Voice and Speech Review

ISSN: 2326-8263 (Print) 2326-8271 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rvsr20

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To cite this article: Eric Armstrong, Shannon Vickers, Katie German & Elan Marchinko (2020): Accent and Language Training for the Indigenous Performer: Results of Four Focus Groups, Voice and Speech Review, DOI: 10.1080/23268263.2020.1727640

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23268263.2020.1727640

Published online: 17 Feb 2020.

VOICE AND SPEECH REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/23268263.2020.1727640

ARTICLE

Accent and Language Training for the Indigenous Performer: Results of Four Focus Groups

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the experience of Indigenous performers in Canada; it makes recommendations on how to better serve Indigenous actors-in-training, for appropriate and effective accent and language resource creation, and on how to improve the ways that professional Indigenous artists are supported in roles requiring Indigenous language and/or accents in theatre, television, and film. This project reviews the outcomes of four focus group discussions with Indigenous performers around the topic of accent and language training and its use in performance. Participants reported on their experience with accent and voice training in western and Indigenous performance training institutions, on their experience performing in traditional language and/or performing with an Indigenous accent of English, how they felt performance training can be decolonized, and on the accent/language resources they felt were important to improve training opportunities for Indigenous artists.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous performance in Canada; indigenous accents and dialects; decolonization; actor training; accent coaching; indigenous actors; cultural sensitivity

Introduction

In 2015, Eric Armstrong was hired to help create resources for a play that was beginning rehearsals in Toronto; an Indigenous actor had reached out for assistance with accent acquisition. This request was not novel, but the limited options to find primary source material (both online and through publications) soon revealed a potential need for more resources to support Indigenous artists. The actor agreed that more resource material would be beneficial to the community. Would others agree? Would the greater community of Indigenous performing artists across Canada also identify a need for accent and language training resources to support Indigenous storytelling on stage and screen? What kind of resources might best serve the community? We sought to find out the answers to these questions by engaging a wide range of artists through a series of four focus groups.

Literature Review

While there is a fairly rich research literature on Indigenous languages, the material on the accents or dialects of Indigenous people in Canada, on Indigenous English, First

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Nations English, Inuit English, etc., is extremely limited; Native American English in the United States has fared a little better (Dubois 1978; Leap 2012). In 2008, Ball and Bernhardt, in *First Nations English Dialects in Canada: Implications for Speech-Language Pathology* identified only two previous studies (Mulder 1982; Tarpent 1982) on First Nations dialects (both on Tsimshian English), and there has been little published since then. Eminent Canadian linguist Charles Boberg shared in a personal e-mail that Indigenous English in Canada is a variety "that, sadly, has received very little academic attention compared to that devoted to other ethnic varieties of North American English." Of the studies that do exist, many focus on Indigenous English within the context of education and speech-language pathology, as it has been frequently "pathologized" due to stigma, rather than properly identified as a legitimate language form in its own right (Sterzuk 2008, 7). A small number of these provide descriptions of the phonology of a specific language, for example, Carlson et al.'s (2002) "Illustration of the IPA" focused on Nunchanulth. Another example is Genee and Stigter who focus on Blackfoot/Siksiká, a language spoken primarily in Montana and Idaho in the United States, and in Alberta, Canada; in particular, they outline its grammar and morphosyntactics, but not its phonology (Genee and Stigter 2018).

As for collections of accent resources that might be of use to coaches working in theatre, film, or television, there is similarly little to find. The International Dialects of English Archive, dialectsarchive.com (Meier and Meier 1999), features a limited collection of 19 accent resources in their "Native American" section at the time of publication, only two of which are from Canada.

Methods

Participants

We approached potential candidates for our focus groups with the hope of finding a broad spectrum of Indigenous artists working in theatre, film, television, and storytelling. We felt that anyone who self-identified as an Indigenous actor or storyteller would be an appropriate candidate. Our recruitment procedure began with invitations to Indigenous students and former students, as well as colleagues from our own institutions. From there, we broadened our search to invite Indigenous artists we knew or had met, and we asked them for suggestions on artists who they felt would be appropriate candidates. In the end, Facebook provided the greatest access to Indigenous actors: we could often triangulate Indigenous actors via other actors' Facebook Friends lists and reach out directly through FB Messenger. Our plan for two face-to-face focus groups, one in Winnipeg and one in Toronto, led us to try to specifically target actors in those two communities. Over time, we found that many of the performers living in those hubs worked for Indigenous theatres across the country, or in mainstream regional theatres, and were often not available. As a result, we decided to schedule two web-based video "zoom" focus groups, which attracted performers from across Canada.

We invited 112 performers to be participants, and 87 declined our offer. We were unable to find anyone who self-identified as a storyteller, unfortunately. In all, we had 25 participants, with 13 women, and 12 men. We categorized them as being in three groups: (1) "Junior" being those in training, or a recent graduate; (2) "Mid-career" or established

artists; and (3) "Senior" being participants with 15 or more years in the industry. We had 11 "junior" participants, five "mid-career," and nine "senior" actors.

Culturally, there were participants who self-identified as—in order of greatest number of participants to smallest—Cree, Ojibwe, Métis, Mohawk, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Cowichan, Dakota/Nakota, Dene, Mi'kmaq, Odawa, Tahltan, and Kaska. Unfortunately, we were unable to recruit any participants who were Inuit, the second largest Indigenous language/cultural group in Canada, for our focus groups.

Participants were asked to sign an informed consent document; it allowed them to choose between being anonymous in the publication of the data from the focus group or to make their participation known by being identified by name.

Data Collection

We began each group with introductions and invited us all to share who we were and where we were from. Then, we focused the discussion around four sub-questions. Each of these was, in turn, broken down into more specific questions.

(1) *How are people trained?* Here we sought to find out more about the backgrounds of our participants, how they came to their current role in performance. We sought information about whether they had pursued some kind of training or whether they had learned on the job.
(2) *What is important to you, in regard to accent/dialect/language?* In this section, we hoped to get more general impressions of how our participants felt that accent/dialect/language plays a role in Indigenous performing arts in general, both in work they had created or witnessed.
(3) *How can we decolonize Indigenous performance training?* We asked about how their experience in learning voice, speech and accents could be improved, in order to create more optimal learning environments for Indigenous actors-in-training.
(4) *What kind of resources do you want, and how should we source them?* We wondered whether they felt a general "toolkit" for learning Indigenous language and accents would be of value to them, and what should make up such a resource. We also asked, if we were to focus on one accent/language to begin with, where should we start, and how might that process be culturally sensitive?

