A Conversation with Ellen Cushman and Naomi Trevino: Literacy, Recent Histories, and Indigenous Language Persistence

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We sat down with Ellen Cushman and Naomi Trevino to discuss how they see themes from the special issue intersecting with their current work. Ellen Cushman is currently Dean's Professor of Civic Sustainability at Northeastern University and Co-Director of Northeastern Lab for Digital Humanities and Computational Social Sciences. She is also a Cherokee Nation citizen and has been working with Cherokee community members on the Digital Archive for Indigenous Language Persistence (DAILP). Naomi Trevino is the Associate Project Manager for DAILP and has been working on the project since they were an undergraduate major. Naomi does a lot of the behind-the-scenes work with the technical side of things, making the road maps in the grant plans into a reality with the help of some of the other developers.

The following is a lightly edited write up of an interview from summer 2024. Participants in the conversation included Ellen Cushman (EC), Naomi Trevino (NT), and special issue editors Jennifer Stone (JS) and Amanda Sladek (AS).

JS: Can you tell us a little bit about the DAILP project? How did you decide to start it and what is it all about in general?

EC: The project was conceptualized with Gordon Henry, who is an Anishinaabe White Earth Chippewa citizen. We were working at MSU at the time and we were thinking about all the ways in which archival language documents in our respective languages, Cherokee and Anishinaabemowin, exist in archives around the country. We wanted to know what was in those documents, because there was so much to learn about. And we thought, what if there are words that haven't been spoken in years? Wouldn't that be important for us to know what people were doing and writing about back then, and who was doing the writing? And there are thousands of these pages in beautiful, handwritten documents!

So we started with a little planning grant to conceptualize what this archive would look like. We envisioned desired features of an archival site for translating documents with community members and got a sense of their current language practices. Then, in about 2015, I moved to Northeastern and tried to grow the Cherokee prototype. Now we're in the third phase of the project and we have working models of the reading and writing environments. In the reading environment, you can read documents that have been translated with community members. In the writing environment, you can translate new manuscripts by selecting a word or paragraph from the document and type into a

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translation interface that feeds language information directly into our database, which then displays the translation in the beautiful reading environment. So we're excited about this phase of the work where we actually get to try out really systematically creating another edited collection—a second one—using the DAILP translation interface (DAILP TI).

Translation teams in our communities contribute to the process as they're learning, studying, and analyzing the language in these documents. And imagine creating a few of these books to help us understand how to scale the project and hand it off to other languages. All of our features are developed for Cherokee, but they'll be able to map onto the needs of other language speakers.

NT: When we started out, as Ellen said, we were kind of scrappy and rough. It was three undergraduate student developers—Aparna Dutta, Shelby Snead, and myself—who cobbled together the project, putting data in spreadsheets, writing the skeletal code and just getting something up so that we could have the gravitas we needed to go for more.

Once we had that initial prototype of the reading environment up with about 20 documents, we took that to anyone who would listen and said, "Do you want to support us in creating more of this?"

That led to the reading environment we now have, which is well over 80 documents at this point. All originally handwritten Cherokee syllabary documents that we have put in the computer. We have had a number of different community members—including Ernestine Berry, Clara Proctor, John Chewey, Oleta Pritchett, Tyler Hodge, and Alice Jumper Wilder—translate them with us by working through and revising our annotated copies of them. And now we have in this beautiful edited collection, Cherokees Writing the Keetoowah Way (Cushman et al., 2023), reflecting all that labor.

Now we're working on our writing environment which will let community members go in and do that work themselves, which is a really exciting next step for us.

JS: What's really exciting to me, and I'm sure to other *ATD* readers, about this project is the level of community engagement. Can you talk about how you've approached this as a community project rather than a traditional academic project?

NT: First and foremost, every piece of work we do runs through as many people in the communities as we can as soon as possible. We work with people in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the United Keetoowah Band, and occasionally the Cherokee Nation.

