

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Opinions

They ripped out our tongues: Language loss, historic trauma and HB 216

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I recently saw an article in the Anchorage Daily News, "Bill making Alaska Native languages 'official' gets pushback," about the apparent "push back" House Bill 216, the bill to make the 20 Alaska Native languages official languages of Alaska, is getting.

The article itself was infuriating enough, but after I read it, I scrolled down to the commentary section. The very first comment I saw (now pushed further down the thread) almost set my hair on fire it made me so angry. I normally try to keep away from these sorts of public discussion boards -- more than once I've called them "a cesspool of humanity" because for whatever reason (the armor of anonymity, etc.) people seem to be especially hurtful and inflammatory on these sorts of threads. But I couldn't let it stand. I tell myself sometimes that I really shouldn't bother getting involved with comment threads like this because I rarely think I'll change the commenters' minds, but I just can't help it. I can't help but care. And sometimes I think I can change the minds of people who read an inflammatory comment and don't know the truth, the counter argument, the real history. I don't want them to take away from this article the misinformation. The very first comment that I saw below this article read:

No one is telling anyone they can't speak their language and no one ever did tell them that. Kids were just expected to speak English in school so they would learn English, which seems pretty sensible to me. You can speak your language all you want to and teach it to your youth all you want to. The hard, cold fact is that most Native youth don't want to learn their language. It's just not a top priority. At all. So that's why languages die out. Don't blame someone else because your own people don't know their language. Blame yourselves. I don't like the direction this bill is pointing. I'd nip it in the bud before it evolves into a real problem on own the road.

I couldn't leave what they said alone, unchallenged, so I posted the following reply, slightly edited and expanded here.

I don't know how to respond politely, but your comment can only be described as woefully misinformed.

Was I beaten as a child if I spoke my Native language (Tlingit)? No. As a child, did I personally have to beat other children who dared to speak their Native language, beat them until they were bloody? Beat them as hard as I could because if I did not hit them harder, harder, then I would be the one that got the beating. No. Was my mouth washed out with lye soap if I spoke Tlingit, soap that burns your tongue and lips? No. Was I put in a small metal box baking in the

hot Oregon sun for hours on end, with no room to stand, my skin burning, blistering, peeling when it came into contact with the hot metal? No. I did not directly suffer any of those things. But my grandparents did. And many of our parents and grandparents did, in the boarding schools. We did not lose our language, it was beaten out of us. There are stories of young boys showing up to these boarding schools, 5 year old boys in some cases, who spoke their Native language fluently, but it was slowly beaten out of them; later, when their classmates saw them, they asked if they still spoke their language, and these boys, now men, got angry and declared they had never spoken their Native language. It was completely torn out of them.

When they washed our Elders mouths out, they told them, "Wash away that filth!" or something along those lines. Being Native was dirty, was evil, was bad; we cavorted with demons, they said, when we danced. Our songs were demonic, our art. Our culture was beaten out of us. We were ashamed to be Native.

To become a citizen after the 1915 Territorial Act, you had to have 5 white people testify on your behalf that you had completely abandoned your Native ways: that you no longer lived in a Native community, wore Native clothes, ate Native foods, spoke your Native language. Five white people had to swear that you were no longer Red in anything but color. Only then could you become a citizen of Alaska and the USA.

It is reprehensible to say that we chose not to speak our languages. Our parents and grandparents chose not to teach us, it is true, but only because they were afraid we would be treated as badly as they were, that we would be punished like they were for being Native, for speaking their language. It makes me furious to hear you say I don't speak my language because I don't want to. There is nothing in the world I want more than to speak Tlingit. But that opportunity was stolen from me by the missionaries, by the boarding schools, by the government men. Our languages were ripped from our mouths. They ripped our tongues out.

Shame on you for blaming us for what happened! I have no other words to describe what you've written then shameful. Educate yourself. There is much more to the story than you appear to know. But we know it. We lived it. We're living it now. Trust us when we say we want it, more than anything. That language is the heart of our cultures. That our cultures are beautiful and worth saving, that our languages are beautiful and worth saving.