The two face-to-face focus groups began with some food and drink which we shared, which is a traditional protocol in many indigenous communities. Our discussions were two hours long and were held at the University of Winnipeg's Department of Theatre and Film, and at Ryerson University, in downtown Toronto. Our third and fourth focus groups were run online using zoom.us video conferencing software. The face-to-face focus groups were audio-recorded using a digital recorder; the zoom.us software includes the capability for recording the audio and video tracks. Research assistant Elan Marchinko transcribed the audio of the focus groups with great care and specificity.

Data Analysis

Both investigators are primarily voice teachers, and voice/text/accent/language coaches for theatre, film, and television. We come to qualitative research with a certain cautiousness, as this is something quite new to us. In the analysis phase of the process, we did not use an electronic coding system but rather chose to use traditional methods to track/encode the transcripts with tables in documents.

Our approach was modeled after the procedure outlined in Magnusson and Marecek's *Doing Interview-based Qualitative Research*, especially chapter eight, "Finding meanings in people's talk" (Magnusson and Marecek 2015). The methodology outlined there served as our framework, to review the focus group material for meaning. In particular, Jerome Bruner's concepts of *Culture* (Bruner 1986) lie at the heart of the theoretical framework behind this approach. "We use the word culture to refer to the shared meanings, view of the world, moral visions, and practices that together make up a way of life for a social group" (Magnusson and Marecek 2015, 4). The framework also is structured around the multiple senses to the word *meaning*, again supported by Bruner (1990): the substance of the talk, the implications it carries, our understanding of the talk, and finally its significance. Working with our Research Assistant Katie German (Métis), we went through a process of approaching the transcripts with each of our four research questions in mind, gathering excerpts of points of view, statements, and arguments that stood out, and writing descriptive notes in an attempt to distill the meaning of the excerpt. These were then gathered into an integrative summary of the material gathered in response to the sub-questions that arose out of the research questions. As new sub-questions were identified, we gathered more excerpts, and wrote a descriptive commentary for each of these. We worked through each of the focus groups, in turn, and then amalgamated the content of all four groups into one document for each of the four research questions. Then, as we turned to write our final analysis, we re-reviewed all the excerpts and commentary, looking to synthesize specific themes that arose across all four groups.

Results and Discussion

The following is a discussion of the qualitative data results presented in themes and subthemes.

Training

The paths of training in voice and accent within all of the focus groups varied from no training at all to post-secondary training in an acting program. Those with university experience ranged significantly, from only having a year of theatre and/or film study, to three who had done a master's degree in theatre (MFA or MA), in the United Kingdom, Canada, or the United States. Other participants had done private study through one-on-one coaching, or private acting classes in professional or semiprofessional acting programs.

Those who chose a university, college, or conservatory program often did not necessarily begin in theatre: participants reported beginning in programs as diverse as kinesiology, radio and television, and medicine. Sera-Lys McArthur, who began her training in the two-year musical theatre program at AMDA[1] in New York City, shared that "I went to get my

master's in acting at the University of Essex in England and [...] definitely I was going to get, like, the colonial experience of the theatre art form" (FGWinnipeg: 137–139).[2]

While many participants (18) had received their training in traditional Western college, university, or conservatory settings, 11 participated in training that was specifically Indigenous. Most common among our participants was training through the Centre for Indigenous Theatre (CIT),[3] but many had also participated in programs run by Debajehmujig Theatre Centre in Manitowaning on Manitoulin Island, Manitoba Theatre for Young People in Winnipeg, or Full Circle First Nations Performance in Vancouver. For Meegwun Fairbrother, this training served as a stepping-stone to more intensive, Western-style training: "I went to the Debajehmujig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island—worked with them for, like, three summers and then met Martha Burns[4] there. She lit a fire under my ass to go to university! To go pro! And, so I got to York [University Department of Theatre Acting Conservatory]" (FGToronto: 124–126).

For some, their training began in arts programs in high school, such as Nyla Carpentier. She later studied acting at Studio 58 in Vancouver, a conservatory program based at Langara College, followed by two years with Full Circle's Ensemble Program. In fact, most participants received multiple forms of training, culminating in performance work in professional theatre and/or film. At least two of our participants, on the other hand, had no formal training in an institutional setting, but rather had on-the-job training while working in the field. Gloria Eshkibok stated that "I didn't go to any school, but I did take a lot of private classes" (FG2: 138–139).

Julian Black Antelope: So, I have no formal training. And what actually got me booking my first role in a Steven Spielberg mini-series—I actually did stunts . . . was the simple fact that I *can* speak some of my language. Some of the language—I mean that's the only culture I know is Blackfoot. (FG1: 209–213)

Important Aspects in Language and Accent

We asked our participants when introducing themselves, to share which languages they spoke. All participants had English as their first language, except for one, Rachelle White Wind, whose mother tongue is French. Waawaate Fobister shared that "I grew up on reserve and both my parents are Ojibwe speakers, so I grew up with the language. Uh . . . yeah, so, I'm not completely fluent but I can speak it—and I write plays [...] in the language" (FG1: 94–97). Twelve of our participants shared that they had at least some ability in their traditional language(s), though some shared that they had only limited skills. Among them were second-language speakers of English, French, Saulteaux, Ojibwe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Onkwehonwe,[5] Mandarin, Japanese, Blackfoot, and Dene.

While many of our participants reported that they had their traditional language, several did not. Participant 3's experience was shared with several others: "I never learned and neither did my Mom unfortunately. Her parents didn't think it was wise to teach them" (FG1: 80–81). Michael Greyeyes said that "both of my parents were in residential school, so they [their teachers] got in their heads, and somehow they convinced my Dad . . . to not teach me and my sister Cree" (FG2: 167–170). Participants recognized the importance of having the skills to learn another language other than English, in order to be prepared for

a role: the expectation in the industry is that they are capable of learning a traditional language regardless of what traditional languages, if any, the actor is familiar with.

While some participants studied in Western "standard" accents such as Received Pronunciation, Scottish, British, and Australian (FG2: 147–148, FG2: 212), most did not have specific accent training in an educational setting.