Our most frequent collaborators are a group of Elder speakers that are based out of the John Hair Cultural Center in Tahlequah. We have meetings with them every week where earlier on we would open a document that they would go through and do the translation. We would talk about the translation: "What does this word mean when you say it in this sentence versus when you say it in this sentence in another document?" or "Did we spell these things right?" All sorts of different questions that they know better than we would.

Nowadays, they are helping us steer the direction of our writing environment. We will do a little bit of work and put it online in a place where they can work on doing a live translation of a document through the DAILP website.

We also try to bring members of the community into our day-to-day work. For a lot of the audio you'll see on the website, we've had multiple community members having their hands on that. Of course, the voices are the Elder speakers from the United Keetoowah Band, but also, if you open the Word information in our annotated copies of the documents, you can hear each word of the audio spoken individually. Community members did that. They went into the software called ELAN and they broke apart the words. One of those community members, Charlie McVicker, then came on and worked with us as a software developer for a while. Truly, we try to fold community members into everything we're doing.

When we are not working directly with community members, we try to use undergraduate student help to bring in fresher perspectives and move away from a more traditional academic way of thinking about this work into something that's guided by the community and grounded in the community.

EC: All of the designs, everything, from top to bottom—from the ideas of the features, what they'd like, how they should work—all of these things begin with the community. But also the translations themselves were donated from the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. Those translations really got us started and became the basis of all of our annotations and instructional materials. The United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians translation team had done those translations for a different installation at the John Hair Cultural Center and Keetoowah Museum. Their translations really helped us develop our first collection, which proved even further the concept that Naomi suggested. We have these 25 documents, but can we build a whole digital edited collection?

We proved that we can do that through these community-based translations. As we do that, we're persisting in the language. We have language learners working with us. We have speakers working with us. They all get to practice the language as they go.

We also get to document the Cherokee language as we go. We found words that haven't been heard in decades and aren't found in any other language resource we know of. We found ways in which very fluent and sophisticated Cherokee writers organized sentences. The community members love that. That is one of the most meaningful reasons why the speakers come back and love the work. They get to hear things that their parents and grandparents were telling them that they don't get to hear anymore. To breathe life back into the language like that and make sure it continues in use and in practice, that's when we know we've hit our stride. We've aligned language persistence and language preservation and made them mutually sustaining.

JS: How are people taking up these materials? Are there community groups or classes using them?

EC: We've heard anecdotally that folks listen to the audio of translations being read in their cars. They've downloaded audio and just listen to the words being spoken as they're doing other things (e.g., cleaning, basket making, cooking). Or, they'll read along as the audio is playing. They'll print up the actual syllabary document and read along with it, and it helps them with the tone and pronunciation.

We've had three teachers confirm that they teach it in their classes, so they have gone back to particular documents with their students. We've had two linguists say that they referred to it and want to use a translation to build further scholarly studies. We have had some really lovely news stories come out at both *Northeastern Global News* (Mello-Klein, 2023) and the National Archives (NHPRC Newsletter, 2022, 2023) featuring this project which is really terrific. It is things like that that drive people to the site and have them take a look at it.

I think our biggest claim to fame is how other nations want to pick up this software and move it forward. We're excited to start the final packaging of the software and handing it out after this next phase of work.

JS: We're working on a special issue of *Across the Disciplines* about the intersection between writing studies and studies of the history of English. How do you see your project intersecting with these two areas?

EC: In a couple of ways, I think there are some nice connections there. So if we look at the idea of translation and the idea of delinking from English, what do we learn when we do that? What we learn about are different world views, lifeways, and perspectives—more ways of being and doing. It's just

very important for us to think through different language systems and how it is that people construct and understand the world.

So, in writing studies, translanguaging, certainly, although our project is not quite to that level of pedagogical work yet. But translanguaging is happening in the community to some extent. I have been working on this idea of incommensurability because, to some extent, Scott Lyons (2010) is right. When you have an Indigenous language, it is really difficult to find ways of translating it into English terms. There's that incommensurability. But, I think that through decoloniality and decolonial methods, working with communities specifically in community-based translation processes, we're able to find a way to both deepen our understanding of Cherokee lifeways, but also complicate and imagine new ways of being in an English epistemically driven structured understanding of life.

