

Native American Language Revitalization Podcast Transcript

Lily: Hello, I'm your host, Lily, and today we're going to be discussing the politics and colonial context for modern day language preservation and revitalization efforts in Native communities across the United States. Let's get into it.

Intro music plays.

Lily: Prior to the colonial settlement of the 13 colonies, the region that would become known as the United States was home to hundreds of Native nations. These nations coexisted like most neighboring nations have throughout history, through periods of war and peace, evolving their language and culture around each other. As European settlers began to colonize this land, Native peoples responded accordingly, many of them learning English and other colonial languages to facilitate trade. But those efforts were largely not reciprocated, and as the newly founded United States began to push westward, language became a weapon.

Transition music plays.

Lily: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, hundreds of Indian boarding schools, funded by the United States federal government, were opened across the country, charged with the “complete restructure [of] the Indians’ minds and personalities”¹. Attendance at these schools was mandatory, and the government went to great lengths to ensure this, withholding food and

¹Colin Calloway, *First Peoples*, 7th ed. (Macmillan Higher Education, 2024), 393, <https://reader.yuzu.com/reader/books/9781319522223>.

money from the children's families if they did not attend. The schools were cruel, and forcibly anglicized the children. Any child who spoke their Native language instead of English was severely punished, often through physical violence. This was another in a long trend of traumas inflicted upon Native people by the United States federal government, the effects of which lasted far beyond those immediately affected.

Lily: Many of the Native children who were beaten for speaking their Native language grew up to be parents, and the impacts of the language-related trauma was passed on to their children. Elsie Allen, a Pomo woman, recalls crying herself to sleep at the Covelo boarding school in California and thinking to herself, "If I ever get married and have children I'll *never* teach my children the language ... I don't want my children to be treated like they treated me"². The violence children were met with in boarding schools as a reaction to speaking their language was an effective form of suppressing many Native languages, the impact of which is still seen today.

Transition music plays.

Lily: It is believed that over 250 Native languages were spoken at the time of European arrival. Today, few remain, with many languages being "kept alive" by a few key tribal members and elders. Only 7 native languages have more than 10,000 speakers posing a real threat to preserving and adapting Native culture and life to the modern era and for future generations. Especially given how many Native communities include oral histories as a crucial cultural tradition, the preservation of these languages is vital to the preservation of Native culture. Of

² *First Peoples*, 396. Accessed online.

course, Native communities are critically aware of this, and many have developed language programs and other methods to counteract the decline of Native language.

*Clip of the ABCs being recited in the Wampanoag language plays*³.

Lily: Jessie Little Doe Baird is Mashpee Wampanoag, and a co-founder of the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, an intertribal language revitalization project that began in 1993. The project is reviving a language that hadn't been spoken in six generations and was considered dormant. Doe Baird helped to bring it back to life by studying the Eliot Bible, a bible that was translated into Wampanoag in the late 1600s, and other works that were written by members of the Wampanoag Nation hundreds of years ago. Doe Baird and others have now successfully written a dictionary, phrasebooks, codified a grammar, and implemented the language into schooling systems⁴

Lily: Not all Native languages have been lying dormant. Cherokee is an example of a Native language that has remained alive, but that doesn't mean that the nation isn't navigating threats to preserving their language. In 2024, the Cherokee Nation made large strides in preserving their language. Aided by the momentum garnered after the 10-year National Plan on Native Language Revitalization was released at the end of the Biden-Harris administration, the nation is partnering with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Fund for Excellence in American Indian

³ Cape Cod Times, "Return of the Wampanoag," [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEi2P1kCfSQ&t=8s) (Cape Cod Times, March 17, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEi2P1kCfSQ&t=8s>

⁴ MacArthur Foundation, "Language Preservationist Jessie Little Doe Baird: 2010 MacArthur Fellow | MacArthur Foundation," [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDAdYjhg2xI) (Macfound, September 28, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDAdYjhg2xI>.

Education to focus language preservation efforts on film and media projects⁵. The plan also set out to implement other forms of language revitalization, mostly in the form of financial support for schooling and other educational programming⁶.

Transition music plays.

Lily: The preservation of Native languages is an ongoing process to heal the damage caused by colonial suppression. While the federal government ultimately failed to eliminate Native languages, many nations are struggling to preserve that element of their heritage, especially amidst continued attempts to assimilate Native peoples. There is no one right way to go about language revitalization, as demonstrated by the differing approaches taken by the Cherokee and Wampanoag, but language preservation of any form is a brilliant example of Native resistance and survivance. Momentum is growing, and the future of Native languages is bright.

Outro music plays.

⁵Chuck Hoskin, "Cherokee Language Preservation Moving Forward," Nativenewsonline.net (Native News Online, December 22, 2024), <https://nativenewsonline.net/opinion/cherokee-language-preservation-moving-forward>.

⁶ The White House Council on Native American Affairs, "10-Year National Plan on Native Language Revitalization," *United States Bureau of Indian Affairs*, December 2024, https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/final_12032024_10-year_national_plan_on_native_language_revitalization.508_1.pdf.

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