Disappearing, Inc.: Glimpsing the sublime in the politics of access to endangered languages

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Abstract

The central themes of a popular and scholarly literature of language endangerment are connected broadly to European concepts of Wonder and the Sublime, and specifically to an American ambivalence about ‘progress’ and environmental despoliation (also expressed, e.g., in 19th century American landscape painting). The documentation of ‘vanishing’ American Indian languages by John Peabody Harrington (1884–1961)—carried out indefatigably, in secret, and always in ‘salvage’ mode—is considered next. Harrington’s vast Nachlass is today playing a central role in language revitalization and tribal recognition efforts of contemporary Native Californians, even as its contents, and its compiler, remain at least partly lodged in those same Romantic tropes of the Sublime (as was Harrington’s own self-image, perhaps): limitless, forbidding, impenetrable. Writing as a way of rendering languages accessible and rescuing them from ‘oblivion’ is the unifying theme, ironically enough.

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1. Introduction

In this article I want to focus on the politics of access to languages defined as ‘endangered’, and the ways that these languages become accessible to people in various modalities of encounter. I will work through two case studies.

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First, I take up popular and scholarly literature about endangered languages, attentive to the ways in which this literature summons its readers to an encounter with these languages as monuments in a sculpture garden of human cognitive achievements, objects of wonder and appreciation. Endowed with the ability to stop the observer in his or her tracks, these disappearing linguistic structures, once ‘objectualized’—e.g., by being written—bear all the hallmarks of the Sublime in the European imagination.

Second, I take up the writing of these languages, sketching the posthumous career of the documentary archive of California Native languages left behind by John Peabody Harrington (1884–1961), which is now being used by the descendants of his original consultants to ‘re-generate’ languages otherwise long ‘dead’, almost à la Jurassic Park. I will show that the vast archive of Harrington’s documents has taken on many of the very same qualities of the Sublime—awe-inspiring, terrifying, seemingly limitless in complexity—that are associated with the languages themselves in the popular literature of language endangerment.

My focus throughout will be on the consumption, and appreciation, of languages, as opposed to the ‘production’ of them (e.g., in parole)—hence the centrality in my account of written text artifacts that represent, and in some ways embody, these languages.

This essay is informed by my own continuing involvement in efforts to maintain, teach, and assemble documentation about the three distinct ancestral languages at the Warm Springs Indian Reservation community in central Oregon (the languages are Northern Paiute, Sahaptin or Ichishk’in, and the Wasco–Wishram dialect of Upper Chinookan, also known as Kiksht—this last has been the focus of most of my efforts; see Moore, 1988; Aguilar, 2005). At Warm Springs, language-learners are combining regular face-to-face interaction with elders with the tools of ‘literacy’, including audio- and video-recordings—and advanced training (as of August, 2005 on a bank of Macintosh G4s) in the use of software applications like iMovie™ as modes of access to a rapidly growing digital archive of the languages—all in an effort precisely to get beyond the position of a mere consumer or appreciator, so that these language(s) can become for them not only family heirlooms, but forms of discursive practice.

1.1. Memorialization and regenerativity

If my first concern is with the politics of access to ‘endangered’ languages, my second and closely related concern is with practices of writing, in the first instance because written text artifacts (and other documentary recordings) are obviously the loci of new kinds of encounters between people and the ‘heritage languages’ they claim as their own.

In local communities, documentary materials on endangered languages of cultural heritage are not only aids to memory, but are also endowed with generative potential in their own right, because from them additional texts in the language, written as well as ‘oral’, can be produced. Not surprisingly, in communities like Warm Springs, where stereotype-conforming fully fluent native speakers are in painfully short supply (as they are in many Native communities in the US), a robust politics of access has grown up around such documentary materials and controversies have erupted around questions of orthography.

One result is that documentary archives—teaching materials, word lists, fieldnotes of linguists and anthropologists, audio- and videotapes and digital files—are more important than ever as sites where people in the community encounter and engage with the language of their cultural heritage. Everyone knows that these are poor substitutes for immediate
face-to-face interaction with living elders, but, when the language is clearly moribund, efforts to catalogue the existing archive and add to it are proceeding at a brisk pace, while the elders are still living.

