

Sounding Out! Podcast #40: Linguicide, Indigenous Community and the Search for Lost Sounds

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

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PLAYLIST This podcast is an effort to understand the cultural practices which surround the recovery of “lost sounds.” These

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound, Documentary, Identity, Indigenous Studies

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This podcast is an effort to understand the cultural practices which surround the recovery of “lost sounds.” These are early linguistic sounds that have been forgotten after years of cultural and martial violence toward indigenous communities in America.

From the very beginning of the invasion of the Americas that began in 1492, Eurocentric ideologies overwhelmingly failed to recognize the strengths of American Indian cultures. Evaluating Native people as “savage,” efforts to westernize the tribes alternated between genocide and acts of removal. Government supported education, amongst other things, became the primary means to accomplish the forced eradication of Indian language. The loss of language as a component of ongoing colonization is what Hawaiian scholar Noenoe K. Silva has called “linguicide.” The results of “linguicide,” as the suppression of indigenous languages and cultures in the United States, has been catastrophic for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples.

For Indigenous people, the spoken language is a cherished intellectual treasure. Each sound captures how we see the world. Native American languages are oral, but some of them have been written in the last three centuries. There are over two hundred different North American languages still spoken by peoples of the United States and Canada. That is, of the over three hundred pre-contact languages originally spoken, only two hundred languages still remain. Fortunately, Native communities are fighting hard to keep these languages alive through sustainability efforts and revitalization projects.

I wonder about the relationship between “lost sounds,” indigenous language, and personal experience. How did we come to lose the language in our own homes? How does this loss continue today? What is being done to “find lost sounds”? How are we, as Native people, searching for the sounds, and what does that process mean to us? The conversation in this podcast is not about the science of linguists, it is not about history or the methods of linguistic preservation. Instead, it is a conversation about the experience of listening and trying to hear how we once were.

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Marcella Ernest is a Native American (Ojibwe) interdisciplinary video artist and scholar. Her work combines electronic media with sound design with film and photography in a variety of formats; using multi-media installations incorporating large-scale projections and experimental film aesthetics. Currently living in California, Marcella is completing an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of New Mexico. Drawing upon a Critical Indigenous Studies framework to explore how “Indianness” and Indigeneity are represented in studies of American and Indigenous visual and popular culture, her primary research is an engagement with contemporary

Native art to understand how members of colonized groups use a re-mix of experimental video and sound design as a means for cultural and political expressions of resistance.

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