NT: As Ellen was mentioning, it is not as simple as you sit down and you translate it, right? To have one short document (for example, a funeral notice) translated in a way that we're comfortable putting online, our Elder speakers do their translations. Then, we talk with them repeatedly.

During that process, we have this back and forth where we'll realize: "Oh, this word here? There's actually not really a good way to say it." Then we go: "What about the way it's used in this particular sentence?" Unlike in English, where you can take the meaning of a word out, you can't really do that in Cherokee. When you ask, people will give you a face.

It's a lot of trying to figure out what is the closest we can get to getting the idea across, understanding that we've succeeded if we get people curious to dive deeper into the language. That's really where you're going to be able to get the full meaning out of any of the documents or stories we have on our site.

Cherokee is an agglutinative language where the words have a lot of parts to them. People get really creative with those parts when they're telling stories—*especially* when they're telling stories. It becomes this fun puzzle, not just for us, but really for our community members to go through and say: "I heard my auntie say this when I was younger; here's what I think they're talking about here." That's just not something you get outside of this kind of context. It is really a unique way of thinking about the meaning of words and the stories themselves that is pretty refreshing.

JS: What about the history of English piece of that?

EC: If you're understanding the history of English in terms of how the grammar was brought together, the words were brought together from other languages, and how the morphemes work, you can begin to parse out different meanings and different understandings. Then you can begin to map that onto the grammars of Cherokee. Those word forms, especially the longest one—they're verb forms. They have an action in the middle of them, but then, through affixes and prefixes, they build meaning. They show you a picture of an action that's happening. So, one word can actually be a full sentence, potentially, in Cherokee.

English doesn't work like that, but it kind of builds in the same way. You can take apart different words to understand how it is that they build out. If you begin to map on those structures and help people understand how it all works, you've done a couple of things there. You've helped them understand how English creates a worldview, but also how English itself, and translingualism, are historically rooted.

I really love *Translingual Inheritance* by Elizabeth Kimball (2021), which looks at the history of English and translingualism in Philadelphia. She talks about how, in Philadelphia, different languages came together to form, at that time, a very multicultural and multilinguistic fabric that actually helped build out English. It was this really lovely study of historical roots of translingualism, showing that

it's been here for quite a while. It gets us to that history of English, I think, in a way that shows how it was historically linked, especially in the foundation of our own fledgling democracy.

NT: Also a little bit on the nose. The big trees they have in that national park? What are they called? They're sequoias. Why are they called that? That's the guy who wrote the syllabary. He didn't speak a lick of English and yet he's so ingrained in the American English language in a lot of sneaky ways. The work he did, even though most everyday English speakers probably aren't even aware of it, has had a really strong impact on the American English language itself.

JS: Originally, we reached out to you because we see your work overlapping with both writing studies and HEL, but also bringing them into conversation with Indigenous studies and literacy studies. Could you talk a little bit about how you think those areas might contribute to this conversation about the confluence we're focusing on for the special issue?

EC: For literacy studies, in particular, community-based work and how the field has taken that turn to do community-based work and teaching of writing in communities. And thinking about how writing with, for, and in communities can unfold in really ethical ways. That's certainly been a longstanding aspect of my work.

The other through line is Indigenous studies, which I've been able to dig even deeper into in the last, maybe 15 years, as I've studied empire through a long-term literacy project with Cherokee. Really digging into how it is that reading and writing and language persistence happen. And thinking about how all of Indigenous studies bases itself on story as methods, story as knowledge creation—that has figured largely into my work. The ways in which story works for Indigenous studies in particular.