Deneh'Cho Thompson: I don't think we focused particularly on accents but we did accent work as it came up and we did a lot of work around being able to articulate certain sounds and shapes and things like that so that we could identify our own accent work as we went—so, [. . .] we were looking how we could be adaptable when we started working. (FG2: 72–76)

Those participants that had general accent training received it as part of classes in a theatre program; otherwise, they figured it out on their own when they were required to speak within a work setting such as a film or a play. In which case, those participants that needed private coaching would seek out informants and/or coaches through their communities and their own networks. In a few rare instances, they had the support of a professional coach on a film.

We were eager to hear how our participants valued accent or language as a performance tool in their theatre and/or on camera work. There is clearly a high demand for Indigenous actors to speak with accented English, or in a traditional language, often one that they do not speak. "I would say one out of every fifteen auditions it's gonna be in another language and you have to be ready to learn it, which I'm all game for" (Participant 3 FG1: 546–548). Samantha Brown's experience goes even further: "Pretty much every single play that I've done I've had to do another language" (FG1: 554). As we had suspected, our participants confirmed that they are frequently required to come up with the language or accent on their own. Samantha continues that, "just YouTubing things is what worked also. But again, like, it's a huge challenge and you're often left to do it on your own devices, and it can often be criticized because it doesn't sound right" (FG1: 546–548).

We heard that demonstrating in an audition that one has the skills to speak and also to learn different languages or accents can help artists get more work.

Generalized Accent vs. Specific Ones

Participant 7 felt that a generalized accent was likely good enough in some cases:

> You also have to look at your audience. [. . .] And if your audience understands what you're saying and are going to come back at you afterwards then yes, you have to get the dialect right. But, if you're writing for a bunch of white people anyway. (FG2: 482–485)

However, generally, we felt that our participants disagreed with this point of view, arguing that the benefits—a savings in cost or time—were not outweighed by the harm done by lack of cultural context or accuracy. "I disagree with that. I think we have to get it right no matter what. I think we have to strive to get it right" (Deneh'Cho Thompson FG2: 487–488). "I agree with Deneh, 'cause it's like it is right or it is wrong, you know? And we have dealt with wrong for a long time because wrong was good enough, right?" (Michael Greyeyes FG2: 493–496).

The Rez Accent

We heard early and often about a generalized Indigenous accent that actors encounter in their work, that they chose to call many things, though the term that was used most often was a "Rez Accent," deriving its name primarily from the accent of people who live on a reserve.[6] This generalized accent was described by many as an asset for an actor, frequently serving as a shortcut in their process, but, because it was felt that it was frequently built upon stereotypes, the so-called Rez accent could be problematic. Things were further complicated as participants also used the term to describe stronger Indigenous accents that they heard or used at different times in their lives, or in specific environments. We heard that internalized bias within Indigenous communities held that a Rez accent equates to a lack of education. Some participants experienced shame around Indigenous languages and accents, which has caused the learning of them to cease within their families. Participant 2 captured the complicated relationship she has with her accent:

> When I was growing up, "Your accent makes you sound dumb." Like, my Gramma used to say my voice sounded dumb [. . .] When I would speak Rezzy—Like, there's three white kids in my class and I don't talk like them at all and then you're like—you don't talk like the teacher, so you sound dumb [. . .] 'Cause yeah it's like it's not educated is what she was saying [. . .] It's like we have to speak a certain way if we wanna be taken seriously. Especially in acting, I was worried that that would come a lot. That me speaking in my weird accent would be, like, people would be like, "Well no, that's not what Viola sounds like." (FGWinnipeg: 684–734)

Playwright and performer Ian Ross' perspective on the matter was startling:

> The only criticism that I ever got doing *Joe from Winnipeg*[7] was from somebody anonymously from my reserve sending an email to the CBC saying I was [. . .] perpetuating the stereotype of Aboriginal people. And then I wanted to talk to them [. . .] because I would have [. . .] said, "Really? Like if I'm doing that, like, let me know." 'Cause I wanna do things in a better way, right? But then I thought about it and thought, "Well, what does this character do?" He teaches people to [. . .] listen to one another; to respect one another; to love each other; to try and do good in the world. And then I thought well shit, if those are Indigenous stereotypes, then yeah fuck, I'm gonna stereotype the hell out of that." (FGWinnipeg: 777–786)

There was some discussion of experiences of being required to sound more "Native" by producers (Julian Black Antelope FG1: 423–424 and Darla Contois FGWinnipeg: 1356–1362). On the other hand, some were told that their accents were too strong: "'You can't speak like that when you go into the audition room.' 'Cause I was, like, really hardcore—my Rez accent. You know, I had to learn how to get a *Canadian* accent" (Waawaate Fobister FG1: 437–439).

Support for Accent and Language in the Industry

In terms of their experience as performers, there was agreement that accessing supports and resources was easier in film and television, rather than in theatre where budgets are likely tighter, and the responsibility frequently falls to the performer. Samantha Brown's experience in theatre is extreme, but probably not atypical:

> My rehearsal schedule was ten days and then we were on the road! So, I had ten days to not only learn a new language, learn new dialect, learn new everything! . . . The whole show in ten days! So, it's hard to give that care that you need to give to something so that it is

> accurate and you're not being misrepresentative and that you're being caring to someone else's language, because Cree is not my language (FG1: 834–836).

We heard that mainstream actors, using European accents, frequently got access to supports more readily than Indigenous ones.

> Julian Black Antelope: Like, when they have someone speaking like, whatever, a small speech in … German, they go to great lengths to make sure there's a language dialect coach there 'cause those languages are very accessible. … But, when it comes to Indigenous languages … they just assume that if you can speak one you can speak 'em all. So, there's very little care and I think that's because of the lack of resources. They don't have someone who can speak these languages. (FG1: 391–400)

Creative Teams

In all the focus groups, we heard about instances of directors' and producers' ignorance around Indigenous culture, languages and accents. "In my experience … they're not specific at all. They just expect us to kind of sound different or otherly, right?" (Michael Greyeyes FG2: 364–365). There was also a desire for the creative team to be better educated, perhaps through a public forum on hiring practices and/or how to work with Indigenous performers. Casting directors, in particular, were called out for their insensitivity. Joshua Ranville's experience seems typical:

> I did an audition … for a Native role and it was when I was a lot younger … I felt very strong about the audition and they … felt good about it, too. They said, "That was great. Can you do that again, but can you sound more Native?" (FGWinnipeg: 1377–1381)

Michael Greyeyes summed it up succinctly: "'Well, we'd like you to sound more Native.' Well, that's insulting and that's racist" (FG2: 827–828).

