings of the American Anthropological Association on "American Indian Languages in Unexpected Places." At the time, we sought to put into conversation the work of Philip Deloria on *Indians in Unexpected Places* with the recent concerns of linguistic anthropologists.[3] We felt that Deloria provided a useful angle by which to attend to what, from a certain vantage point, might appear anomalous, but from an ethnographically and dialogically based perspective seemed less anomalous, but rather expected. On a related theme, we took inspiration from Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* and his concern with the denial of coevalness: the forms of unexpectedness that Deloria so usefully describes are also, simultaneously, ways of denying coevalness to Indigenous peoples.[4] It was these racist forms of imagining, and of denying coevalness, that we found so potent in Deloria's work, especially with his focus on cultural productions sitting so invisibly in plain sight. Given our desire to create a conversation across disciplinary lines, Paul Kroskrity suggested we propose a special issue for *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. Our original session in Philadelphia, which had included Lisa Philips, Barbra Meek, Erin Debenport, Wesley Leonard, ourselves, and Paul Kroskrity as discussant, seemed a solid foundation, but we also felt that it would be much strengthened if Philip Deloria provided commentary. We were delighted when he agreed. And so, in 2011, our special issue was published.

It was with a fair amount of pleasure that we find ourselves offering commentary on a new set of papers that revisit the theme of "American Indian Languages in Unexpected Places" for this journal. A lot has happened since 2011—a resurgence of Indigenous-led and Indigenous-language media production, an Indigenous poet laureate for the United States, an Indigenous leader for Bolivia, a cascade of additions like COVID to the "crisis chronotope" (to borrow from Debenport). Each has brought opportunities for change, for relanguaging, for reimagining, and, we may well hope,

for rethinking "the unexpected." In this new volume, some of the names are familiar (Barbra Meek, Erin Debenport, and Paul Kroskrity), but most are new (Georgia Ennis, Karl Swinehart, Jenny Davis, Bernard Perley, Joseph Marks, Cesar Barreras, and Laree Newhall), including some younger and emerging scholars. One goal of our 2011 special issue was to move outside of our received silos, and we see here a continuing movement away from narrowly defined academic pits. It is heartening to see the range expanded to include South America as well, the transhemispheric vision a welcome inclusion—especially as many of us now are associated with Native American and Indigenous studies programs that reach across hemispheres and continents. This is not to say that these histories and contexts are identical, as Debenport and Ennis stress in their introduction, but to say that new and invigorating conversations can be had, new connections made, new angles explored.

Anthropologists and linguists have often been far too concerned about documenting language as something static or as a remnant, as something that people don't play with, and a turn toward looking at vitalities that might not fit into such received assumptions might be one way to see and hear relanguaging in practice (or praxis).[5] Taking in—and taking seriously—what we hear and observe can be transformational: Ennis clearly illustrates how her own initial assumptions about what constitutes Kichwa media (radio as exclusive of embodied performance) or Kichwa language (as separated from other sociocultural phenomena) were rightfully challenged as she conducted work in Ecuador with multimodal narratives of *pita* creation.[6] As Meek makes clear when discussing her favorite Kaska language projects—the first Kaska translation of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Eric Carle and the subsequent intergenerational live performance of the text: "They reflected the innovativeness of my collaborators and their willingness to create 'Indigenous' language texts that weren't exclusively Indigenous in origin. Had I thought they should have been a more traditional narrative, I have no doubt that they would have chided and teased me for my lack of imagination." We neglect the pleasure of languages at the peril of ignoring the things that matter to people, that provoke a sense of enjoyment and fun. We should also add that being chided and teased is something we as anthropologists and linguists should be attentive to—it may help us to recognize the misalignment between our "research questions" and the concerns of the people we work with.[7]

The editors cite Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* in their introduction, a reminder of the importance of place and language in both Indigenous studies and linguistic anthropology, and we would like to invoke an even earlier book by Basso, *Portraits of "The Whiteman,"* which begins, rightfully enough, with a quote by Vine Deloria Jr.: "It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been emphasized by professed experts."[8] Basso's book seeks to correct that inattention to humor by highlighting a particular Western Apache form of joking, yet there continues to be an inability to attend to speech play and verbal art in anthropology.[9] This, we think, has been to the detriment of linguistic anthropology (and anthropology and linguistics) and to the people that we work with. As Phil Deloria noted in his 2011 commentary,