My blood has cooled somewhat since I made that original post, and now that I am in a calmer state of mind, I can explain a few additional points I originally made very quickly at the end of my post more carefully.

These boarding schools, coupled with the out-adoption of Native children outside our culture (systematically removing us in large numbers from the homes of our children's birth culture), along with the massacres and violent attacks against our people (such as the bombing of Angoon, Kake, and Wrangell) are consistent with the UN definition of genocide.

Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota social worker and University of New Mexico associate professor Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart argues that the treatment of the Native Americans by the U.S. government was genocidal according to the U.N. definition of that term, citing as specific examples for the Lakota wartime massacres such as Wounded Knee, as well as other wartime treatment including "war trauma, prisoner of war experiences, starvation, and displacement," as well as cultural mistreatment, including "the separation of Lakota children from families and their placement in compulsory (and often abusive) boarding schools" and "forced assimilation and cumulative losses across generations, including language, culture, and spirituality, (which) contributed to the breakdown of family kinship networks and social structures." According to the U.N. website:

Genocide is defined in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group [bombings of Angoon, Kake, Wrangell, Wounded Knee, etc.]; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group [such as forced sterilization, which was inflicted on Native mothers]; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group [as in out-adoption]."

Indeed, later in that same document, in addition to overt acts such as killing, the "forcible transfer of children, imposed by direct force or through fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or other methods of coercion" is defined as a genocidal act. Consider this description, by Ruth Kirk, of Indian children being taken to boarding school in British Columbia, Canada:

Sometimes families didn't want to send their kids to school. The boat would come around picking up kids, but they'd tie their kids in sacks and say, "We don't have any kids. That's just some old stuff there." One place in Kyuquot [British Columbia] they put them into sacks, so nobody from that village went to school for one whole year.

It is such a heartbreaking image: parents hiding their children away in sacks so the government cannot take them, because seeing them taken causes them so much hardship and mental anguish. Of course, as hard as these schools were on the parents, they were that much harder on the children.

Diane Hirshberg, director of UAA's Center for Alaska Education Policy Research and associate professor of education policy, recorded these words of one survivor -- and I use that term deliberately -- of Nome Beltz boarding school: "It was safer, you had a higher statistical rate of survival doing a tour of combat in Vietnam at the time than of graduating from Nome Beltz. It was an Alaska Native hell. It was ... one of the guys who committed suicide later that said, 'Yep, the odds are better.'"

It is not a stretch to say that the boarding school survivors, having lived through conditions like that, suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders, and that this trauma impacts how they raise their children, how they unconsciously pass that trauma on to the next generation, and the next, and on down the line. It's called historic trauma.

That the state should now make symbolic reparations to begin to undo the damage that has been done to us over the course of two brutal centuries of colonial rule does not seem to us, as Native people, to be such an unreasonable request. It is almost literally the least lawmakers can do. I have a hard time imagining how they could make a smaller gesture recognizing the role that state schools, that state policies, played in the ethnic cleansing of our people. All we want is for them to make the smallest possible effort to repair the damage the state has been complicit in inflicting on our people. All we want is to be recognized, to be acknowledged as equals. To be as meaningful to the state, as a group of people, as the willow ptarmigan, or jade, or the forget-me-not, which are the official state bird, rock, and flower, respectively. Are we not even as important as that?

I do not understand the opposition to this bill. What would be wrong with legislation passed in Inuktun, the language of the Iñupiat (which no one is suggesting this bill would allow)? Would it be any less understandable to non-Native people than English legislation is to many of our elders?

It is a miracle our languages have survived as long as they have, and are as strong as they are, given the abuses our peoples have suffered to preserve them. That alone demonstrates how important our languages have been to us. Give us this one symbol of hope, this one sign that you care. That is all we ask.

Dei awé. That's enough.

Kyle Wark is a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Alaska Anchorage and the Indigenous Researcher and Policy Analyst at First Alaskans Institute. Mr. Wark is writing solely as an individual; this commentary is not intended to represent the views of First Alaskans Institute. His title is presented for identification purposes only.

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Comments