Frequently, the creative team did not take into consideration the need for preparation. "It's on the spot. […] They tell you and right away you speak it and there's no practice" (Rachelle White Wind FG1: 380–381). Or worse yet, Rachelle White Wind continues, they expect you to be able to change in an instant. "You learn all the words and you learn all your lines and [you arrive] on set, 'Oh, we're actually gonna change all the lines!' And it's like, 'Oh god.' Now not only do you have to memorize new lines [but also] the accent and how they're saying it" (FG1: 386–389). Michael Greyeyes's strategy seems particularly effective: "what I do in the process of accepting the role is demand that, if that's the case—they want me to be Navajo—then I have to have support" (FG2: 1144–1145).

Ultimately, many actors wanted to respond to these requests by focusing on the integrity of their work. Julian Black Antelope explained "when somebody asks me to put on more of a Rez accent, my first question is, 'Does this pertain to the character? Why? And can you explain to me why?'" (FG1: 635–637). Using an accent, whether it is a request from the director or a discovery the actor makes, is about making a choice that is appropriate for the character (Nyla Carpentier FG1: 263–266).

Learning Accents and Language

We asked the focus groups to tell us how they learned accents or language for their projects. The participants' approaches included listening to the audio of native speakers, watching either video or working face-to-face with an accent informant, trying out the

physicality, and learning the mechanics of sound/articulation. Online sources were predominantly YouTube, such as this example from Sera-Lys McArthur: "What I did was go to YouTube and look people up from the area. Luckily I found [. . .] video of a town hall and they were just gonna have some dancing and someone was just talking on a mic in a gym" (FGWinnipeg: 1035–1046).

Some respondents said that their knowledge of phonetics was particularly helpful to them. Sera-Lys McArthur, who trained in conservatories in the United States and United Kingdom, shared that "one of the cool things about being educated in all the places I've gone—one of the things that stayed the same was studying the International Phonetic Alphabet [. . .] I felt like I had a key to unlock things" (FGWinnipeg: 1278–1297). Julian Black Antelope's experience with a coach who used a phonetic approach had a significant impact on him.

> I worked with a language coach out of Vancouver [. . .] who doesn't speak a stitch of Native languages, but she teaches it. She studies it phonetically. She [. . .] was the one that made sure that I had perfected these tiny, tiny, tiny little inflections that she could hear. She [. . .] taught me phonetically how to pronounce. (FG1: 815–820)

In terms of oral posture, placement, or awareness of specific speech styles, Nyla Carpentier's experience—of having to adapt to a mainstream accent in her training that then gave her skills which she could use later for Indigenous language or accents —was ingenious.

> There's something about the placement and then having to go to theatre school and being told, 'Oh, you have to push your voice forward.' But if you ever want to get back to that spot —you know, knowing that you have to talk further back. (FG1: 577–580)

Later, Nyla shared that Voice classes "were my two favourite classes [. . .] because of the way they explained the mechanics of how the voice worked [. . .] I was able to access different tones and tonalities of accents and language because you figure out that that's where the voice lives" (FG1: 990–997).

Perhaps most important of all was the use of personal networks in order to source informants, or to access knowledge about language, accent, and that community's culture. "It's a lot better to work with somebody and to speak with them directly . . . I would learn more from a person, like, a living breathing person, rather than YouTube" (Nyla Carpentier 763–774).

Honoring Language

We heard repeatedly how a performance of a language or an accent based in observation and fact, supported through careful research and preparation, gave actors an opportunity to show honor to the culture, language, traditions and people of the group being represented.

Julian Black Antelope: When I worked with Graham Green[8] he taught me something very cool, it was really good advice. He said, "When you're speaking another person's language, when you're learning, you take the time to speak it correctly. Even if you're just speaking in English." (FG1: 735–741)

Ian Ross's comments reflect on the impact that that commitment can have.

> When I got to speak Nakota in *The Englishman's Boy*, that was the first time that our language was ever put on film. And that meant something to a lot of people. If I would have just half-assed it and, like, done some other dialect or not even really learned it right [. . .] just done like gibberish, which happens, too [. . .] then I wouldn't feel the sense of pride or that I've made a contribution in the way that I feel I have now, you know?" (FGWinnipeg: 1433–1434)

Hunter Cardinal's experience working with an elder on language was transformative.

> "Do you know what the root words are for 'woman' in Cree? [. . .] Well, it's 'heart' *[otêh]* and 'fire'—." That completely changed my conception of obligations to my community, understanding the sacredness of that. And it just got me thinking more and more about that worldview and the words *are* like medicine. They connect you *way* back (FGToronto: 1116–1121).

Learning Language, Not Just "Parroting"

Several of our participants spoke of the value of learning to speak a language more fully with an understanding of syntax, grammar and structure, rather than just "parroting" or mimicking by rote (Deneh'Cho Thompson FG2: 876–882). Julian Black Antelope commented that when you know the language that is the source for the accent, "there's no acting required. It just dictates what your body does [. . .] what your inflections . . . that's effortless. And, I think that's where the thing with accents lie for Indigenous languages—you have to look at the language itself first" (JBA FG1: 343–346). It was felt that having a deeper understanding of the language you are speaking is important to the delivery of the lines, and that can be further supported when the actor is aided by a coach whose process is rooted in historical context and cultural understanding.

Michael Greyeyes: I did a film this past Fall in which I spoke Lakota and I had a language coach and I also had an Elder that spoke to me *about* language so that—as I learned the language—you know the lines of it, you know, the phonetic lines of it, he also walked me through essential language *ideas* and philosophical *ideas* about things. And sometimes they had nothing to do with, like, the words. Sometimes it was something else. And that, like, larger framework of teaching filtered into language and then, ultimately, could the—the dialect—or the sound of it came later. (FG2: 566–572)

Decolonizing Performance and Performer Training for Indigenous Persons

We asked our participants to engage with the question of how best to "decolonize" current practices and standards that are found in performance and training. They clearly and repeatedly articulated that it begins by acknowledging and disrupting inaccurate, negative portrayals of Indigenous characters in film, television, and theatre. And maybe that means *not* adopting a generalized "Rez" accent: "those kinds of accents that, for me, diminish the image of who we are is hugely problematic. I mean, the colonial project has done a pretty good job on us. Like, we are deracinated. In many cases we do not grow up in communities [. . .] there's a whole lot of things going on. So, how you sound is how you sound" (Deneh'Cho Thompson FG2: 795–805).