While storytelling is done pan-tribally, it's a very different kind of story. A very different kind of understanding. It's not like literary narrative or literary analysis, though some Indigenous scholars say, "Well, that counts." Others say, "Well, no, it doesn't. We really need to do the language work of that to really understand Indigenous words and not just sprinkle them throughout a piece of beautiful writing and say 'look, I've created Native American literature from story.'"

Story is also, in a very curious way, used in community literacy projects, as well. So much of it is about the origin story of the methodology, the community itself told from the community's perspective. Who is writing that story, and how might that be coming into fruition? What is it that the community needs in terms of their rhetorical interests? What are their goals, audiences, purposes, and challenges? How are they defining their writing tasks? How can we begin to map into that and onto that?

Thinking about literacy studies and Indigenous studies, it's very much putting my money where my mouth is—always—both within the community and working with and for my people and for other Indigenous peoples to hopefully help with language persistence using stories. Stories that *they've* identified, writing that *they've* identified. All of our pieces are identified by community members first and foremost.

That helps us in a really important way because it means that we know they've already vetted it, so they're not going to publish anything that's culturally sensitive. But, they are going to publish things that are meaningful to them and they're going to tell us how it's meaningful. Naomi was mentioning how people comment as we go on our translations. That's one of the most rich comments that we get: "Oh, this word does this? But in another context it does this? You have to pronounce it with this, this way, to make it say this. They change pronunciations in this context, and you need to know that." It's just incredibly, mind-blowingly rich, what you're learning about the context for the stories and for the knowledge-making practices that continue on today.

NT: As you know, DAILP is a text-based project. As far as things go, it seems pretty agreeable to a lot of the more English-oriented folks we know because they're like: "Oh, that's written down. I can find a way to eventually wrap my head around that." Well, the story of the syllabary is Sequoia was doing his thing and he sees the white man putting these symbols on paper. Then, they're able to look at those symbols and speak based off of them. He says: "Oh that's a great idea. Let's do that for ourselves."

So he comes up with the Cherokee syllabary and it, very quickly, gets support from the community and is adopted widely. Now Cherokees can look at a piece of paper with a bunch of lines on them and speak the language off of that.

But that's still new. That was in the 1800s. As far as Cherokee cultural memory goes, that is pretty modern. One of the tensions we see in our work is how do we get all these different cues that go beyond the page. That is something we are bringing to the table in this conversation.

We have multimodality as a very important part of our website because that context is important. You just don't get that in the writing. If you have the syllabary characters written out, that doesn't tell you anything about vowel length or about tone. Those things are the difference between talking about beans or farts. And that's a big difference!

Exploring that core tension between writing being a very important part of Cherokees and Cherokee identity, but also still being relatively new and the writing itself being in a completely different understanding from how English speakers think about writing and what writing does. We see that in our work doing translations every day. You can't just do a one-to-one on the words in the paragraphs on the document. It just doesn't quite work. That's not what the language does.

That's a tension I expect to see a lot more of as we move to work with other communities who don't have a writing system under their belts for a good two centuries or so. I'm very curious to see how that conversation pans out within our own work, but also what that can lend to the history of English writing studies.

Traditionally, I think of philologists sitting in a room with bookshelves kind of digging in at the nitty gritty of a word. You can't do this kind of work that way.

AS: We have encountered that perspective of the study of the history of the language is a scholar who is sitting, lit by candlelight, surrounded by old books that were written with a quill pen by some old monk. Not saying that those older histories aren't valuable, but we were wondering if you would maybe talk a bit about the value of looking at these more recent histories when doing work on language and literacy.

NT: If you look at our website, you'll see that a lot of our edited collection is from this notebook called The Willie Jumper stories (1964). Those were spoken stories that were written down…

EC: In 1964. The entire notebook–140 pages of stories written in the syllabary–was completed in 24 hours.

NT: That was about 60 years ago. For a scholar of the history of English, that might seem like a short amount of time. That might not seem very exciting when there are documents that are on the cusp of old Germanic or something like that.