In order to capture some of the tensions between language documentation and preservation (e.g., through the creation of documentary archives) on the one hand, and language maintenance (e.g., through classroom teaching and other more immersive activities) on the other, I want to draw a contrast between two modalities of encounter with endangered languages: Regenerativity—more or less ‘writing-for-reading-aloud’ (see Keller, 2005)—and Memorialization, the creation of a permanent record of the language for posterity.

Memorialization, as an orientation to the beauty of linguistic (grammatical) structures—compare Saussurean langue—partakes of much of what Stephen Greenblatt, in an article on museum display, has called Wonder: ‘the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’ (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 43).

(Re)generativity, by contrast, as an orientation to the representation (however inadequate) in writing of instances of language use—compare Saussurean parole—has much in common with Greenblatt’s notion of Resonance: ‘the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand’ (ibid.).

The stance of Memorialization/Wonder is clearly rooted in a long European tradition of the Sublime, according to which an (art) object, a place, or a landscape—in this case, a language, embodied in written texts—inspires in the viewer ‘the idea of pain or danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror’ (Burke, 1757, quoted in Barringer and Wilton, 2002, p. 9); objects apprehended in this way are seen as imbued with Kant called ‘a greatness [that is] comparable to itself alone’.

The stance of Regenerativity/Resonance is clearly of a different order: here the written marks can be ‘read’ as indexical signs pointing back toward an original oral/aural utterance—itself an emblem of its context, a swatch of a sociocultural order—or forward, to a next re-utterance or re-animation.

Memorialization—for example, using writing to capture a permanent record of a grammatical structure for posterity—is based on an ability to imagine language as ‘frozen’ in time and separable from its speakers (see Bauman and Briggs, 2003 on ‘purification’); it is, moreover, at the very center of a by-now-familiar media discourse of indigenous languages as ‘endangered species’, which announces that when ‘we lose’ a language, we lose ‘the supreme achievement of a uniquely human collective genius, as divine and unfathomable a mystery as a living organism’ (M. Krauss, quoted in Schwartz, 1994).

The ‘memorializing’ discourse of languages as ‘endangered species’ celebrates grammatical structures and systems (langue) for their beauty and ‘uniqueness’, often basing such aesthetic judgments on a typological-comparative frame of reference (e.g., Greenbergian universals, Parameters of UG) that is not shared with the reader. Seeing the obsolescence and replacement of languages as a problem of ‘diversity’, the broadly biolinguistic perspective (e.g., Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Maffi, 2005) does not usually celebrate the beauty—and actual uniqueness—of particular ‘executions’ of the system (parole). The ‘Memorialization’ literature positions exemplary structures as objects of Wonder, not exemplary speakers or acts of speaking. ‘Last speakers’—anecdotes and photographs of
whom are a fixture of the ‘endangered languages’ literature (e.g., Nettle and Romaine, 2000, pp. 1–5 et passim)—are much more often lionized for the grammatical structures in their heads than for the eloquence of their utterances; it is precisely in that sense that they give ‘mute testimony’ to language loss.1

Regenerativity, by contrast, is often associated with language revitalization efforts in local communities, where documentary materials in various media grow in importance as points of contact between living community members and their heritage languages and cultures just as the number of fully fluent native speakers decreases. If my Warm Springs experience is at all typical, today’s language learners and descendants do not want to hold their own ancestral languages at arm’s length and admire them as if they were many-faceted objects; they want to resume the practice of speaking them. Hence they begin not by studying paradigms but by memorizing utterances.2

The contrast being drawn here between regenerativity and memorialization is strikingly similar to one that Caroline Walker Bynum traces through the homiletic and hagiographic literature of medieval Europe. ‘Medieval theorists’, writes Bynum, ‘understood wonder (admiratio) as cognitive, non-appropriative, perspectival, and particular’ (Bynum, 2001, p. 39); imitatio, which for many medieval authors formed a contrast with admiratio, centrally involves a stance of appropriative mimesis (imitation). Imitatio seeks to unite the subject and the object on the basis, perhaps, of shared essences (a state of consubstantiality achieved, perhaps, through ritual practice).