There was a call to break down stigma and bias associated with being an "Indigenous performer," especially for students who are coming to terms with the fact they have rarely seen themselves represented in performance pieces."This was my third year of theatre school—I never realized that I hadn't seen myself represented on stage until that moment. And it was just—it was waterworks. It was a truly profound moment for myself as a performer; as an Indigenous performer" (Brefny Caribou FGToronto: 930–937). Ian Ross reminds us that representation serves to destigmatize, as well: "And so, when people are speaking Ojibwe, those Native people that were in that audience thought, 'That's me! There's value in me. Look! My story's on a stage'" (FGWinnipeg 1919–1921).

Several voices suggested the need to reconcile the stigma around Indigenous people who have a mainstream accent, who did not grow up with an Indigenous accent. Participant 5 shared how they had been told "Oh! You sound like a white lady!" (FG2: 106). Joshua Ranville's experience was not unique: "I wish that, too, that I could do the Sweetgrass English [another term that came up for a 'Rez accent'] … really well. […] I think that's so beautiful, uh what you said Ian, that *that* is our voice. That's how we sound. Uh well, you know, my people—I don't sound like that—but I wish that I did, sometimes, I wish that I could do that" (FGWinnipeg 939–953). Participant 2 shared that "I forever felt like Spock on *Star Trek*, where you're not Vulcan enough for the Vulcans and you're not human enough for the humans" (FGWinnipeg: 1315–1318).

In What Ways Does Post-Secondary Training Need to Change?

We asked our panels to discuss how actor training institutions need to change. They felt that the wealth of resources for non-Indigenous accents and the great lack of tools to aid in sourcing Indigenous accents are a direct reflection of colonization in theatre training.

It was felt that educators need to learn to appreciate cultural differences around body language and eye contact; Participant 2 shared "I wish there was more training by Native people up North 'cause that—that was the one thing I always hated was being trained by people, like, 'You don't know how anti-social I am! I'm trying!'" (FGWinnipeg: 610–612).

Most post-secondary training programs are Western and Eurocentric; our participants highlighted the need to offer both Indigenous language training and Indigenous performance history, and they expressed a desire for a more diversified curriculum and faculty in order to change representation. Indigenous students deserve a broad range of acting roles, not just roles written for settler/immigrant characters, nor just Indigenous characters exclusively. They need roles that offer a broad range of opportunities, in terms of accents, emotions, styles, personas.

> Participant 2: I became a writer just because I always hated the roles for Native people, so I wanted to make something bett- … I wanted to at least make a bit more … variety in terms of what roles there were for Native women especially. […] [When being given a scene in acting class, she thought to herself] "Please not a Native role, please not a Native role." I hated how people wrote Native people, and that *North of 60*[9] narrative where it's like everything is depressing, everything is sad. (FGWinnipeg: 546–549)

Indigenous performers need the full range of accent skills, from mainstream (General Canadian, American, European), to Indigenous accents, performed in a range of levels, from mild to strong. Flint Eagle felt strongly that Indigenous actors should also be

encouraged to play a range of non-Indigenous ethnicities, as transformation is at the heart of acting (FGToronto: 1279–1284).

Educators should understand that Indigenous students face significant challenges associated with dealing with the way in which Indigenous people and their speech are perceived and judged. Hunter Cardinal shared this story:

> So, there's that really interesting cognitive dissonance that I think a lot of youth are unpacking now, me being one of them. And I would almost describe it as a bit of internalized racism … I started panicking because my whole life I've been told—and I've seen—how us having an accent is a bad thing, plus being poor is a bad thing. So, it's a really tricky thing that gets really deep into a lot of psychological dissonance and pain, too. (FGToronto: 512–528)

Participant 8 felt that storytelling as a component of Indigenous performance needs greater support, as it served them well in learning their language. "The idea of mimicking people or the idea of learned storytelling—that's how I learned a lot of the language back home, was listening to the men talk, telling stories, right?" (FGToronto: 290–293).

How Do the Television, Film and Theatre Industries Need to Change?

In addressing their hopes for change in the industry, significant energy went to challenging assumptions of pan-indigeneity from non-Indigenous creative teams about what an Indigenous performer should be expected to be able to do. As Flint Eagle suggests, "they cast us with the expectation that we're all speaking the same language […] They're like, 'What? You can't say that?' And I'm like, 'It's not my language!'" (FGToronto: 314–326).

Participants in the Toronto focus group felt that a public forum regarding hiring practices in theatre and film would have an impact.

> Flint Eagle: The bottom line is the production. I think that … part of the focus should be that moral conscious[ness]. They are working with more integrity. That's why they're seeking language coaches […] that's why this forum [i.e. the focus group] is existing, correct? Because there is an integrity that exists and is growing. And that's what should be focused on is … that there is a forum available that will provide them with a greater … sense of integrity. (FGToronto: 1385–1390)

Suggestions on a Useful Resource for Indigenous Artists

In the final segment of our focus group, we turned our conversations to the kinds of resources they felt would be most useful to them as Indigenous artists. There was consensus that an easily accessible learning tool for Indigenous languages and/or accents would be an asset. (Samantha Brown FG1: 834–836). It was hoped by Participant 2, and others, that such a resource might level the playfield, even a little; "I think it would just be fairness for it to be there. 'Cause there's already toolkits for learning Elizabethan English, stuff like that." (FGWinnipeg: 1575–1578). There were suggestions that such a resource might have the potential to help Indigenous actors learn an accent in a responsible way, being mindful and having an understanding of the language and the roots of the accent. "So, there's that whole connectedness that I find is super important and that a set of protocols and processes to engage speakers would be a really interesting way forward that

could really add to that" (Hunter Cardinal FGToronto: 1126–1128). Several participants hoped the resource might forge a connection to the actual language, not just the accent on its own.

> With travelling the world and studying as many languages as I have, I have found the accent in the language. It's a parallel. In order for me to deliver a convincing accent with English . . . it came from knowing the language; speaking the language; learning the language. Same as with to get "reservation" accent, it comes with speaking the language. (Flint Eagle FGToronto: 992–996)

Our participants also imagined that readily available resources could educate not only actors but also producers, directors, and casting directors, to understand the complexity of Indigenous language (Julian Black Antelope FG1: 862–865).

What Would Be Most Helpful?

