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# Indigenous Legacies and Digital Realities: A Conversation with Drs. Ellen Cushman and Gordon Henry about the Digital Archive of Indigenous Language Persistence (DAILP)

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Dr. Ellen Cushman



Dr. Gordon Henry

In this interview, Dr. Ellen Cushman and Dr. Gordon Henry discuss how community-driven initiatives have shaped a platform that blends archival research with innovative digital tools. Ellen Cushman is Dean's

Professor of Civic Sustainability and Professor of English at Northeastern University and a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. Her scholarship explores how people use literacy and language to endure and create change. Her book, *Cherokees Writing Resilience: Everyday Literacies of Collective Action* (working title), will be the first monograph to treat the common writings of Cherokee people as evidence of a lived ethic of individual perseverance and collective resilience. Gordon Henry is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of English at Michigan State University. He is an Anishinaabe poet and novelist and an enrolled member of the White Earth Chippewa Tribe of Minnesota. His poetry has been published in anthologies such as *Songs From This Earth On Turtle's Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry* (1983) and *Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First Native American Writers* (1994). His novel *The Light People* (1994) was awarded The American Book Award in 1995.

The [Digital Archive of Indigenous Language Persistence](#) (DAILP) highlights how collaborative, inclusive, and technology-enhanced practices can enhance archival practice. While exciting in its transformative potential, readers of *Scholarly Editing* will recognize how challenges linked to interpretation, curatorial perspective, and community expectation must be weighed against the transformative goal of maintaining Indigenous data sovereignty. As we shall see, from the challenge of AI language scraping to building trust within and across communities, this interview highlights how critical concerns about editorial practices are addressed in a project that seeks to preserve and promote Indigenous language for future generations.

This interview was conducted October 17, 2024.

You can listen to this interview on the [Scholarly Editing website](#).

**Julian Chambliss:** Thank you again for joining me and answering this question for *Scholarly Editing* Voices and Perspectives. My first question is, can you briefly describe the origin of the Digital Archive for Indigenous Language Persistence?

**Gordon Henry:** I will say that I think Ellen should speak to this in greater detail since I was on the grant early on. That was sort of the seed for this project and she has since done the work and it was really her vision I think to get this project off the ground. We had an IMLS grant while at MSU. It was a starter grant and tested a few aspects of the project as it's currently developed or developing, and I came in as a sort of an Anishinaabe helper, I guess you could say. As we would say, an Anishinaabe to assist and get connection with the Anishinaabe community, mostly in Michigan. I'll speak to a bit more about that, but really Ellen's got the larger background about the technics and the way the grant works technically and so forth.

**Ellen Cushman:** So picking up from where Gordon and I left off when I moved from Michigan State University in 2015, we had originally conceptualized this space for digital archive, for Indigenous language persistence because both of us understood that there were so many archival materials in our respective languages, our respective charo languages, and we were kind of envisioning this beautiful space where people could come together and persist in our languages as we translated these documents and searched for new words and built out our dictionary resources and helped our learners continue to practice the language with

our current speakers and that would give our current speakers reason to continue speaking. And so we had this beautiful vision and IMLS supported us with a Sparks Ignition grant on that, and then we developed some wireframe clickthroughs just basically scoping out desired features of this. Well in 2015 I took a position with Northeastern University and really just stood up the Cherokee language portion of that, which is related to my own nation and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

It mocked it all out, developed the code for it, developed an interface of a reading environment and an interface of a writing environment so that when people are translating these documents, they're able to produce something that is available to other readers but is also contributing to our language resources. That's the reading environment, but then it's also producing a writing environment, that where we can work together to do that translation from a distance and across time and space. And so we have the reading environment now and we have the writing environment and I'm really pleased to say, and here again I can pass it off to Gordon because we're going to come full circle.

**Gordon Henry:** Yes. Our hope is then to make the Anishinaabe materials, the archival materials that are used in this kind of grant development and project development to bring those into the project alongside the Cherokee language materials. And so we're going to have multiple communities. We had two Anishinaabe speakers involved in the IMLS grant, one from Canada, one was locally living in Lansing at the time and got their advice on it, but we know there's much more to do on the Anishinaabe side. The archival record is deep and treacherous, and so we were trying to think about ways of integrating text and getting speakers to help us with some of the interpretive and community-based relations to that material.