In this literature, Bynum finds, ‘the wonderful was contrasted not with the known or the knowable, but with the imitable’ (ibid., 51): ‘the phrase non imitandum sed admirandum (not to be imitated but to be marveled at) had been used since the early Church to express the distance between heroes and martyrs, on the one hand, and the ordinary faithful, on the other’ (ibid.). Imitatio grounded in shared substance based on descent (‘blood’; genealogy) or ethnicity is obviously not an option for most non-Indian linguistic and anthropological experts; but this does not mean that admiratio (Wonder) is the only alternative.

Bynum traces the ‘complex rhetorical contrast’ between admiratio and imitatio in the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux:

Imitatio, to Bernard, is appropriation; it is, he says, ‘being in society with’, ‘experiencing’, ‘learning’, ‘taking into oneself’, ‘consuming’. Its semantic field includes words such as ‘pattern’, ‘mirror’, ‘example’, ‘model’, ‘image’, and ‘nourishment’... [I]n medieval piety, imitatio could be as literal as Henry Suso’s carving of Jesus’s name into his chest with a stylus or Saint Francis’ stigmata;... What is essential in such imitation is an ‘other’, of course, but the encounter is made possible because an ontological similarity to that other... is built into the experiencing self. To all this, admiratio was in emphatic contrast. ... [W]e wonder at what we cannot in any sense incorporate, or consume, or encompass in our mental categories (Bynum, 2001, pp. 52–53).

1 Cf. the opposition between corpus planning and status planning in applied linguistics, where corpus planning focuses on structures (langue), and status planning focuses on situations of use (parole); the former has often received more sustained and systematic attention than the latter (Eastman, 1983).
2 Hence also the importance of audio (and now digital) recordings: one of my friends at Warm Springs downloads to her iPod the digital recordings she makes each week of a pair of fluent elderly speakers visiting with each other in Kiksht (Wasco Chinookan) and listens to them as she runs errands in her car, using technology to make up for the ‘poverty of stimulus’.
In reception (e.g., reading) as well as production (e.g., inscription/transcription), there are differences between the stances: the memorializing gaze, reading the text-artifact retrospectively, discerns a representation that captures, ‘as if in amber’, the evidence for the ontological uniqueness of a grammatical system; the regenerative gaze, reading prospectively, sees transcriptions as records of past pronunciation but also as recipes for future (re-)production, a set of instructions that tells the reader how to re-animate the word(s) in the present, and future.

There is a real sense in which the ‘memorializing’ orientation sees language as self-entextualizing: the structures that properly belong to langue are not only immanent in any and every recording or transcription of a particular event of speaking (parole), in fact any particular transcription becomes transparent to langue in the same way as any other. By contrast, the orientation to ‘regenerativity’ sees language as self-contextualizing, such that any event of speaking becomes unavoidably transparent to the context in which it was uttered.\(^3\)

I will turn now to an examination of the now massive popular press discourse that places the issue of language endangerment within a framework of biolinguistic diversity (see, e.g., Hale et al., 1992; Maffi, 2001 and Maffi, 2005), tracing in this literature an intertwined thematics of memorialization (wonder, admiratio) and regenerativity (resonance, imitatio); I will argue that this discourse belongs to a larger genre of travel literature that can be linked both thematically and historically to earlier modalities of capturing the destruction of American landscapes within the framework of the sublime. This will allow me to provide the sociohistorical context of the phenomena of central interest to this paper, before I turn to the specific example of Harrington and his archive.

2. Cosmopolitan sublime

On August 10, 2005, the Associated Press ran a feature story on the US National Science Foundation (NSF)/National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) Project, under the headline ‘Project seeks to preserve dying languages’ (Hartman, 2005).\(^4\) Only one in a flood of similar stories over the past 10 years or so, the article begins by citing statistics (‘Every two weeks or so the last elderly man or woman with full command of a particular language dies. At that rate, as many as 2,500 native tongues will disappear forever by 2100’); it goes on to point out that ‘each [language] is a window into the human mind that can benefit the world at large’, that the loss of linguistic diversity ‘endangers our capacity to understand the genetic basis of language’, and to remind us that ‘Languages aren’t just words, linguists say, but a people’s way of looking at the world’. Examples of linguistic ‘peculiarities’ from Guugu Yimithirr (deixis) and Piritapuya (OVS word order) follow, with the added warning that ‘Some small and declining tribe in Africa or in Papua New Guinea—a country where there are 820 languages among fewer than 5.5 million people, by one count—may know something about a plant that could help treat cancer or Alzheimer’s’.