Many of the participants had in mind an online resource similar in nature to the *International Dialects of English Archive* (IDEA),[10] a tool that many were familiar with, but with a singular focus on Indigenous accents and language. We received a range of responses of what that resource might include, such as audio samples of people speaking with an accent and, where possible, in their traditional language. Their recommendations were based in large part on their experience with resources that they would have accessed as part of a production, or training program. For example, high-quality audio resources were clearly helpful to Michael Greyeyes's process. "The woman who coached me for *Woman Walks Ahead*[11] is a lovely white lady who went to extraordinary lengths to get me Native speakers from this specific community, and made recordings, and an incredible body of work" (FG2: 1304–1308). The value of audio as an accessible resource was underlined by Participant 8 who had to learn Mohawk in spite of their limited experience or training in accent, language or phonetics: "I can't look at it written out, 'cause the letters and the way it's all broken up in colons and parentheses, it's just confusing to me. I learned by talking . . . So, I have to get them to send me Voice Memos[12]" (FGToronto: 668–675).

Though an online resource was seen as being of value, real people with skills to coach were much more highly valued. "I have a coach that I call, who's actually in the U.S. and they're Assiniboine . . . But he works at a university and it's much easier for us to have a dialogue about and . . . he'll teach it to you, very slowly so that you can hear it clearly" (Sera-Lys McArthur FGWinnipeg: 1075–1081). In fact, we heard many respondents calling for a database of consultants that could be approached for one-on-one coaching, translation, or language and/or cultural knowledge. Several people insisted that knowledge keepers that serve as translators and consultants should be well paid for their time, effort, knowledge and experience. "I think if we had a database where somebody was responsible for collection of this data, there should be funds available [. . .] to give to these Elders to compensate them fairly" (Julian Black Antelope FG1: 924–927). School systems on reserves were a suggestion where one might find such contacts, as they have an existing faculty and language curriculum. "They *are* that resource. And it's an immediate resource *[snaps fingers]*" (Flint Eagle FGToronto: 881–886).

More often than not, Indigenous performers rely on their extended network to find contacts who will help out with the creation of bespoke resources for each project.

> I ask also a lot of my friends who are from that community to read my lines so that I can pick up the little slang words that they use, and they do, you know, have a specific way of speaking. So, that's been helpful, just asking the locals to help me with my lines. (Rachelle White Wind FG1: 370–373)

With that in mind, it was suggested that a social network-based resource could be invaluable. "So, networking is a key thing. Maybe starting up a Facebook group or something on social media. There's all these actor's groups but there's nothing for dialects and languages—Indigenous languages" (Julian Black Antelope FG1: 1323–1326).

Video resources were of particular interest for many of our participants. "If we were gonna have something that came out of this [. . .], [it] would be to have a video portion of that person speaking English from where they're from and with what their regular sound is" (Sera-Lys McArthur FGWinnipeg: 1305–1308). It was felt that visual resources would both help those who were not primarily auditory learners, but also to capture some of the physicality of the accent/language informant. "You get 'em to do a little piece where they speak it in their language and then they speak it in English and it's right at the camera so you can see—watch their pronunciation move and even their body language of what they're doing when they talk" (Julian Black Antelope FG1: 797–787).

We feel that, in response to the participants' description of how they learn accents and language, any resource would do well to ground its materials in those methodologies with a focus on the physical action of the articulators, placement, articulatory settings, and oral posture. Also, of importance would be elements of prosody, including intonation, rate, and rhythm particular to the accent/language being studied. We also reiterate their interest in accent materials being built upon the firm foundation of sound linguistic research into the source traditional language(s) from which the accent sprang. Sera-Lys McArthur, who had significant prior training in accents and phonetics, felt that materials written using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) would be most beneficial: "I just think once you're given that tool [i.e. phonetics], it unlocks so much" (FGWinnipeg: 1309–1310).

Deneh'Cho Thompson felt that the biographical data about informants are especially important in terms of placing the materials in context. "So, beyond the recording; *where* it's from, *when* it's from, the *history* of that voice, but also, tools for the interpretation of that that include cultural context to the language or inflection context" (FG2: 1351–1356).

Challenges and Concerns

Our participants also shared their concerns about what challenges might arise if an accent/language resource was created. There was a worry about appropriate use if such a resource was made available using the internet that might further the colonial experience by "taking" cultural material inappropriately (Michael Greyeyes FG2: 1247–1251).

We also heard that there might be push back from the community around the appropriation of cultural voice, and "pan-Indigenous" performance, where an Indigenous actor of any background might play any other Indigenous person regardless of their nation or cultural identity. As Deneh'Cho Thompson explained, "I find pan-Indigeneity to be a very problematic idea. It groups Indigenous people as one and, in that, it makes it easier to be another one thing that can be othered" (FG2: 1008–1010).

Participant 8, who is Mohawk, shared how he had played his own culture for the first time two weeks prior to our focus group, 18 years into his career.

> I cut my hair when I was in Los Angeles, I shaved my head. And literally, like, everything that came at me was Mexican [. . .] Back to my point: it's that fine line of me playing someone —another nation [. . .] and all the definitions of appropriation that I've read [. . .] it's pretty tricky, even within ourselves. (FGToronto: 1227–1259)

Our participants predicted that we would have a hard time gathering samples for an Indigenous accent resource (Deneh'Cho Thompson FG2: 1350–1351). Sera-Lys McArthur had a challenge when working with an informant, a Nakota speaker, for *The Englishman's Boy* for CBC: "she was fine doing one-on-one coaching with me. But then when I called her a few years later to ask her for coaching she said she would coach me over the phone, but she didn't want me to record her" (FGWinnipeg: 1026–1029). Though she was able to get some money from production to pay her informant, in the end, "I don't think it was an issue of payment. I just think she didn't want her likeness or herself to belong to somebody else out of her control. Like, she would—talk to me on the phone but she didn't want to be recorded" (FGWinnipeg: 1070–1073). Overall, there was concern over who would gather and protect any source material generated for such a resource.

Where to Start?

When we asked our participants which language group or accent such an accent resource should begin with, there was, unfortunately, no consensus. Understandably, a number suggested that such a project should start with their own language group! Some argued that one should start with one of the languages with the highest population, such as Cree, Ojibwe, or Inuktitut, as they're more likely to be needed by actors for projects with the broadest appeal. A few, such as Julian Black Antelope, advocated for beginning with languages that are critically endangered[13]: "I would pick a language that is in risk of dying and is not represented [. . .] just out of preservation" (FG1: 1134–1135).

