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Post-1800 Catawba Language Revitalization:

Language as Agency

The United States' historical effort to efface Indigenous culture—an effort that some scholars term “linguistic genocide”—has resulted in widespread Indigenous language endangerment and dormancy: many Indigenous languages have small, declining speaker populations or no speakers at all. In response, language revitalization efforts have become critical for many Indigenous communities (Dorzheeva 252; Montero, Dénoimé-Welch, and Henry 199; Hinton 4-5). Scholars and language communities engage in these efforts in order to document, teach and ultimately restore endangered and dormant languages to daily use (Hinton 5). Their work stems from varied rationales: some scholars promote language revitalization because of endangered languages' value to global society, while others highlight language attrition's impact on culture (Fishman; Hinton; Montero, Dénoimé-Welch, and Henry; Ting). Still other scholars explain language revitalization as a “human rights issue” because language loss erodes endangered language speakers' access to their culture and, through culture, identities (Hinton 5; Ting 4).

In contrast, language communities often emphasize their languages' inherent “sanctity” as justification for revitalization (Fishman 73).¹ They also highlight language's role in

¹ I do not intend to suggest that language communities cannot produce scholarship about their languages themselves, nor do I wish to imply an inherent distinction between endangered language users and scholars. In contrast, endangered language learner scholars and Indigenous scholars offer valuable contributions to both their

community-building and fostering “kinship” between language users (Fishman 73). These distinct approaches reflect a divide between scholarly and community-based approaches to language revitalization. Scholars focus on the value of endangered languages in global knowledge systems and express outsider concerns about cultural vitality; language users center the value of those languages *within* their cultures. However, their efforts share a core belief in Indigenous languages’ importance.

Yet despite widespread agreement about language revitalization’s importance, some individual initiatives, like those related to the Catawba language, remain largely undiscussed—even though both scholars and Catawba individuals have endeavored to revitalize Catawba since the 1800s (Dutta and Kaufman 1; Merrell 248). The Catawba Nation’s own revitalization work is particularly understudied in contrast to outside scholars’ work.² To counteract this literature gap, I propose the research question, “What is the Catawba language revitalization movement’s post-1800 history, and what factors and contexts motivate revitalization?” I am neither a linguist nor a Catawba speaker, but by examining Catawba history, lexicons, and language-learning resources, I have gained a history- and rhetoric-grounded understanding of Catawba’s value to its speakers and scholars. In the pages that follow, I aim to highlight the Catawba Nation’s own revitalization work alongside outside scholarship, centering the Nation’s praxis as different from but equally important as scholarly studies.

communities and to academia at large, as demonstrated by Indigenous authors Spy Dénommé-Welch and Stanley R. Henry (Montero, Dénommé-Welch and Henry). The language loss literature that I have encountered, however, generally reflects a distinction between endangered language users’ viewpoints and outside scholars’ viewpoints. By juxtaposing academic and language-user communities, I hope to demonstrate the overarching differences I have noted between these generalized categories, not to discount individuals who fit within both groups.

² Again, I do not intend to suggest that Catawba people cannot produce scholarly literature of their own. I do, however, wish to point out that very few of the academic papers and books I have encountered in my research reflect Catawba voices—a division that may reflect continued barriers to entry for Catawba people in academic fields. In the absence of much accessible Catawba scholarship, my paper examines the broader Catawba community’s revitalization work in contrast with outside scholars’ publications.

Catawba History

Language scholar Chien Ting explains that revitalization must respond to a language's "history of attrition," which contextualizes the language's dormant or endangered status (Ting 6). Understanding Catawba language revitalization, then, begins with understanding Catawba history. Many scholarly accounts of the early Catawba Nation reflect colonizer and settler rather than Catawba viewpoints and therefore may not offer a holistic view of the nation's past. Nevertheless, they offer valuable background on Catawba language attrition, especially when considered in conjunction with Catawba scholar Brooke Bauer's publication on Catawba history (Bauer; Heinemann-Priest 50).

