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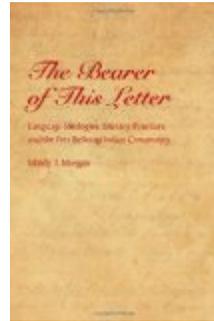


Mindy J. Morgan. *The Bearer of This Letter: Language Ideologies, Literacy Practices, and the Fort Belknap Indian Community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xvi + 325 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-6757-2.

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Attitudes toward Literacy in the Fort Belknap, Montana, Indian Community

The Bearer of This Letter is an interesting but narrowly focused study of the use of writing on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation located in north-central Montana. The title refers to the written passes that tribal members needed from an Indian agent to leave their reservations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The contents are adapted from Mindy J. Morgan's 2001 Indiana University doctoral dissertation, "Alternating Literacies: An Ethnohistorical Examination of Literacy Ideologies on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Montana."

Morgan found in her study that "English literacy was initially something to be endured; it was a technology that limited rather than liberated the local population" (p. 6). English was initially used for trade and diplomacy, and one of the first uses of writing was written treaties that progressively dispossessed American Indian tribes of their lands. Morgan argues, "Writing was not seen as a creative expression of the individual mind but rather as an act of power by the larger colonial state" (p. 10). It "was not merely a tool for assimilation but a symbol of assimilation" (p. 12). However, in their attempt to wrest control of their lives back from Indian agents appointed by the U.S. government, the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine of Fort Belknap sent written petitions in English to Washington DC, seeking redress of their grievances. While the functions of literacy remained limited in the first half of the twentieth century, literacy did have uses that included formalizing marriages and defin-

ing land ownership. Unlike many Indian reservations in the United States that encompassed only one "tribe," the Fort Belknap Reservation has two Indian nations, the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine, that speak very different languages, and thus English became a lingua franca for the operation of their tribal government as well as for their dealings with the federal government.

A broad assimilationist tide worked against the use of Indian languages and cultures and in favor of English with few exceptions. The U.S. government and most Americans exhibited an "ideology of contempt" for Native languages and cultures (p. 18). However, Jesuit priests who established missions at Fort Belknap and elsewhere had a history of multilingualism and scholarly work that led them to study and learn Native languages. Another exception to this general contempt was a New Deal federal writers project during the Great Depression that hired local writers to record traditional stories and other cultural materials.

With the post-World War II Indian self-determination and civil rights movements a new interest in the past was aroused, and in the 1960s revitalization of traditional dances provided a venue for Native languages. "Language was the primary way of asserting Native identity" (p. 186). After the passage of the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, the Fort Belknap public schools established bilingual education programs, and classes at Fort Belknap Community College complemented these limited ef-

forts at revitalization after it opened in 1982. Morgan was curriculum coordinator at this tribal college from 1996 to 2000, and she notes, “Tribal colleges have become key sites for language instruction” with the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) and other teaching methods that do not focus on reading and writing (p. 209). The repeal of the Bilingual Education Act with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has meant a stronger “English-only” emphasis in public schools at Fort Belknap and across the United States. However, Fort Belknap and other tribal colleges have retained their strong commitment to tribal languages. One of the interests of younger tribal members is the special language used in Sun Dances and other rites, but classrooms are not seen as an appropriate place for this ceremonial language.

The Gros Ventre language is much more severely endangered than the Assiniboine language, also called Nakota, because the Assiniboine language is related to Lakota and Dakota spoken in eastern Montana and the Dakotas for which dictionaries, grammars, and other language materials were produced in the nineteenth century with the help of missionaries. One of the focuses of Morgan’s book is the local attitude toward developing orthographies for the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine languages with some speakers seeing their languages as oral with no place for writing, which is a “white man’s thing.” When writing was seen as something important issues of standardization arose. A standard way to write the language makes it easier to share language materials, but it also erases important dialectal differences.

The reference to “language ideologies” in Morgan’s subtitle refers to various attitudes about language, including “language experts”; dialectical issues on how words should be pronounced; the appropriateness to write a previously oral language; and, if orthography is adopted, the potential standardization of that orthography. Readers interested in the role of language ideologies that Morgan discusses would benefit from examining Paul V. Kroskrity and Margaret C. Field’s edited book *Native American Language Ideologies: Beliefs, Practices and Struggles in Indian Country* (2009), which includes case studies that throw further light on the diversity of issues facing tribal language revitalization efforts among different Indian nations. In addition, Kroskrity’s chapter entitled “Language Renewal as Sites of Language Ideological Struggle: The Need for ‘Ideological Clarification’” (downloadable at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~{ }jar/ILR/ILR-6.pdf>) emphasizes the need for understanding the history of particular Indian nations and addressing their perceived wants and needs and backs up Morgan’s contention that “one size does not fit all” in indigenous language revitalization efforts.

As I mentioned at the start of this review, this book is an interesting but narrowly focused study of one aspect of one U.S. Indian reservation. Overall it supports the findings of more general studies about the colonization of Indian nations and how these nations have increasingly reasserted their sovereignty in recent years and how that reassertion often involves efforts to revitalize their indigenous languages and cultures.

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