**Julian Chambliss:** I think one of the things really interesting about hearing the origin of the project and something I think is meaningful in the context of the Association [for Documentary] Editing is that both of you come from tribal communities. And I wonder if you could say just a little bit about that perspective and the way that it triggered your conversations leading to the project. Is there a particular experiences as people working in the academy, people working with the archive at some level, either directly or indirectly in the way that's sort of influencing the description of Native American peoples and cultures and spaces? Can you say a little bit about that?

**Gordon Henry:** For me, I have to sort of think about my family history and the history of the White Earth Nation when I'm answering this question, and that in a way could take days, but I will say my father and both my parents were raised on the White Earth Reservation and my father was raised around fluent Anishinaabe speakers. When he was 10 years old, his father died. He was taken to live with his grandparents or my great grandparents, and that's where he was surrounded with the language every day. Once he joined the military, the ability for him to speak or the terms or context from which he would be able to be practicing the language was not there. He could not teach it to us. He could not speak. He was working full time. And so all of us have this sort of legacy of being connected at one time in our family histories to people who were speakers.

And then you add to that sort of the, what shall we call it, settler colonial impositions on the cultures of our nations. And you find yourselves looking back as you move into your adulthood and even later in life like myself, and you start to reimagine the possibilities for the language continuance and preservation and development for the next generations. My granddaughters, my daughters and my family. And I speak that

because when I was growing up, there was nothing of the sort we have now in terms of the digital educational tools and services available to students and people now. I went to a tribal school very briefly on the White Earth Reservation when I was in fourth or fifth grade, fourth grade actually. And there was no Anishinaabe language spoken there. They were trying to teach us to read, do math. And so for us it was like, and then coming up through the sixties and seventies, we started to see this sort of re-inspiration of our native heritage and identities and cultures. And even back then, I still have vinyl records of Anishinaabe language. And so there were always people concerned with this from the sixties on, but we never really knew about it in the context that we were learning. At least I didn't, and a lot of students at the schools didn't. That's totally changed. So it comes out of this sort of personal understanding of what happened and just wanting to know how we can relate to the language again in ways that our relatives did long ago. I will mention too that three of my grandparents went to boarding school, great-grandmother and two grandparents, and there again, there was a deemphasis if not an outright denial of a willingness to let students speak their language. So there's a long history that we could talk about that for quite a while. And I appreciate the question though for sure.

**Ellen Cushman:** Thank you, Gordon for that, for the story. And it's one that resonates well with myself. And I was raised away from really understanding or knowing our Cherokee peoples, except in the most general kind of sense because the ways in which that history that Gordon describes was played out in Oklahoma with my own family was one in which this similar kind of distancing happened. Distancing from our land, distancing from our language, distancing from our peoples and our families. And it's through this position in academe and through this position of just wanting to try to make knowledge differently and with our communities in order to do, as Gordon says, the work of recuperating the past, recuperating what our elders had and what still persists today, drawing upon that into the present moment so that we can leave a legacy that's better for the seven generations in front of us of learners and researchers and teachers and community members, everybody.

And that kind of full cycle work that brings us into the moment of the present, but asks us to recuperate the past and build on the past and continue it into the present and be mindful of the future. That to me is the kind of model of reciprocity that I was taught was really very important from day one. And so even if we didn't have our language, there were certain kinds of ethics that were pressed into us and that was, you will work with your community, you will go back. You better by God do good work. My mother said to me when she sent me off to graduate school, you better by God do good work. And it was as much about being replaced with the creator in the provider as it was being placed for your community and making something good out of the opportunities that we've been given to hold these positions and to be able to do the work that we're doing. But it's deeply personal for both of us, as you can tell.

**Julian Chambliss:** I recognize that. And my second question is an opportunity to sort of explore that issue because there's always I think, a tension where members of the community and then research in that community navigating the relationship between that community and the research. And so how do you navigate the very real sort of familial understanding of community legacies, but at the same time doing this very academic research in the context of especially I saw the 21st century world where pressures seemed to only have increased and the tension seemed to only have grown more dire related to Indigenous spaces, Indigenous culture, Indigenous concerns.

**Ellen Cushman:** I think that digital has given us some really unique opportunities to begin to, I mean, for both of our nations, most all of Indigenous peoples actually are really keen on technologies, especially as those connect to ways of being and doing that help us be and do even better to bring forward our life ways. And so speaking for Cherokee people alone then, or, and I can't do that speaking for myself alone, it's always been kind of this imperative to understand these tools as both enabling and constraining, and they allow us to enact various aspects of our peoplehood. And that's a concept from American Indian studies and Indigenous studies, this idea of peoplehood, and it's this understanding of ourselves as having language, having history, having ceremony, and having land that make us very, very in tune with ourselves and with our people and with our ancestors.