The first written account of the Catawba comes from Spanish explorers in the 1500s, who encountered a "loosely associated confederation" of Catawba villages in what is now the Carolinas and Virginia (Bauer; Heinemann-Priest 50). As European violence and diseases—especially smallpox and influenza—impacted the Catawba throughout and beyond the sixteenth century, those villages began to rely on each other for protection (Goddard, "The Indigenous Languages of the Southeast," 19; Bauer).^{3 4} Colonizers understood the villages' cooperation as a single identity, the Catawba nation, but the villages retained relative autonomy from each other and only gradually came to consider themselves as a single community. The first record of unified action by the whole Catawba nation comes from 1763, when Catawba leaders sought legal land protection against encroaching settlers (Bauer). Despite their efforts, the Treaty of Ford Nation forced Catawbas to sell all their land and scatter across the Southeast in 1840

³ Catawba populations declined drastically following contact with Europeans, dropping from an estimated 1,500-6,000 "Catawba-speaking people" before Spanish explorers' arrival to less than one hundred people in the 1930s (Bauer; "Tales of Catawbas Told"). Their population has since resurged, reaching 379 Catawbas by 1990 and over 3,000 enrolled members today ("About the Nation;" Gefert).

⁴ James H. Merrell characterizes this unification as "reduc[tion] after 1760 to a single Catawba town" (qtd. in Goddard, "The Indigenous Languages of the Southeast," 19). However, since Bauer's scholarship is more recent, I adopt her description of intentional, gradual unification instead of Merrell's explanation of a reduced population.

(Bauer; “Catawbas Merge into Modern Era;” Heinmann-Prest 51). In 1960, Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs terminated the Nation’s federal recognition, prompting a substantive campaign for re-recognition (Bauer; Moore). The tribe succeeded in restoring its sovereignty in 1993 and continues to uphold its cultural identity through pottery-making, “cultural classes,” public-facing programming, and archival documentation (Bauer; *Catawba Nation Archives*).

Even when filtered through settler-colonial viewpoints, the Catawba Nation’s history demonstrates survival and survivance in the face of oppression. However, settler efforts at cultural genocide and forced assimilation have also enacted a toll on the Catawbas, which becomes especially clear through the Catawba language’s decline and dormancy (Dutta and Kaufman; Hicks).⁵ Some scholars identify that decline as beginning in the early 1800s, when Catawba began to adopt English patterns and characteristics (Dutta and Kaufman 9; Lieber 4; Goddard, “The Indigenous Languages of the Southeast,” 20). Most language revitalization scholars, however, determine a language’s endangerment status based on the number of speakers it has and its role in their daily lives (Montero, Dénomme-Welch, Henry 208; Ting 8). These shifts in Catawba did not become apparent until the late 1800s. Linguist Oscar Liber reports fifty or fewer Catawba speakers in 1856, and by the end of the 1800s, Catawba was no longer spoken widely by members of the Nation (Heinemann-Priest 51; Liber 3). By the 1930s, the Catawba nation’s “language of daily use” was English (Hicks 349), and by 1935, Catawba had only three

⁵ Most language scholars consider a language to be “dead” or “extinct” when it no longer has any living speakers (Montero, Dénomme-Welch, Henry 199; Hinton 4-5). However, the Catawba Nation refers to its language as “alive” throughout its history, even when the language had no living speakers, because Catawba individuals documented and thus preserved their language (“Catawba Language”). For the sake of clarity, I refer to the Catawba language as “dormant” during the years when it has no speakers. This word choice echoes contemporary scholarship, particularly Indigenous scholarship, that recognizes a language’s lack of speakers as a non-permanent state (Montero, Dénomme-Welch, Henry 199; Hinton 4).

living speakers (“Tales of Catawbas Told”). The last native speaker, Chief Samuel Blue, died in 1959 (“Catawba Language”).⁶