Nyla Carpentier: In the States it seems like the only tribe they always focus on is Apache or Lakota. For Canada, I'd probably—right now what I've noticed, the higher request seems to be Cree, but also maybe Coast Salish, trying to find the Halkomelem,[14] [or] Haida. (FG1: 1162–1169)

Samantha Brown's recommendation was that researchers should be "using a language that is on the risk of dying, you can use it as a template for the other languages that are more—are still established and that are being utilized more" (FG1: 1238–1253).

Conclusion and Implications

In devising this project, we hoped to identify the state of Indigenous accent and language training, and its utility for Indigenous performers working in the Canadian context. We are greatly indebted to our focus group participants for their insightful commentary.

To summarize our results, it is helpful to begin with a review of our findings derived from our four research questions.

(1) *How are people trained?* We found that, overall, there is a very broad landscape for Indigenous performer training. Many of our participants created personal training regimes with a mix of traditional European training modalities and Indigenous performance training programs. Though some had educational opportunities that went all the way to a terminal degree (MFA), the other end of the spectrum featured individuals who only had the training they had assembled from a range of short-term professional workshops targeting specific skills, or on-the-job training.
(2) *What is important to you, with regard to accent/dialect/language?* While a few of our participants were fluent speakers of their traditional language(s), many were not, and some even expressed feelings of shame or frustration about their language skills. Here we directly felt the impact of the residential school system, which worked to eradicate traditional language over multiple generations. Many reported on how they felt a pressure from family or educators to change their speech to conform to mainstream norms. Others shared frustration in their inability to adopt an Indigenous accent, due to their limited exposure while growing up as they were integrated into mainstream suburban communities. While many had voice training, few reported having any accent training at all, and none had any training in accents specific to an Indigenous language. Frequently they were required to be self-sufficient in developing an accent for a role, and many relied on online resources such as videos from YouTube to find appropriate primary sources.

In discussing their professional experience, almost all had been required to work in a traditional language other than their own, and almost all reported that having any kind of support for learning that language was rare. The vast majority of our participants felt that the tendency within the Indigenous performance community to rely on the so-called "Rez" accent, though expedient, was inappropriate, and that a more specific accent, based on the context of the character's cultural and linguistic background, would be preferred. Those more senior actors with significant film and theatre careers did get some coaching from accent/language experts and/or elders to develop such a specific accent/language performance; however, this seems to have been the exception to the rule. The participants reported that they were frequently dealing with racism, ignorance and insensitivity from engagers and from those in positions of artistic leadership such as producers, directors, and casting directors.

Our participants also shared how they felt that they had a responsibility to honor language and accent and that proper preparation was at the heart of that. In part, that would come from a deeper understanding of how the language/dialect/accent works, rather than just mimicking by rote. Coaching that is supported by an elder who speaks the language fluently would allow the actor greater specificity and empathy than when a coach is there merely to make sure that the performer succeeds in matching the sounds of a recording of a first language speaker.

(3) *How can we decolonize Indigenous performance training?* Greater opportunities for Indigenous students to play Indigenous characters, and to see themselves in a range of roles, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, were stressed. Access to

accent and/or language training resources, specifically targeting Indigenous communities, was underlined. It was felt that educators need to be better prepared to appreciate cultural differences, such as body language or eye contact, on top of the pressing need for more Indigenous educators, who continue to be dramatically under-represented on conservatory, college, and university faculties.

With regard to changes needed in the film/tv/theatre industry, participants felt that a public forum regarding hiring practices in the industry would be beneficial, as a way to address the stereotypical assumptions that Indigenous performers confront in their work. In order to prevent the continued marginalization of Indigenous artists in mainstream contexts, we need to train the leaders of tomorrow by teaching students about ways of interacting with communities outside the mainstream so that those who go on to become directors, producers, and casting directors are properly equipped to support Indigenous performers appropriately.

(4) *What kind of resources do you want, and how should we source them?* There was a real divergence in the participants around whether resource gathering should focus on groups with large populations or groups whose language is endangered. It was hoped that accent resources would include more information about the language associated with it, rather than merely focusing on the sound changes affecting the vowels and consonants, so that an actor might have a better appreciation of how the language impacts their accent. It was felt that video would be most valuable, as it would allow the accent/language informant to share more than just the sound of their speech/language, but also external oral posture, facial expression, body language and gesture.

There was also a call for a resource of Indigenous accent or language elder/consultants, rather than merely a database of recordings and analyses, who could be contacted by a performer should they need support. The importance of clarity around appropriate protocols for working with, hiring, and acknowledging these consultants was emphasized.

Up to this point, there has been no theoretical knowledge about accent training for Indigenous performers in Canada; our findings set the stage for further research and development of greater resources for use by the Indigenous community. It is hoped that this article clarifies the artists' point of view on the current state of Indigenous accent training and performance, in order to support further research and resource creation.

The results of this project could affect at least four groups, namely Indigenous performers, educators, Indigenous producers/creators in theatre and tv/film, as well as non-Indigenous persons working in mainstream theatre and film. Firstly, Indigenous performers and storytellers could benefit from a better understanding of the breadth of experiences outlined by our research informants through the focus groups and the strategies that they have employed to counter colonialized structures within the theatre, film, and other performance industries. Educators seeking to make a welcoming learning environment for Indigenous actors in training need to supplement their training with better information about the nature of the demands placed upon professionals. Supplementing their resources and knowledge of Indigenous language, accent, and culture would go a long way to fostering such a climate, on top of their need to support

Indigenous students in developing the skills necessary for the industry and their place in it. While Indigenous producers and directors have a great deal of experience creating work that fulfills their chosen mandate, the artist-respondents in our project shared invaluable information that would make for a better working environment and richer, more culturally sensitive performances. Non-Indigenous producers, directors, and casting directors working in mainstream theatre, film or television, that create work that includes Indigenous characters need to better understand the demands on Indigenous performers, and better support those performers with appropriate resources and access to culturally appropriate human resources including elders, accent/language informants, as well as properly prepared and trained accent/language coaches.

As educators in higher education, there is a drive now to "decolonize" the institution; our participants warned against strategies that are not centered in the needs and the desires of the community, but merely co-opting or appropriating Indigenous ways of learning to further the paternalistic, colonial experience. By educating ourselves, by reading broadly on decolonization, Indigenization, as well as equity, diversity and inclusion topics *prior* to consulting with Elders and traditional knowledge keepers, we show respect in coming to the conversation as informed collaborators.