And at the center of all of those four aspects of peoplehood is oftentimes for some people they say it's sovereignty and for some other people say, no, no, no, it's technology. It's the tools that we use to name our world, to be in our world, to change our world and protect ourselves from the legacies of repeating themselves, the legacies of variation and the like. And so digital tools for me really do help us continue forward. Most of the Cherokee people in our nation of over [...] 700,000 citizens live outside of our tribal core, the tribal reservation and the northeast corner of Oklahoma. And that means that digital tools are the primary way in which they stay connected with our nation. And so helping all of us do that by way of archival documents that are as far as ways in Chicago or New Haven, Connecticut or Philadelphia, other major archives around country, well, bringing those back in and bringing them to pressing them into the service of our people using digital technologies, that's a great opportunity for us that we want to take up and realize.

**Gordon Henry:** Thanks for that, Ellen. I appreciate it. Yeah. I tend to think of it in the way that we work with communities as there's sort of to some degree an inbuilt trust when you're from a community and from a group of people. That said, each community is a little different. There are like 300,000 Anishinaabe people from across Canada all the way to North Dakota, so to speak broadly about working with communities really involves particular communities and knowing people there, speaking with people there and deferring to their views on what might need to be done in terms of relation to technology and research. And so I would use this term trust, not trust in the sense of US trust over Native Nations, but trust for ourselves too. We as descendants of people who had been introduced to different technologies over historical time. This is sort of the whole post-colonial conversation around how you use the tools of the colonizers to get what your community might need or want to survive in a way that's whole within this framework of colonialism.

And so for that, for post-colonialism really revolved around writing. How do you use writing as a technic to deal with and to create a different relationship to the settler colonizers? And likewise, even us, I'm still somewhat distrustful of some technologies and some digital applications. And so I think we have to figure out what our trust relationship is to those technologies. And of course the big one here is AI, but there's other smaller segments of that. I'm like a lot of people on different groups on messenger and there's multiple Anishinaabe language messenger groups where people are speaking back and forth or texting back and forth in a language, sometimes audio, and you'll get varying views if you ask for a translation for something or you start a conversation, you'll get varying views from different people in different regions of the US and Canada about what that term might mean.

And so we have to figure out also how to negotiate those spaces where we're getting this sort of piecemeal relationship to the language for those kinds of spaces. I mean, that may not be the concern here in this context, but the whole idea I'm trying to express here is that when do we ourselves trust the technology of what we're working with and how does that create a benefit to communities that they want, not necessarily what we want or what we're interested in as academics. So there's this notion of deferring, I think in some ways to communities. When I worked on the archival grant with the Saginaw Chippewa tribe, I will mention them here. They have a board of elders that you meet with as you go forward on a project. And they do this according to all the protocols within their particular local community and then decide whether you go forward with a project or not.

And you try your best to explain what the technology is or talk to them about the technology, but in some ways you're still working through that intellectually and spiritually, whatever you want to call it yourself. And so that's part of the struggle, but I think it's a worthy struggle. And Ellen, I think is the trusted Cherokee nation people. I've worked myself into communities, again, White Earth, I have relatives there. The trust is there, but I've lived in the Saginaw among the Saginaw, Chippewa people for many years too. And so you have to develop trust with the community and also with the technologies and digital spaces you're working with.

**Julian Chambliss:** I think that's a really great answer, and it kind of leads me into my next question, which is about the digital, because there is always, I think, a legitimate anxiety about the digital, it's impermanent who controls the technology and the proprietary nature of certain things. And so I would ask you if you could talk a little bit about what do you see as the biggest benefit of the project as it's sort of conceived and be as clear as you can. I think for our readership, there's a real important intervention represented by what you are doing, right? Association [for Documentary] Editing, editing and artifacts. And the archive is very important to the traditional readership. But the recovery and the inclusion of so many voices that have been marginalized in the context of the archive, marginalized in the context of the sort of documentary story of the United States or the Western context in particular, are always huge challenges. But then, because we're all, I think very aware of the inherent slipperiness of digital things, what do you perceive as huge challenges? What keeps you awake at night? Because there's always a translation problem. I know this from my own work.