This language loss had no single, clearly defined cause. Many Indigenous nations experienced language loss when the federal government forced their children to attend boarding schools designed to destroy their culture, including their language (“Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative”). Although scholarly literature offers a minimal record of boarding schools’ impact on the Catawba, at least one Catawba child attended the Carlisle Indian School in 1912, suggesting that boarding schools may have impacted Catawba language attrition (“Carlisle Indian School”). English-language day schools on Catawba land also contributed to language shift.⁷ These schools, established by Mormon missionaries during the 1880s, offered instruction to Catawba children in English. While the Nation apparently welcomed Mormon missionaries, offering them homes and encouraging their mission work, their presence meant that Catawba children practiced English instead of Catawba (Bauer; Speck XIV; Stout).

Anthropologist George L. Hicks suggests that Catawba language loss also occurred partially as the result of the Nation’s strategic, intentional adoption of colonizer culture, which protected them from conflict with Anglo-Americans (Hicks). Ting, however, contends that—in general—this kind of language shift reflects the influence of oppressive forces rather than a language community’s autonomous choice (Ting 2). Ting’s generalized assertion seems applicable to the Catawba context: for example, by 1996, the *New York Times* notes several Catawba individuals who did not want to learn or practice Catawba, fearing that they would be “ridiculed” and treated poorly (Stout). Ultimately, however, this fear of retribution did not

⁶ The precise date of Blue’s death remains in considerable dispute. Heinemann-Priest, for example, reports that he died in 1952, whereas Hicks reports his death as occurring in 1957 (Heinemann-Priest 51; Hicks 394). I provide 1959 as his date of death because it receives consensus from Merrell and the Catawba Nation (“About the Nation,” Merrell 248).

⁷ “Language shift” refers to a language community’s abandonment of their native language for a dominant tongue in response to social or economic pressure (Ting 2).

prevent the Catawba from protecting their language. As I explore in the following sections, both the Catawba Nation and non-Catawba scholars engaged in language preservation and reclamation efforts throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, laying the groundwork for the language's modern revitalization.

Revitalization: Scholars of the Catawba Language

Pre-1900s Scholarship: Comparison and Classification

Naturalist B.S. Barton published the first written Catawba vocabulary in 1798, and throughout the 1800s, other scholars expanded on his work by classifying and comparing Catawba with other Indigenous languages (Goddard, "The Indigenous Languages of the Southeast," 7; Ko; Siebert 100). Generally speaking, linguists compare and classify languages to study their change over time (Ko). Early Catawba scholars' focus on these methods may therefore indicate their academic interest in charting Catawba's evolution. More broadly, their emphasis on comparative studies demonstrates their intention to generate knowledge about the Catawba language for other scholars, not for the Catawba community. This intention parallels modern language preservation scholars' focus on endangered languages' value to scholarly and global communities rather than language users themselves (Hinton 4-5). Thus, during the beginnings of Catawba language preservation and in modern day, scholarly preservation efforts center the academic community rather than Catawba language users (Lieber 3).

Early Twentieth Century Scholarship

During the 1890s and early 1900s, scholarly attention to Indigenous languages increased as anthropologists and linguists began to fear that Indigenous cultures would vanish under federal assault (Bauer). Catawba scholarship in particular accelerated during the 1930s and 1940s as the language's attrition increased (Heinemann-Priest).⁸ However, early 1900s scholars still understood their preservation efforts as a "scholarly duty" rather than a stance of solidarity with the Catawba Nation (Bauer). Anthropologist Frank G. Speck offers a clear example of this academic focus. Speck interviewed Catawba-speaking individuals during 1913 and 1914, then published his findings in his 1934 book *Catawba Texts* in order to record "a last feeble voice from the grave of a defunct native culture" for "future students of human achievement in its simpler phases" (Speck XIV; Merrell 248). Speck's statement reveals the racism inherent in his studies and also demonstrates his interest in preserving Catawba culture to further the studies of other scholars like himself rather than to support the Catawba nation.⁹

Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Century Scholarship

Since Catawba Chief Samuel Blue's death in 1959—which marked the beginning of Catawba dormancy—most Catawba scholars have focused on analyzing their predecessors' work, particularly Speck's. For example, George Hicks critiques Speck's search for "continuity" between contemporary and historic Catawba culture and instead reframes the Catawba language's development within the Nation's "contemporary circumstances" (Hicks 33-4). Ives Goddard challenges the validity of Speck's work by explaining that Speck's Catawba-speaking collaborator, Red Thunder Cloud, was not a member of the Catawba nation at all (Goddard 8-9;

⁸ In addition to anthropologic and linguistic research on the Catawba, public awareness of their language also increased, as demonstrated through a public lecture on the "dead" Catawba language at the University of South Carolina in 1936 ("Science Group Hears Lecture").

⁹ Speck's characterization of the Catawba Nation as a "defunct native culture" is as factually flawed as it is racist: the Catawba nation has continued its cultural practices, preserves its language, and maintains its identity today, thriving despite ongoing challenges to its sovereignty ("About the Nation," Bauer).

Taukchiray). James H. Merrell sidesteps Speck's ethnographic conclusions to engage Speck's vocabulary lists as a primary source (Merrell 258). These scholars do not engage with Speck's work as he originally expected, but they share his goal to further academic rather than Catawba community understanding of the Catawba language.

Other recent Catawba linguists continue to compile Catawba lexicons, like Kasak, Dutt and McBride's 2019 contribution. These modern scholars recognize Catawbas' sovereignty and survivance strategies far more than Speck and his contemporaries. However, they remain focused within the academic sphere rather than offering their findings as a resource to the Catawba Nation (Dutta and Kaufman). As I explore in the following section, the Nation has and continues to engage in language reclamation efforts largely outside of scholarly support.

The Catawba Nation's Language Reclamation

The Catawba Nation's own language reclamation efforts are poorly documented within scholarly literature. However, my examination of the Nation's digital resources, in conjunction with scholarship on Catawba history, affords an overview of Catawbas' efforts to reclaim their sovereignty and share their culture via language reclamation. This history, I propose, demonstrates language documentation and revitalization as expressions of agency and autonomy for the Catawba community.

Pre-1959 Documentation

As Catawba language attrition accelerated throughout the early twentieth century, Catawba individuals recognized and counteracted the language's endangerment. Catawba efforts

to document their language included recording interviews with Catawba speakers and writing down Catawba dictionaries and pronunciation guides (“Catawba Language”). These preservation initiatives parallel the methods of non-Catawba anthropologists and linguists throughout the twentieth century, but their approaches remain distinct. Linguists often minimized Catawba contributions to their work: Speck, for example, characterized the Catawbas with whom he worked as “of unusually low intelligence” and disinterested in their “literary heritage” (Speck XII, XIV). In contrast, the current Catawba Nation emphasizes Catawba-speaking individuals’ contributions to pre-dormancy preservation efforts. The Nation explains that “those who knew how to speak even a little Catawba worked to pass their knowledge on,” assuming an active role in documentation (“Catawba Language”). I read these community-sourced efforts as an assertion of Catawba agency during the early 1900s. Catawbas who helped preserve their language did so through their own intentional choices and efforts, not—as Speck suggests—as passive participants in non-Catawba research. Based on this reading of Catawba language history, Catawbas’ pre-dormancy language preservation demonstrates more than a straightforward desire to protect their culture. Instead, language documentation was a means for Catawbas to direct their own futures rather than allowing oppressive forces to dictate their circumstances.