> A language game may be among the best places to see the internal positioning taking place within Indian groups trying to set and control the pace and nature of change. Tradition, purity, Indian English—all these (often non-Indian) categories are part of indigenous discourse. . . . In soap operas, poetry, and film, Indians engage the ideologies, mock them, unravel them, and question them.[10]

A linguistic anthropology that fails to attend to forms of speech play and verbal art is a linguistic anthropology that fails to attend to those places of possibility and delight, to places of relanguaging and of emergent vitalities, where play leads us to language ideological clarifications (Barreras and Kroskrity) and even to shifting enregisterments and social awakenings (Swinehart).

> "Action," he says.
>
> "Let them have fun. Encourage their curiosity," he demands. "Curiosity never kills anyone. Hey, I'm still around. How many storytellers have I run out?" he muses.
>
> "Action," he says. "And forget about assessment. Let them speak the language and have fun." Coyote laughs.[11]

The astute reader will note that this special issue begins with a bit of verbal art and speech play in the form of Jenny Davis's poem "Welcome to the Indigenous Languages Slipstream," with its knowing intertextual references to a wide range of popular culture and its use of Indigenous languages, not as something from the past but as something in the present, and something moving. A slipstream transcends genre and narrative form. We can be pulled in by it, blown around by it, or let it take us where it will. This is a world of possibilities. Davis sets the tone for the rest of the special issue. The papers that follow move in and out of that slipstream. The poem is not just about emergent vitalities or relanguaging, but it is, in fact, about both simultaneously.

Perley's concern with emergent vitalities has been long in the making, and it is a crucial way of reimagining the work of linguistic anthropologists and others. It pushes us to focus on the places where languages are actually used and in the ways that they create possibilities of joy and delight, not as remnants of something lost but as precisely those places of "language life." As Perley notes, "Native Americans are becoming experts in their own linguistic traditions, and they are doing so by challenging the privileged discourses of non-Indian experts." Here, Webster is reminded of a conversation he had years ago with a senior anthropologist, and when that anthropologist asked Webster what his research was on, Webster had replied, "Navajo poetry." Before Webster could continue, the anthropologist went on to talk about the various curing ways that had been documented by numerous other anthropologists. When Webster was finally able to point out that he worked with contemporary Navajo poets who wrote and performed their poetry in a variety of languages, the anthropologist lost interest and excused himself.[12] Apparently, poetry was not exotic enough. Too contemporary. Perhaps, as well, too playful, too fun.[13] Not Indigenous.

Indeed, it is precisely Perley's point, of "becoming experts in their own linguistic traditions," that the paper by Barreras and Kroskrity highlights so well. Here we see

the collaboration between a senior linguistic anthropologist (Kroskrity) and a junior linguistic anthropologist and member of an Indigenous community, in particular Yo'eme (Barreras). The paper details Barreras' efforts to create a Yo'eme board game. It is a game that resists the need for winners, but it is also a game that "illustrates how the Yo'eme language is dynamic." And here, we can think of no better example of an emergent vitality, a form a relanguaging, in the form of speech play and verbal art than to quote Wai when she says, "Learning Yo'eme in a fun environment while playing a cultural game is a blessing." Here we cannot but help recall a recent point made by Tulio Bermúdez Mejía: "The assumption that verbal art categories are dynamic and changing, instead of fixed and rooted in the past, prioritizes the view that Indigenous and other minoritized languages and people have dynamic lives and futures, and leave behind the colonial narrative that such people and their languages are approaching unidirectional death."[14] While the game itself entextualizes traditional cultural forms in its structure as one side of language ideological clarification, it is the process—the sociality—that is of most importance in this intergenerational play. It not only invites "critical indigenous consciousness," it invites curiosity, conversation, socialization, and speech play to learners at all levels.