There is no greater techno critic than an old person in the community. They, they know it can't work, right? So I would love for you to talk about, as you think about the project and what it's supposed to do, this is a great opportunity. What will happen? This project is allowed to live to its best self. And then on the other side, yeah, I worry about this and I worry about trying to explain blah, blah, blah.

**Ellen Cushman:** I think one of the greatest strengths of the work that we're trying to do is that when we're able to help, right now, what we've done is create this space that really works well with Cherokee and it helps across all three Cherokee federally recognized tribes that have long-standing political differences among them and very different ways of understanding the language and language practice among them. It's not a monolith, as Gordon points out, it allows for a negotiation of that incommensurability when things might be translated in different locales in different ways, but then everybody in those locales struggles with how they would put that into English in a way that allows it to both reveal a meaning, but also perhaps obscure some things that are perhaps more appropriate to save for within the community. So there's this constant

double translation happening, if you will, and the ways in which that mechanism of translating works you so rightly point out Julian, is something that we really try to represent in the work of this software, of this reading environment and the writing environment.

So if this is allowed to continue as we scale up, we'll be able to demonstrate some of the comments that translators are writing as they describe that incommensurability or the ways in which different dialects might pronounce something, or the ways in which the translation we have is in English thus. But know that this is actually a really deep cultural concept for us. And if you break it down syllable by syllable or morphine by morphine, what you begin to understand is just how complex and just how close to the cosmology of being and doing this archival document actually allows us to recuperate and gather back and continue forward with. And so there's those great possibilities there. The downfall is AI language scraping, and then the repackaging of all of our language work and copywriting it and selling it back to us and telling us, oh, that language work is now owned by somebody else because I've downloaded it. I've repackaged it into this derivative project and I want to capitalize on it. And so one of the things that we've been, the thing that wakes me up at night is Indigenous data sovereignty these days and how to protect all of the work that our community members have contributed thus far and will hopefully contribute into the future as we scale this and hand it off to other nations as well, or other grassroots tribal communities as well.

**Gordon Henry:** Yeah, well said Ellen. I appreciate that. And your mentioning of this AI scraping, there was recently a book that was posted on various social media sites saying something like the most commonly used Anishinaabe verbs, and then somebody sent a message and a follow-up to that saying that this book was AI derived and produced and then being sold under the authorship or the editorship of the person who did the AI work. So there's that, but going back to what I felt was part of the question as well, I would say that one of the things that was of interest to me was wanting access, I guess access to what we knew were archival sources, whether produced by settlers or our own people. Often we have to negotiate that too. There are many, many language materials that are produced by church, churches, missionaries and so forth.

There's a Moravian missionary archive, I think down in Indiana somewhere. I can't remember. A friend of mine was studying that when he was at MSU. And there's all kinds of missionary texts and documents, hymnals and so forth. And so we want, but we also want people if it's possible, and if they're interested, again, we defer to individuals and communities to have access to things that we didn't have access to that other people didn't have access to, and allow those documents in the ways that they were conceived of as linguistic learning materials to allow us to see the language in that way from a particular historical, even social political context. And that I think was something that we did not have access to. This might give us accessibility. I think that's one of the things that we are hoping technology will do, will give us access again.

And we have to have people to evaluate that access. And sometimes it will be the old people who are skeptical about technology just as the way some of the old people are skeptical about me having a PhD. You know what I mean? It's one of those things that you face and say, okay, I'm skeptical too. How can we work through it and see if it can really be helpful or a tool for transformation or survival in some way? So yeah, I hope that answers question, but I was really concerned with access in many ways. All these things are held at archives all over the United States, and there's a lot about our families, there's a lot about our history and our language is right there in a lot of those archives.

**Julian Chambliss:** That point, I think leads into our next question, which is about the digital and what I think of as really classical set of potentialities around digital, it's preservation, dissemination, retention around information form. But as you've alluded to, that becomes, I think, more complex in the context of Indigenous people and Indigenous cultures because of the ways the record is fragmented. And I think one argument, and I guess my question is on the one hand, one argument is a digital space becomes a place where important work of piecing together a more holistic narrative around something can be accomplished, that you can do more to help people as you've alluded to in terms of pronunciation, in terms of meaning making, in terms of the different sub distinctions within communities, around language, around culture, and so on and so forth. But at the same time, you also create this possibility of a very particular kind of distortion that might be created because it is a digital space and you don't have access to everything because access isn't uniform even when you're trying to build something digitally. Some places you have access to in terms of work, some places you don't. So when you're thinking about the digital and these questions around language preservation, trying to encourage a certain kind of dissemination, even questions of persistence of language amongst your people, are there particular things that you're hoping to achieve digitally? And are there other tools or practices that you're considering in terms of alongside the digital, I guess is the question?