Late 1900s: The Catawba Cultural Project

The Catawba Cultural Project, founded in 1989, houses the Nation’s contemporary language resources and is “tasked with protecting, preserving, promoting, and maintaining the rich cultural heritage of the Catawba Nation” (*Catawba Cultural Center*). The organization draws a clear connection between Catawba national sovereignty and Catawba language preservation during the late 1900s, demonstrating that Catawbas’ expression of agency through

language continued even after their language went dormant (*Catawba Cultural Center*). As I discuss in the section “Catawba History,” the last native Catawba speaker, Chief Samuel Blue, died right before the federal government revoked Catawba sovereignty (Bauer; “Catawba Language”). The Catawba Cultural Project highlights this connection as central to its mission: it explains that, throughout the years after Blue’s death, “as the Catawba Nation fought to restore their federal status, it seem[ed] that the Catawba language might be lost” (“Catawba Language”). During this period, the Nation viewed language loss as linked to loss of national sovereignty—or rather, of the Nation’s agency over its own affairs. Before Blue’s death, language preservation had represented an assertion of agency for individual Catawbas who shared their knowledge. Following the language’s dormancy, preserving language became a community-wide expression of agency through the creation of the Cultural Project and its widespread revitalization efforts. Language revitalization thus became a means for the Nation to define the world in its own terms when its legal capacity to define itself was stripped from it.

My reading of language revitalization as cultural agency lacks direct input from the Catawba Nation itself. Furthermore, language preservation literature does not extensively discuss the connection between language loss and national sovereignty. My proposal therefore remains tenuous. However, it gains strength based on consideration of Catawba history: Catawbas succeeded in attaining federal re-recognition in 1993, just four years after founding the Cultural Project (Bauer; “Catawba Language”). To me, this connection suggests that Catawbas’ language preservation work has resonance beyond its cultural significance, influencing the Nation’s legal autonomy and agency on a federal scale.

Current Catawba Reclamation

Current Catawba language reclamation centers language learning as a means to ensure that Catawba culture continues to thrive, expanding upon historical resonances between Catawba language and agency. The Catawba Cultural Center offers four ways to engage with the Catawba language. Most accessible to non-members of the Catawba community is the Catawba Language Learning App, where users can learn and practice fundamental vocabulary. The Cultural Center also offers public-facing cultural education programs, through which non-community members can join an hour-long course on various Catawba topics, including language (*Catawba Cultural Center*). Catawba archives—which include extensive language resources—are generally but not entirely accessible to non-Catawba researchers, and members of the Nation have full access to archival language resources (*Catawba Nation Archives*). Finally, Catawba community members can sign up for courses explicitly focused on Catawba language learning (*Catawba Cultural Center*).

Catawba language educational efforts currently reflect elementary-level curriculum, and the Cultural Project is developing middle- and high school-levels to “ensure that future generations of Catawba will be able to read, write, and speak their own language again” (“Catawba Language”). The Project’s efforts thus reflect the Nation’s intention to share Catawba culture with the non-Catawba public, demonstrating that the language constitutes an important part of Catawba cultural identity as presented to the outside world (*Catawba Cultural Center*). I also read the Nation’s control over access to its language as a continued expression of cultural agency. Through the Catawba language learning app, cultural classes, and most archives, access to the language is open to the public. As noted above, however, only Catawba Nation members

and employees can take language classes and access the full language resources of their archives. By controlling access to its language, the Catawba Nation continues to exercise its language-based agency. Language preservation thus remains important not only for Catawba culture but also as an assertion of Catawba agency.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

My investigation of Catawba language attrition and reclamation demonstrates a distinction between scholarly and Catawba Nation rationale for preserving the Catawba language. For most non-Catawba scholars, preserving the language represents a means to document the past or provide resources for future scholars. In contrast, the Catawba Nation engages their language as an expression of agency in their current moment, whether their goal is national sovereignty or public education about their culture. These separate reclamation efforts, however, may not be as distinct as they originally appear: current Catawba language learning programs rely on scholarly anthropological resources as well as Catawba archives, and Catawba agency may also appear in the language and stories Catawbas have historically chosen to share with non-Catawba researchers like Speck (Heinmann-Priest; Speck). These intersections warrant further investigation. Future research must also address intersections between the Catawba Nation and scholarly communities: research and publications by Catawba individuals within the academic sphere remain largely untapped. I hope that my work offers a foundation for this future scholarly work as well as an insightful resource for Catawba language users.

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