As Wesley Leonard pointed out in his 2011 contribution, emergent vitalities among Myaamia community members include active songs, games, bilingual texting, and "regular communication."[15] But these actions and "games" are quite serious. Yes, they encourage curiosity, but they underlie a broader crisis chronotope: "Contemporary language efforts of the Miami people are motivated by a need to respond to our political and linguistic history. Our efforts are in some ways a healing process."[16] Webster, too, in his 2011 piece on Blackhorse Mitchell's poem "Drifting, Lonely Seed," shows how Mitchell's verbal art was an active process of healing, of crying for help in a colonial prison, misread by his "mentor" as a grammatical and genre triumph of power over Mitchell's Navajo English.[17] Indeed, as Joseph Marks's reminds us in a careful analysis of the linguistic and poetic features of a text within a larger Tlingit milieu, verbal art *is* action for healing and resistance. And in this, it is a reminder of the value of careful attention to linguistic features in verbal art. But Marks is after something different as well—he wants us to understand how Jesse Dalton, Naa Tláa, uses her speech to create what Marks calls "limited reincarnation" or, perhaps, to highlight the temporal quality here, the momentary reincarnation of Tlingit ancestors. This is done through a variety of Tlingit linguistic forms, through Tlingit deixis and demonstratives and through kinship. The goal for Dalton, as Marks makes clear, is the removing of grief—and this removing of grief, which finds its locus in the interweaving of past, present, and future, is created through Dalton's speech. For Marks, Dalton "has decolonized the space and time for the remainder of the ceremony." It is a chronotopic world, as Marks makes clear, "only accessible for those who are Tlingit."

Here, then, is the healing and decolonizing work of verbal art—and one that fashions a future as well. These are moments of Indigeneity that "saturate a colonized space." Lisa Philips, in her 2011 contribution, illustrated how colonized spaces were reified in maps in early British Canada, erasing specific Indigenous multilingual practices that fell outside of a colonial hegemony.[18] She illustrated how a remapping

of Indigenous language practices uncovers Indigenous agency in the face of necessity, as well as Indigenous action in the face of symbolic and actual violence. Swinehart's analysis of the ways in which Aymara has been remapped onto a changing La Paz through the development of the Mi Teleférico public transit system illustrates the link between speech play (the naming of transit stations in Aymara, the appropriative play by elites to name their fancy restaurants, the multivalency of "The Pit") and the reimagining of a stratified society. These are actions emerging from the election of an Aymara president. The old linguistic boundaries are now in play, old social structures in question. "The Pit" has possibilities. This is not speech play/verbal art outside of time, but rather these are verbal arts at the nexus of time. It is verbal art that changes the world.

> "Change the way you tell my stories.
>
> "And, Rex," he chides. "Don't forget about technology. The times are changing and you must learn to embrace the changing. Change with the times. Change the way you tell my stories. Take the camcorder, the cameras, the tape recorders, and the digital cameras out of your closet and teach your nephews and nieces how to use them. Use them. Hey, they're just collecting dust now," he teases.[19]

In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Phil Deloria reminded us of the early Native American involvement in Hollywood as producers and actors. Unfortunately, these early successes and interventions succumbed to the studio system, whose invention of Hollywood Injun English (HIE) Meek juxtaposed with Indigenous community concerns in her original 2011 journal paper.[20] Peterson's 2011 contribution looked at the ways in which Navajo and Navajo English were relanguaged by Navajo film producers such as Nanobah Becker, Blackhorse Lowe, and Bennie Klain.[21] They were all using various forms of speech play and verbal art as a kind of feelingful iconicity to relate to their audience. But this kind of language work—of storywork—can still be ignored.[22] Just as Webster's research on Navajo poetry was dismissed by scholars, so was Peterson's work with Navajo language broadcasters and singers and their daily speech play and verbal art heard on the Navajo Nation's own radio station KTNN. It was not serious enough, it was not "correct" enough, not "academic" enough: "It's all about literacy," he was told by those pesky non-Native senior scholars and language activists. Get them to read and write. He also remembers conversations with current Navajo Nation Museum director Manny Wheeler—both of them much younger at the time—and Wheeler's now-fulfilled dream of a Navajo language dub of *Star Wars*. We can say with confidence that the Diné versions of *Star Wars* and *Finding Nemo* and Navajo-language social media videos and texts appear as foci in more social interactions and spur more curiosity than do those dictionaries or lesson plans. Oh, and if you're wondering how to say "light saber" in Navajo, you're asking the wrong question.[23]