For us and the work we do, that history and its proximity to the current moment is where our speakers find the most value in our methodology. Those are the instances where they say, "I haven't heard that word since I was young and talking to my grandma. Let me think about it, ask around, and get back to you next week." Those become really enlightening discussions.

English is always sort of pressing down on Cherokee speakers against their will. Having these more recent histories to look at, I've noticed that the speakers we work with use that to claw back through their own minds to reach these lost words–well, they're not actually lost–they're just not used anymore. People will shorten the words or come up with new things that aren't quite said how they said things before.

It's always this really exciting thing when we pull up this word that someone remembered from their childhood but hasn't heard anyone say since. That's not something you get if you focus on the long past. That's only something you can get if you focus on the immediate past. I think that's a big need in the Cherokee community because of that pressure from English. But I think that's something English could use, too—that conscious awareness of how things were said just a little bit before you, and not just how things were said around the time of the Brothers Grimm doing their thing.

EC: That study of language shift that you're describing is so hugely important for understanding super large-scale social change—migrations and flows of humanity, to influences of other languages and peoples, to influences of domination and national languages being imposed and superimposed. I mean, you really begin to learn world civilization and the history of civilization as you're looking at language shift.

It's especially important for Indigenous languages to see how they've shifted and how things are still being practiced. And, how we can continue that practice into the future so we can hopefully stop some of that erosion and erasure.

JS: Do you see any risks in historical scholarship on language, writing, and literacy studies? For example, how do we avoid projecting present-day assumptions about culture and identity onto earlier periods and peoples, who may have had quite different norms and experiences?

EC: Naomi will tell you stories about how some of our community members will talk about how things were said long ago and in different regions. Or they'll tease each other about their accents or their dialects.

That's just plum funny to me, because they're just slightly pronouncing things a little bit differently, maybe dropping off a syllable or emphasizing something a little bit different. Whatever the case, all of that language variation maps geographically to a location and a history and a people and a community.

Understanding not just the location of that community that says the word that way, but understanding why it is, and how it is that the language came to be spoken that way in that particular area–those are questions that I wish our scholarship would dig into a little bit more. Not just the etymologies of the word, even though that's important.

NT: Knowledge of place is important. Knowledge of relation is important. Knowledge of time is important. Something really unique about the kind of work we do is that the goal is not to separate past and present the way we traditionally do in academia. The way the language is spoken now is a reflection of the generation before and the generation before that.

You'll find that when we're talking to community members, they'll signpost these things. Like Ellen was saying, they'll say "That's how they say things where you're from," or "That's an older way of saying things." The goal isn't to make language how it used to be. But also, the goal isn't to separate the past and the present; it is to meld those with recognition.

We see that come up pretty often, especially when we're working with older stories or some of the government documents. It's about being responsible about time and relation and saying, "I don't say that right now, that's how they used to say it. But, I think we could get some good out of people being familiar with it again."

People are excited to point out those changes over time in the language. A lot of our speakers even get excited to either learn something from that older language or just directly try to learn some of those words.

It's the interchange between understandings of the past and understandings of now that brings so much value to this work, especially as a language archive.

EC: It gives us a sense of grace to say: "Gosh! If they said it *that* way, there must have been a reason for that. Let's dig into that reason. What was going on?" It's this moment of realizing that where we are now is because of where they were and what they went through. If Willie Jumper hadn't written down these stories, we would not have been able to be in the position of translating them and continuing the practice of the language.

There's something so amazingly pedagogical in how Willie wrote the stories. He actually separated the words for us and showed when they cascaded over other lines. The handwriting was beautiful.

In any event, it's important for us to see the past and the present and the future as commingling in the present moment and to learn from that process. In doing so, not necessarily becoming judgmental about what our Elders said or did, because we've not walked a mile in their shoes. But, we know that we wouldn't be where we stand today without them.

It teaches you that grace. It teaches you that reflective ability and the conception of time you need that our disciplines don't necessarily do. Disciplines do things that arbitrarily define what present language use is and what past language use is. We need to see it as ongoing practice and understand our assumptions are based on all of these factors.

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