**Gordon Henry:** Yeah, I really appreciate that notion that things are really fragmented and it might lead to a kind of distortion about the particulars that you choose from any archival source. And so I think that's part of the reason that you want to work with multiple community partners and maybe even across communities to sort of dispel that sort of singular approach to documents, or at least a limited approach to documents. And so you want to expand the conversations around the kinds of materials that you're working with to include community people that have a knowledge of the language history and all those things associated with cultural reservation, preservation, repatriation and so forth. So I think our biggest way of fighting the distortion, if that's the right way of putting it, is to think about being inclusive in the conversations we have. I mean, we have communities now where they have immersion schools for little kids, and some of these little kids are way better speakers than I am.

And you go into their classroom and they will not talk to you if you speak to them in English. People have told me, I have not been to that particular community that's in Wisconsin, but the kids do not want to speak with people. They've been in the immersion schools long enough. So even in some ways to include children in this discussion about what is this, if you know the language and somebody speaks what's on this document to you, what are you getting from that? You know what I mean? So make it an inclusive sort of perspective that allows us to negotiate the difficult historical terms that have put us in this position of having, trying to interpret things on our own. I hope that helps, but that's my sense of it.

**Ellen Cushman:** That's a really good point because it's our goal for retention, and we tend to talk about persistence as a means of both teaching and documenting language. And so there's a way in which the teaching of this is the practice of the language, and that's where the everyday practice of the language allows us to retain it, allows us to carry it forward and allows us to recuperate the past suppressed epistemologies, suppressed ways of being. Those words that haven't had, haven't been uttered in generation. And that's the most thrilling thing to me is when you hear an elder tell you, oh, my elders used to say that word. I haven't heard it spoken in decades. It's so nice to hear that word spoken. It's so nice to say that word again, and to breathe life back into a language.

And that's where my heart just swells up. And I know I'm in the absolute right place doing the right thing for the right reasons, because the teaching and learning aspect of persistence helps us retain it and move it forward and you're right to talk about preservation. And we tend to think about it in terms of documentation. And much of that documentation, as Gordon has pointed out, has often been in the hands of individuals who were chronicling the language maybe for various reasons, maybe because they wanted to translate the Bible, maybe because they wanted to enable a particular politician to be able to speak to his children and to be able to command, to command enough understanding of Indigenous languages, to be able to find a way to make it possible to speak with Indigenous peoples in and on their terms. And so there's this really interesting moment in language documentation where part of the potential of language persistence is us bringing back into our communities the efforts to document our own languages and build our own dictionaries and do this very deeply complex linguistic analysis that helps us parse each word and understand how it connects back to our histories, our culture, our ways of being, our understandings in relation to each other and to this earth.

And so there's this lovely way in which, and this is part of the model that Gordon and I were thinking of very early on, which was how do we make these two things happen at once? The mutuality of that, of persistence and preservation, how do we make that happen simultaneously so that they're equal and they're running on all cylinders, and one is not more important than the other. They should be mutually sustaining. And that's one of the reasons why I feel so right when I get to talk with various generations and community members as they're working with these archival documents because they understand what they're doing. And those are really high stakes for our community members, hugely high stakes. They want to get this right by them, right by our other communities, right by their kids, right by the future generations. They want to get it right and they will work really, really hard to make it best.

**Julian Chambliss:** The next question, you kind of alluded to it, and the reason for the question has to do with some level of trauma. So the question that I had are there, from your perspective, coming from particular communities with histories and legacies, are there particular concerns and distinctions related to culture that inform the need for or the impact of your work? The part of the reason I'm asking is because of course, from a scholarly standpoint, we talk about discourse and the ways that it shapes meaning, it shapes understanding. And obviously for a readership that's associated with *Scholarly Editing*, the sort of classical framing around that is that it's documenting the papers and the deeds of great typically white men. And that's very much not what the journal's vision is trying to be more inclusive. But I wonder, when you're doing this work, is there something in particular that you have to be mindful of in the context of the project that you're doing that, as I say, informs the need? We have to do it this way, or even as you're doing it, you're concerned about the consequences of doing it are X, Y, and Z?