In this volume, Meek builds on her earlier work, in part, through an analysis of the forms of speech play that are used in the 1994 film *Maverick* and the TV show *Rutherford Falls* (2021–22). In both cases we see how speech play and verbal art can be a site for challenging expectations, of putting into relief received

assumptions—"Indigenous creatives are altering the dialogue and the semiotics of indigeneity found in popular media." But a robust relanguaging, as Meek makes clear, is one that "entails critical reflection or ideological clarification, asking, 'How do the choices I make with respect to my research questions, methods, and data preserve a settler colonial purview and white supremacy more generally?'" This is a question that cannot be easily answered here, nor would we try, but what we *would* like to stress is that the "noise" that Meek describes, the "noise" that is often erased in the work of linguists and anthropologists, is often to be found in moments of vitality, in moments of speech play and verbal art broadly conceived. Meek herself admits to missing actor Graham Greene's decades-long relanguaging project in Hollywood due to "noise."

However, Meek downplays the agency—the fight—that made Terry and Reagan's dialogue on *Rutherford Falls* even possible. Scores of Native film and television producers have had to fight over the years for their own relanguaging efforts, even in the rarified, supposedly "woke" world of US public television.[24] So, too, did *Rutherford Falls'* Navajo showrunner and executive producer Sierra Ornelas, a filmmaker (and weaver, also the "Native writer" on the show). All of these roles are major decision-makers in this kind of production. She was absolutely as in charge as one can be, directly responsible for the relanguaging from HIE and stereotypical topics. Not only that, Ornelas was the first Native American to pitch, develop, and run a network series. Sadly—she was also the first Native American to have her show canceled by a network, but like others before her, has kept the doors open for contemporaries like Sterlin Harjo's *Reservation Dogs*, a show that has taken relanguaging Indian English (and stereotypes) to the next level. Even with Native involvement, there still can be exoticizing, if fleeting, representations of specific Indigenous languages—intentional or not—where morpheme-level subtitled translations of, for example, Navajo float perilously close to the HIE slipstream, as with *Dark Winds*, the latest Tony Hillerman–inspired series on AMC.[25] In Greene's case, he was clever. He wasn't completely in charge. He was just rewhispering, albeit very loudly.

Unlike these professional Native producers who operate at the whims of the global media marketplace, Debenport's original 2011 journal article shows how Indigenous youth refigure ideologies about language and society in their scripting and production of *As the Rez Turns*, their language camp project.[26] Here, it's clear that the play's the thing: not the final media object of the soap opera but rather the scripting and banter and ideological negotiations happening in real time that surrounded its production. Likewise, Newhall shows how the messiness of social media interactions are regulated by compound texts (posts and reposts of memes with commentaries) that speak to a specific Indigenous audience, creating a space in which emergent Indigenous identities can be created, negotiated, and claimed. Memes are verbal art par excellence: They most often incorporate both text and imagery, and sometimes a hashtag—and then the subsequent banter. All of these elements act as an oft-imprecise regimenting indexical for the other. This kind of social media bricolage can often obfuscate authorship or intentionality, or disenfranchise a meme creator (after all, on the internet, nobody knows you're a rez dog).[27] It is a space where not only grammars leak but identities and politics and indexicals and icons all leak, spread, and ooze.[28] But these examples

from Newhall do show how Native creators and interlocuters are using language and symbols as speech play and verbal art for emergent vitalities and relanguaging of social media.