As we reflect on our data-gathering and analysis procedures, we offer the following suggestions in the hope of aiding future researchers. Expect to take a long time developing relationships prior to starting your research. Do a great deal of reading and preparation prior to the grant application process and spend this time networking within the Indigenous performance community. In order for research to be legitimate, you must find collaborators early, and be prepared to be rejected by many potential candidates, as the demands on their time are significant, and they are constantly bombarded with requests to participate in research projects. Ask for help in finding collaborators, and when you find them, expect the timing of the process to be slow, thoughtful and methodical. Plan for honoraria that are higher than usual; participants expect to be paid well for their time and expertise. It takes a long time to build relationships and develop trust, and to identify what protocols are appropriate. Sharing tea and bannock, offerings of tobacco and other gifts: these may be appropriate in some context, but not all. What is the expectation in this community?

Practically, the informants' recommendations for resource creation were spread across a broad range of possibilities. These included the creation of a significant Indigenous accent database of materials in audio and video formats, plus the recommended database of accent/language expert contacts, as well as recommendations to focus on the two ends of the language spectrum (from most viable to most at risk). We originally conceived of this project as having three components, with the process in this paper merely serving as the first phase. Phase two of the project, the gathering of samples of an Indigenous accent is complete, and we hope to publish our findings of that process soon. Phase three was to be the dissemination of those materials, via workshops in both face-to-face and online iterations, to the community. That phase is still to be completed.

This project is the first of its kind, to our knowledge, worldwide. It marks the beginning of what we hope will be a proliferation of accent, dialect and language acquisition strategies for Indigenous performing artists in not only Canada but in other regions around the world. Building upon this humble start, we hope others will consider developing a language "toolkit" or training program to help actors gain multiple strategies in learning Indigenous languages,

in order to fulfill the recommendation made by actors in our forums about the importance of cultural context and knowledge as integral to the employment of accents and dialects. Collaborations led by Indigenous artists and cultural leaders should precede and inform parallel collaborations with those developed with linguists, language educators, and dialectologists. In creating resources for Indigenous artists (and indeed all artists from pluralistic backgrounds), we need to recognize a history of systemic racism and colonial practices that have led to a lack of trust with institutions and euro-centric researchers. Researchers and coaches must develop relationships with Indigenous artists, educators, and researchers to ensure the stewardship of resource creation is led by Indigenous artists and that subsequent resources are safeguarded and returned to the communities they intend to serve. To add to this, investing in mentorship with younger Indigenous artists and researchers and building capacity as an integrated aspect of similar projects will encourage a new generation of Indigenous artists to not only perform and share stories on stage and screen but to also support artistry through voice, text, and accent coaching, rooted in Indigenous culture and knowledge. It is our hope that this work will support more Indigenous storytelling, which will undoubtedly impact global discourse around decolonization in arts and education.

Notes

1. AMDA is the American Musical and Dramatic Academy.
2. Our focus group transcripts are available from the website our partner, Native Earth Performing Arts, https://www.nativeearth.ca/artists/resources/indigenous-accent/research/. Within this citation system, the name is included if applicable. FG represents the focus group, which is followed by the city or number of the focus group and then the page numbers.
3. The Centre for Indigenous Theatre was formerly known as The Native Theatre School, which ran under that name from 1979–1999.
4. Martha Burns is one of Canada's foremost stage actors, having worked with The Stratford Festival and The Shaw Festival; she was a founding member of SoulPepper Theatre Company. She is well known for her performance of Ellen Fanshaw in the TV series *Slings and Arrows*.
5. *Onkwehonwe* is the traditional name for the Mohawk people. The traditional name for Mohawk language is *Kanien'kéha*, which literally means "language of the Flint People."
6. In Canada, the term "reserve" is defined in the Indian Act as a "tract of land, the legal title to which is vested in Her Majesty, that has been set apart by Her Majesty for the use and benefit of a band." The term "reservation," is the term preferred in the United States (Joseph 2016, 27). The term "Rez" could also refer to a form of English that evolved in Residential schools, where Indigenous children were taken from their families by the Canadian government, forbidden from speaking their traditional languages, and required to speak only English (or French).
7. *Joe from Winnipeg* is a character Ian Ross created for the radio; he resurrected the character back briefly on the RiffRaff Youtube channel in 2016. https://youtu.be/6_Cc0g9D10U.
8. Graham Greene, known for his supporting roles in *The Green* Mile and *Dances with Wolves*, is perhaps one of Canada's most respected Indigenous actors.
9. *North of 60* was a 1990s tv show set in the Dehco region of the Northwest Territories. As stated in the Wikipedia article, "The show explored themes of Native poverty, alcoholism, cultural preservation, conflict over land settlements, and natural resource exploitation."
10. *The International Dialects of English Archive*, https://www.dialectsarchive.com.
11. Jessica Drake was Michael Greyeyes' coach.
12. *Voice Memos* is the default audio recording app on iOS devices like the iPhone.
13. Of the more than 70 Indigenous languages in Canada, UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php) identifies the

following languages as being critically endangered: Assiniboine, Bella Coola, Cayuga, Coast Tsimshian, Comox/Sliammon, Ditidaht, Eastern Ojibwe, Haisla, Han, Heiltsuk, Huron-Wyandot, Kwak'wala, Lakota, Michif, Munsee, Nisga'a, Nootka, Okanagan, Oneida, Onondaga, Oowekyala, Potawatomi, Rigolet Inuktitut, Sekani, Seneca, Siglitun, Southern Haida, Southern Tutchone, Tahltan, Tlingit, Tuscarora, Upper Tanana, and Western Abenaki. There are 24 "Severely endangered," 6 "Definitely endangered," and 22 "Vulnerable" languages on the UNESCO listings for Canadian Indigenous languages.

14. Halkomelem is a Central Salish language, located on lands on southeastern Vancouver Island, and parts of the lower Mainland near Vancouver. Haida is a language isolate, located on the Haida Gwaii archipelago off the west coast of British Columbia, and on Prince of Wales Island in Alaska. Both languages feature fairly rare pharyngeal consonants.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Insight Development Grant.

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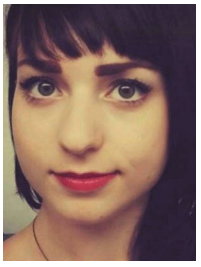

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