**Ellen Cushman:** I think that for the Cherokee folks that I work with, the stakes are really high in light of the fact that there are increasingly fewer and fewer speakers of the language who can help us do this work. And we hang on every word that our speakers and translators are sharing with us because of it and because they're willing to sit with us learners who are struggling with pronunciation and we're struggling with fluency, but we're pretty decent at reading and writing, and they're willing to sit with us and spend the time with us because they see that effort. But the stakes, stakes, Julian are so very high. We lost so many speakers from Covid and the generations and the economies are such that it's hard for people to find reasons and purposes and places to practice Cherokee because so much has to be in English to put food on your table and a roof

over your head. You have to be fluent in English. And there are very few economies that can sustain Indigenous languages. And so what we're doing is giving people a meaningful reason and purpose and sets of audiences to be able to continue practicing their languages.

**Gordon Henry:** Yeah, well said. I mean that is a concern is just the number of speakers that we have in communities that are not with us anymore. And in a sense, in numbers, not in spirit are diminished. And I tend to think of this in a way that maybe not, doesn't sound too Indigenous, but I think that what my sense of things is is every time someone speaks Anishinaabemowin and perhaps Cherokee as well, that we are now in a different field of intelligence. We're working with a different kind of intelligence. And that intelligence is both generative. It's generating new intelligence, but at the same time, it's reminding us of the intelligence that was there with our relatives years ago and still are with us to some degree. And so to think about the settler colonial history of how in some ways this loss of ancestors, the boarding school era, the missionary place in this, all the things that settler colonials might've done to diminish our language or take it away or even reinterpret it for us, was in a way of trying to deny our intelligence, an intelligence that was germane to our relations to the world.

And so that's part of it as well, is like to hear someone speak, then it reminds us of those relations, the moment the words come out of their mouth and say, wow, this is what I didn't know. This is what I don't know. I'm an academic, I'm a PhD, but man, I'm not so intelligent in this particular context. You know what I mean? And so I think that's part of what we're striving for. In some ways it's just to reengage with an intelligence that had a different sense of relationality to the world and to family and friends, everything. So I don't know, perhaps that's a bit too abstract, but I think it's something that we need you to consider.

**Julian Chambliss:** No, I don't think it is. And that tracks to my next question. One of the things that I think readership of *Scholarly Editing* is concerned with is editorial theory. And in a way, you are in a position to be the ultimate kinds of editors and arbiters of meaning, not just simply in the immediate term, but in a kind of, I don't want to be overblown, but a generational way. And so the text that you decide to engage with is there, what politics of care, what considerations drive your decisions? Is it just simply what we can get? What is sort of shaping that approach to the text that you're choosing, disseminating, storing and presenting?

**Ellen Cushman:** And that's such a great question because for the Cherokee portion of this, thank you for that question. All of those texts were selected by the community members as important to the community members. Why? Because maybe they heard their ancestors' voice in them, they saw their ancestors mentioned, or in the case of a set of letters, for example, they knew the letter writer or they had heard a speech. We have three speeches. And they had heard those stories as they were growing up in their ceremonial settings, and they were deeply meaningful to them for those reasons. And so they selected those texts for us. And by doing so, they also understood that they were willing to share that very broadly. And so they chose texts very carefully in that regard for having the most representation that they could possibly give to community practice and to the people that they were including in them, but also because it was important to them to draw upon those texts. And so the ethics of care is I give all credit to our community member because it's really their ethics of care that we're building upon and their editorial choices, and we are very mindful to find ways of representing their translations and deepening their translations with them in ways that bring even more meaning into those texts.

**Gordon Henry:** Yeah, I concur. I think it has to be, I mean, I'm hesitant. I thank you though. It's a question that really makes me, reminds me of how much you have to really take care and not to be too singularly intrusive in what you're doing that you have to understand that this is, it's never been about you. So the model I always take is I'm not really making any decisions. I've always seen myself as being a helper in a ceremonial sense. We know where things are, but we are not going to, once things are built, even if we built them through the institution, it's really community dependent upon how that's going to be done. I mean, the academic world's a different world. I mean, I think there's a sense that people try to do things in this way. They have an editor, for instance, of the overall thing, and then they have subeditors and then maybe hundreds of other people that they rely on to help them figure out the quality of the materials they're dealing with.