Debenport's latest work gives us a fleeting moment of capturing storywork on an iPhone, and touches on the use of technology, from Zoom to Google docs, in Pueblo responses to both COVID and to their continuing concern with their languages (Keiwa, in Debenport's terms). Here we see Zoom chats as sites of "lively exchanges" that were "typed in English, Keiwa, and emoji." In both the Pueblo examples Debenport writes about, she suggests that "the future language work in both cases is one that relies on the cohesion of groups and the reaffirmation of such groups' shared purposes and histories." Toward the end, Debenport reflects on her earlier contribution to the 2011 special issue. In that paper, she suggests that she failed to recognize "resilience and creativity in Native language work" as "the constant," and rather "detailed the supposed unlikelihood of writing being used by youth at San Ramon Pueblo to create a popular culture form—the soap opera." Her recent experiences have inspired reflection and to see the creative use of technologies as the expected response. Such reflection, such critical reflection, is important in all our work. It is our sense that anthropologists and linguists (ourselves included) have not been reliable prognosticators over the years.

"Let them be actors, not the ones acted upon."[29]

A turn toward speech play and verbal art, as these papers make clear, is a turn to recognizing Indigenous peoples as actors in their own right—fashioners of worlds. The quotes by Rex Lee Jim that frame and interweave throughout this commentary were published in 2004, long before our original volume.[30] But the concerns, and the play, align well here twenty years later. That should not be unexpected, as academics seem, sometimes, to be on a twenty-year lag, writing about a world that is no longer—if it ever was—the case. Meanwhile, the people we work with—and those spared our gazes and collaborations—go on forging their presents and their futures, aware of their pasts but not trapped in it. As anthropologists who have been fortunate to work with Navajo and Apache creatives, we recognize well that they have often had an emancipatory vision of the future, one that recognizes their full humanity, one that is brimming with relanguaging and emergent vitalities. Full, as well, of that critical reflection that many of the authors describe here. That anthropologists and linguists have sometimes failed to recognize such practices speaks to an incapacity to recognize coevalness and to listen to what people are saying—not what we imagine them to be saying. Or, we ignore what they are saying in the processes and interactions happening *around* what we "think" the goal is—some ideal, clarified version of language or culture.[31] Here is the great benefit of linguistic anthropology: it has long promoted attending carefully to what people say. Where it has failed, we would suggest, is in not listening to what was being said but rather attempting to fit what was being said into preconceived Procrustean beds of theory.[32]

It should be clear, as well, that the papers also present a challenge to us as non-Indigenous scholars about our own roles in contemporary language practices. As

Meek makes clear, our own work needs to be more responsive, less focused on narrow academic questions and more open to the concerns of those we work with—and the communities they represent. What, after all, have we been doing? Cui bono? Webster, having worked with Esther Belin, Jeff Berglund, and Connie Jacobs on editing *The Diné Reader: An Anthology of Navajo Literature*—which includes work in Navajo, Navajo English, and other varieties of English by roughly forty Navajo writers—sees that book as very much in line with both what Meek calls "relanguaging" and what Perley calls "emergent vitalities."[33] The book is not a story of failure or of vanishing Navajos. Rather, it challenges "demeaning, pejorative patterns of differentiation," and it does so in a way that creates a vitality around the languages used by Navajos today and into the future. English is, as Belin told Webster years ago, a Navajo language.[34] The book looks forward toward the future, not to a perpetually backward-glancing literature, but to a literature that is meant to be relevant now and into the future. It may not be a canonical bit of anthropology or linguistics, but it was a book that many Navajo poets were interested in having, and it was Belin who approached Webster to be a part of the editorial team. It is a book that many Navajos with whom Webster has spoken are proud of. It's noisy, but it isn't bossy. It isn't perfect, but it is a place to read Navajo writers, to attend to their voices unmediated through the writing of Tony Hillerman.[35] Or as Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui writes in the foreword, "I often speak to non-Navajo audiences. . . . [N]on-Navajo and non-Native people mention they've learned about Navajo culture through books by detective mystery writer Tony Hillerman (a non-Navajo). . . . I'm always stunned by such misunderstanding; how regularly Navajo people are misrepresented and wrongly portrayed in the world. During these exchanges, I offer names of many of the Navajo authors included in this anthology. These are the voices they should be reading if they want to understand the worldview and story of our people."[36]