This last point—at first blush a non sequitur—is actually quite revealing of the author’s concept of languages as infinitely and seamlessly translatable: the native term for the plant

\(^{3}\) I am indebted to M. Silverstein (p.c., 31 August 2005) for these observations.

\(^{4}\) Accessed online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,1280,-5201819,00.html; also available at http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/losing_languages.html.
will lead us to the Latin name, which will lead us to its chemical composition, which may eventually lead, if things go well during clinical trials, to better living.

It is impossible, moreover, not to notice the theme of appropriation here: ‘we’ are free to appropriate these languages to our own scientific and other ends, now that they are ‘dead’. The outre forms of knowledge—e.g., about the ‘natural’ world—that are somehow encoded within these languages can now be ours, since the people(s) who developed the languages (‘small and declining tribes’) don’t seem to be using them anymore.

By now this is familiar stuff to linguists and anthropologists, and probably to anyone who reads newspapers. I want to draw attention to the article’s ending, because it brings to the fore one of the central themes I want to address in this article—endangered languages as objects of consumption:

As Wade Davis, an anthropologist who roams the world as an explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society, wrote: ‘Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities’. Starbucks liked the statement so much that the company is printing it on coffee cups, becoming another voice that is making the case for saving dying languages (Hartman, 2005).

A language—to say nothing of ‘every language’—can only become ‘an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities’ from the vantage point of a cosmopolitan consumer, or more precisely, a connoisseur, someone with a cultivated appreciation of things (n.b.!) that are exotic, fragile, endangered, and endowed with all the qualities of the Kantian Sublime. A form of writing that really belongs to the genre of travel literature, this discourse of ‘endangered languages’ invites its readers into a vicarious ecotourism of the mind, visiting out-of-the-way ‘places’ in the conceptual realm, far off (and above) the beaten path: noun-class systems that look like something out of a short story by Borges (e.g., that of Dyirbal [Nettle and Romaine, 2000, pp. 66–70]), obligatory heard-it-in-a-dream evidentials, OVS word order, and so on.

Of course then there is the problem faced by all tourists, namely, what to do once we get there—the answer, I think, is to stand silent and awestruck as waves of appreciation mixed with melancholy wash over us (see Percy, 1983 for a memorable evocation of this).

In any case I think it is fairly clear that with the emergence of a highly visible discourse of ‘endangered languages’ over the last 10 years or so, languages have entered the realm of prestige consumption (cf. Silverstein, 2004, pp. 640ff). People are now consuming languages—or, more precisely, facts (and factoids) about languages—not primarily by speaking them, but by reading and talking about them.

Some of this has emerged in ways that reflect the class stratification of the larger society; one finds articles about ‘endangered languages’ in the pages of Harper’s, the New York Times Sunday magazine, and the Atlantic, not in the Chicago Sun-Times or the New York Daily News, just as one finds books on the subject at Borders or Barnes & Noble, not at Wal-Mart.

It turns out that the most eminently ‘consumable’ languages seem to be those that are ‘endangered’. Most varieties of Spanish, for example, have incredibly complex systems of Tense and Aspect (Bull, 1971), but I have yet to run across an article in Harper’s celebrating that fact. It almost goes without saying that the people who employ this discourse to speak or write about endangered languages are not the same people—demographically or otherwise—as those who speak them, or whose ancestors spoke them.
Now, there is no doubt about the reality of many indigenous and ‘minority’ linguistic varieties falling out of use in local communities and being replaced by other varieties (often, but not always, by so-called ‘World languages’ like English, Spanish, French, or Mandarin). There is also no doubt about the fact that such popular and mass-media discourses of language death (to say nothing of the quasi-academic literature of ‘biolinguistic diversity’ [e.g., Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Maffi, 2001]) mobilize a set of ideologically saturated ‘concepts of language’ that are deeply rooted in European culture, most often a Herderianism of essentialized ethnocultural difference in which ‘there lurks a recuperative diachrony that implies its own—generally mythic—horizon of purity and isolation’ of languages (Silverstein, 1998, p. 409), as if the peoples and communities who spoke these languages had no historical relations with other societies, ... as if they had no experience constructing their own mode of existence out of their dependency on people—not to mention imperious forces of nature—over which they had no control. Rather, until Europeans appeared, they were ‘isolated’—which just means that we weren’t there (Sahlins, 2000 [1999], p. 502; emphasis in orig.).