And that's really what it's about. I also think it has to be sort of community dependent too on the resources you're using among the Cherokee I imagine as I know there is among the Anishinaabe, certain texts were derived from certain community contexts or regions that are applicable to the community you might be working in. So maybe you find a document from the 1700s that's related to the Wisconsin natives that's derived from there somehow was produced from that or from the 1800s and White Earth. And so then maybe that particular document might be of interest to a particular community. You're going to have to do some work in talking with people to explore. I'm going to use another term that I'm trying to wrap my mind around these days when I'm doing editorial work is just this relational provenance. What's the provenance of this document?

How does it relate to the people that are community that are involved in any kind of discussion of this document, and the more people that you can include in that discussion, I think is helpful, but, and that's part of the work really is any editor, anybody doing this kind of work has to have a sort of network of people that know more than they do. You know what I mean? And are going to help them navigate all this. So again, I think that's part of it. It's just relating back to community needs, deferring to that, and at the same time understanding that maybe this hadn't even been introduced anywhere yet. If it's in an archive and nobody's seen it, found one that was in an archive in South Dakota where my great grandmother's being interviewed. We did not know it until her great, great granddaughter founded a reference to it in the library of Bemidji and went and got the documents in South Dakota. So just knowing that something is there is sometimes the first step in the whole process. But man, that's a tough question you asked. It's really self-reflective and it makes me nervous.

**Julian Chambliss:** To my last question now. So obviously this is an ongoing project, and your origin story sort of suggests that there's definitely a desire to move the project forward. So as you're thinking about where you've started and where you are right now, what is your hope for how this will evolve forward, ongoing way? Is there five year plan, two year plan, tomorrow we're going to do this. How do you see this continuing on? And are there particular goals both as community members that are central to your visioning? Are there goals as academics that are central to your visioning? What paths forward are central for you with this project?

**Gordon Henry:** I think when you ask that question, I thought of, and I'm not sure, it's sort of like you get things in circulation about language retention and so forth, but I once heard from several people informal sources that at one time the Maori people were trying to develop a long-term plan for their language. And so

they developed a 99 year plan. And so in some ways you have to think along those lines. Not that we can, but the idea is that I have to say, there are so many more people doing so much more too in this area than I am in communities every day that are really sort of crucial to this whole thing. What we hope is that this will go on and it will be of service and assistance to communities trying to learn more about the history of their relations with the language as well as reinterpret some of those things through the language.

So I guess I would say there's a part of me that says the community's going to do what they need to do, and it doesn't have anything to do with me. I'm here to help. I'm here to offer help. I'm here to catalyze change in whatever ways the communities might, but they don't need me to do what needs to be done, but we're willing to connect with people to people resources to people, to people. You know what I mean? So that's kind of what it's about. But at the same time, our love for our nations and people that really are driving this and our own personal histories. So I'm not sure that really answers the question, but I always, when I was taught how to do ceremonies, it was never about you're the guy leading this or you're the one doing this. You're just bringing people to something that they might experience, and if they want to engage with it, fine. If not, it's not up to you.

**Ellen Cushman:** I love that metaphor of bringing things to people and being the helper. It's exactly it, especially since our communities really do persist regardless of our efforts, I feel incredibly honored to be included in being asked for whatever small contribution I can possibly give, and just to be brought along on their language practices and to sit and hear Cherokee spoken, it's marvelous to me. It's pretty wonderful. And then my only hope is that we could have that 99 year plan. And part of that is I think raising up other people that might want to help do this. So as Gordon talks about carrying water or bringing people to a fire, a ceremonial place, I also think about the seeds of these ideas and these seeds of these workflows or code or the very concrete things that we're producing out of this translation practices or work very technical kinds of things, whatever I can hand off to the next generation and help them stand up their own sites and help them continue with their practices and move those forward, then we've not only lived up to what our ancestors are telling us we need to do in those very writings that we're reading, but we've also helped our people persist into the future. And I guess I'll leave it there.

**Julian Chambliss:** That is a great way to end it. Dr. Gordon Henry, Dr. Ellen Cushman, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with *Scholarly Editing*; your voices and perspectives [are] important to our readership.

**Gordon Henry:** We've been watching your work on this project and— inviting us, I mean, we're honored to be part of this.

**Ellen Cushman:** Very, very wonderful to be here. And thank you, Gordon for making this all happen, and Julian for making this all happen. And it was lovely meeting both, and to the journal for including our voices and our digital projects, thank you.