Over the years, we have used the articles that make up the original "American Indian Languages in Unexpected Places" to good effect in the courses we have taught. For students to get a chance to read about *As the Rez Turns*, or messaging in Myaamia, or films in Navajo, or to rethink the films they have watched as children, or to recognize that not every English is the same, or to understand that Indigenous multilingualism is not new, these articles have opened up possibilities and rearranged expectations. We are excited, now, to begin to teach these articles in our courses—to give students a glimpse of Yoeme board games or Indigenous memes or a Maliseet singer performing alongside Yo-Yo Ma. We also hope they inspire them as much as they have inspired us. But we also use—with equal weight and importance—the films, the stories, the memes, the texts, the jokes, and the poems from indigenous creators in a variety of languages. We invite them—the texts and (where possible) their creators—to our classes and point out that all of these things are completely expected. Perley's point is a useful reminder: "Rather than conforming to the colonial impulse to document the last words of the last speakers as a desperate measure to mitigate language death, Native American language activists are documenting creativity and innovation in their heritage languages as a celebration of language life"—and, we would add, as a celebration of life.

Language ideological clarification itself, whether by Indigenous stakeholders or researchers (or those who are both), can be obfuscated or misrecognized if the "noise" is omitted from the equation, or if we fail to realize that the goal isn't what it seems (or what it seems to us). We leave with a final reminder not to ignore what is hiding in plain sight, that not everyone is in the slipstream by choice, and that not all cultural producers are "activists" in the sense that academics relate to. When asked by his producer (Peterson) about the impact of his acclaimed public television documentary on the Navajo language, *Weaving Worlds*, Navajo filmmaker Bennie Klain—by no means a language activist (or friend of the academy)—put it this way: "I just wanted to get the weavers' stories, and the most authentic way to get the weavers' stories was to do it in Navajo. I didn't go into it saying, 'I'm going to save my people.' I didn't go into it thinking that. In hindsight, I see those dynamics taking place. . . . In hindsight, it's having more implications than I thought."[37]

> "While you're doing these projects, the Navajo language will allow you to act on your thoughts, to accomplish your goals, to realize ideas in physical forms. Navajo then becomes a language of action, excitement, working together, and accomplishment. How much more utilitarian can you get than that?" he asks. "This is the language of true love," Coyote says. "You teach children how to fish out in the sea of sand. They learn to use Navajo as a way of thinking and acting. Let them be actors, not the ones acted upon." Coyote almost raises his voice. "The Navajo language and I have an intimate relationship," he commands.[38]

Notes

We thank Erin and Georgia for the invitation to write this commentary. We thank as well all the authors for such a stimulating set of papers. We dedicate this paper to the memory of Bennie Klain, who never hesitated to put academics in their place. Uncomfortable as it sometimes was for us, we thank him.

1. Rex Lee Jim, "Coyote Stories," in *Voices from the Four Directions: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, ed. Brian Swann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 317.

2. Our thinking on speech play and verbal art has been greatly influenced by the work of Joel Sherzer. See, for example, Joel Sherzer, *Speech Play and Verbal Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through Its Discourse* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Sherzer and Anthony C. Woodbury, *Native American Discourse: Poetics and Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). We take up the issue in Leighton C. Peterson and Anthony K. Webster, "Speech Play and Language Ideologies in Navajo Terminology Development," *Pragmatics* 23 (2013): 93–116. See also Anthony K. Webster, "(Ethno)Poetics and Perspectivism: On the Hieroglyphic Beauty of Ambiguity," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29 (2019): 168–74; Patience L. Epps, Anthony K. Webster, and Anthony C. Woodbury, "A Holistic Humanities of Speaking: Franz Boas and the Continuing Centrality of Texts," *International Journal of American Linguistics* 83 (2017): 41–78; and "Documenting Speech Play and Verbal Art: A Tutorial," in *Key Topics in Language Documentation and Description: Language Documentation and Conservation Special Publication no. 26*, eds. Peter Jenks and Lev Michael (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2023): 175–241.

3. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

4. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). We take up his work in Anthony K. Webster and Leighton C. Peterson, "Introduction: American Indian Languages in Unexpected Places," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 1–18.

5. We are thinking here specifically of Bernard Perley, *Defying Maliseet Language Death: Emergent Vitalities, Culture, and Identity in Eastern Canada* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011) and "Zombie Linguistics: Experts, Endangered Languages and the Curse of Undead Voices," *Anthropological Forum* 22 (2013): 133–49. Other work that makes this point are Barbra Meek, *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011); Jenny Davis, *Talking Indian: Identity and Language Revitalization in the Chickasaw Renaissance* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018); many of the papers in Paul V. Kroskrity, *Telling Stories in the Face of Danger: Language Renewal in Native American Communities* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); Paul V. Kroskrity and Anthony K. Webster, *The Legacy of Dell Hymes: Ethnopoetics, Narrative Inequality, and Voice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Paul V. Kroskrity and Barbra A. Meek, *Engaging Native American Publics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Collaborative Key* (London: Routledge, 2017). See also Teresa L. McCarty, Sheilah E. Nicholas, Kari A. B. Chew, Natalie G. Diaz, Wesley Y. Leonard, and Louellyn White, "Hear Our Languages, Hear Our Voices: Storywork as Theory and Praxis in Indigenous-Language Reclamation," *Dædalus* 147 (2018): 160–72; Aresta Tsosie-Paddock, Elizabeth Redd, and Robert William Autry, "Language Landscapes and Native Resilience: Land-Connectivity, Language, and Identity among Urban Native Americans," in *New Approaches to Language and Identity in Contexts of Migration and Diaspora*, eds. Stuart Dunmore, Karolina Rosiak, and Charlotte Taylor (London: Routledge, 2024): 106–21.

6. On this point, see Rex Lee Jim and Anthony K. Webster, "Native North America: Notes towards a Dialogical Ethnopoetics," in *Approaches to Language and Culture*, eds. Svenja Völkel and Nico Nassenstein (Berlin: Mouton, 2022): 385–424; Anthony K. Webster, "I Want People to Really See It": Poetry, Truth, and the Particularities of Blackhorse Mitchell's 'The Beauty of Navajoland,'" *Journal of the Southwest* 66 (2024): 1–46.

7. On this point, we would point the interested reader to early work by Américo Paredes, "On Ethnographic Work among Minority Groups: A Folklorist's Perspective," *New Scholar* 6 (1977): 1–32; James Howe and Joel Sherzer, "Friend Hairyfish and Friend Rattlesnake or Keeping Anthropologists in Their Place," *Man* 21 (1986): 680–96.

8. Keith H. Basso, *Portraits of "The Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 3; Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Language and Landscape among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). Basso is citing from Vine Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Avon Books, 1970).

9. Sherzer, *Speech Play*. Discussions of speech play and verbal art, of joking, in anthropology, as Sherzer notes in *Verbal Art in San Blas*, have often been to place them in larger and more "theoretically" important frameworks (Structuralist, Functionalist, Freudian, etc.), to underplay what people find humorous in favor of the preoccupations of whatever is currently deemed important in anthropology. As Cecilia Quijano (a Guna woman Sherzer worked with) once explained, "The Kuna place is not a quiet place. It is a talking place and a laughing place" (Sherzer, *Speech Play*, 154). The task of anthropology, at least according to Sherzer, is to take that claim seriously, to not ignore "the sheer pleasure" of speech play and verbal art (*Speech play*, 155).

10. Philip J. Deloria, "On Leaking Languages and Categorical Imperatives," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 179.

11. Jim, "Coyote Stories," 317.

12. See, for example, Anthony K. Webster, *Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009) and *Intimate Grammars: An Ethnography of Navajo Poetry* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015). See also, Esther G. Belin, Jeff Berglund, Connie A. Jacobs, and Anthony K. Webster, *The Diné Reader: An Anthology of Navajo Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021).

13. On some of the humor of Navajo poetry, see for example, Anthony K. Webster, "'To All the Former Cats and Stomps of the Navajo Nation': Performance, the Individual, and Cultural Poetic Traditions," *Language in Society* 37 (2008): 61–89.

14. Tulio Bermúdez Mejía, "Emerging Vitality in 'Endangered' Forms of Verbal Art in Naso," *Anthropological Linguistics* 63 (2021): 417.

15. Wesley Leonard, "'Challenging 'Extinction' through Modern Miami Language Practices," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 140.

16. Ibid. For more on his more recent work on this topic, see Wesley Leonard, "Toward an Anti-Racist Linguistic Anthropology: An Indigenous Response to White Supremacy," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 31 (2021): 218–37; "Refusing 'Endangered Languages' Narratives," *Daedalus* 152 (2023): 69–83.

17. Anthony K. Webster, "'Please Read Loose': Intimate Grammars and Unexpected Languages in Contemporary Navajo Literature," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 61–86. Mitchell's story is well told in Blackhorse Mitchell, *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navajo Boy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004). See also Farina King, Michael P. Taylor, and James R. Swensen, *Returning Home: Diné Creative Works from the Intermountain Indian School* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021); Laura Tohe, *No Parole Today* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1999).

18. Lisa Philips, "Unexpected Languages: Multilingualism and Contact in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century North America," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 19–41.

19. Jim, "Coyote Stories," 318.

20. Barbra A. Meek, "Failing American Indian Languages," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 43–60. That paper built on her foundational article "And the Injun Goes 'How!': Representations of American Indian in English in White Public Space," *Language in Society* 35 (2006): 93–128. See also Barbra A. Meek, "Racing Indian Language, Languaging an Indian Race: Linguistic Racisms and Representations of Indigeneity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Race*, eds. H. Samy Alim, Angela Reyes, and Paul V. Kroskrity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 369–97.

21. Leighton C. Peterson, "'Reel Navajo': The Linguistic Creation of Indigenous Screen Memories," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 111–34.

22. On storywork, see McCarty et al., "Hear Our Languages, Hear Our Voices." See also Anthony K. Webster, "Learning to Be Satisfied: Navajo Poetics, a Chattering Chipmunk, and Ethnopoetics," *Oral Tradition* 34 (2020): 73–104.

23. See Peterson and Webster, "Speech Play and Language Ideologies."

24. See Leighton C. Peterson, "Made Impossible by Viewers Like You: The Politics and Poetics of Native American Voices in US Public Television," in *How Television Shapes Our Worldview*, eds. Deborah A. Macey and Kathleen Ryan (New York: Lexington Books, 2014): 247–66.

25. Compare with Dwayne Martine's poem "Thought Knife," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (2014): 145, which plays with the literal meaning of Navajo terms to make a larger point about Indigenous agency.

26. Erin Debenport, "'As the Rez Turns': Anomalies within and beyond the Boundaries of a Pueblo Community," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 87–109. See also Erin

Debenport, *Fixing the Books: Secrecy, Literacy, and Perfectibility in Indigenous New Mexico* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2015).

27. See Leighton C. Peterson, "Reflections on Navajo Publics, 'New' Media, and Documentary Futures," in *Engaging Native American Publics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Collaborative Key*, eds. Paul Kroskrity and Barbra Meek (London: Routledge, 2017): 169–83; Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 449–67.

28. The metaphor of grammars leaking is from Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1921), 38. See also Paul V. Kroskrity, "All Intimate Grammars Leak: Reflections on 'Indian Languages in Unexpected Places,'" *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35 (2011): 161–72.

29. Jim, "Coyote Stories," 319.

30. Ibid.

31. Dennis Tedlock made this point long ago when he encouraged an ethnography as interaction. See Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 285. See also Jim and Webster, "Native North America."

32. On this point, see Anthony K. Webster, "Whorf, Navajo Poetry, and Ethnopoetic Dialoging," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 80 (2024): 452–76.

33. Belin et al., *The Diné Reader*.

34. Webster, "'Please Read Loose,'" 62.

35. See Sherwin Bitsui, "Foreword," in *The Diné Reader: An Anthology of Navajo Literature*, eds. Esther G. Belin, Jeff Berglund, Connie A. Jacobs, and Anthony K. Webster (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021): xv–xvi.

36. Bitsui, "Foreword," xv.

37. Peterson interview with Bennie Klain, 2010, from Bennie Klain's documentary film *Weaving Worlds* (USA: VisionMaker Media Inc., 2008).

38. Jim, "Coyote Stories," 319.