There may be more at stake here than ‘our own’ (i.e., European) narcissism. Sahlins goes on to sketch the ‘despondency theory’ that lurked in the mid-20th century anthropological literature of ‘acculturation’ and its deprivations, seeing it as the logical and historical precursor of later Marx-inspired visions of the ‘dependency’ of peripheral peoples within the World System (ibid., p. 503). Insofar as all these discourses imagine local and indigenous societies as ‘destined to lose their cultural coherence—as well as the pristine innocence for which Europeans, incomplete and sinful progeny of Adam, so desired them’ (ibid., p. 502), Sahlins asks, do they not ‘mimic on an academic plane the same imperialism they would despise? As an attack on the cultural integrity and historical agency of the peripheral people, they do in theory what imperialism attempts in practice’ (Sahlins, 2000 [1992], p. 478).

If each indigenous language—imagined as fluently spoken and unconsciously deployed in a homogeneous speech-community of like-minded and like-languag-ed individuals—is both a ‘window on the human mind’ and ‘a people’s way of looking at the world’, then what of the linguistic productions of today’s remaining speakers, semipeakers (Dorian, 1981), descendants, and adult heritage-language learners, who codeswitch from English or another ‘dominant’ language to produce words, phrases, and texts in an ancestral variety, often hesitantly and self-consciously? Are their linguistic productions nothing more than ‘bits and pieces of cultural structures ... resurrected into corrupt forms of the European imagination’? Or is this a view that ‘collaps[es] their lives within a global vision of domination [that] in subtle intellectual and ideological ways makes the conquest complete’ (Sahlins, 2000 [1992], p. 478)?

‘A corollary of despondency theory’, as Sahlins points out, ‘was that the others would now become just like us—if they survived’ (Sahlins, 2000 [1999], p. 503). In fact, they have survived, and ‘Contrary to the evolutionary destiny the West had foreseen for them, the so-called savages will be neither all alike nor just like us’ (ibid., pp. 504–505). This is good

5 Compare Salikoko Mufwene’s observation that ‘most discussions of language endangerment have reflected views of languages and cultures as ideally pure and static systems whose integrity and survival must be protected’ (Mufwene, 2002, p. 377).
news, I think, even if the literature of ‘language endangerment’ has not taken adequate notice of it.

Linguists have raised similar concerns, among them Henry Hoenigswald (1915–2003), who noted that ‘thinking about language death confronts the linguist with awkward questions concerning his fundamental concepts’—chief among these ‘the framework of growth and decay and ultimate death, or of evolution and ultimate extinction’, notions he characterized as ‘virulent’ (Hoenigswald, 1989, p. 347). More recently, Salikoko Mufwene has observed that his colleagues have tended to express ‘more concern about languages as commodities for linguistic analysis than with the costs and benefits to the populations who have shifted languages’ (Mufwene, 2001), leading him to ask whether advocating ‘language maintenance for the sake of ‘biolinguistic diversity’’ is not ‘tantamount to declaring languages as more important to linguists than the speakers themselves’ (Mufwene, 2002, p. 383).6

In order to justify the application to language(s) of a metaphor of ‘endangered species’—or, in fact, to connect endangered species and endangered languages directly, as victims of globalization, capitalism, etc. (Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Maffi, 2001)—Silverstein finds that an ‘untheorized folk view’ of language is all that is on offer, a view that he disparages as ‘rationalized by a most naïve Whorfianism about culture and so-called “world-view” (itself an ideological term that bespeaks a lack of contact with serious anthropological, linguistic anthropological, or philosophical discourse since probably 1950!)’ (Silverstein, 1998, p. 422). ‘This’, says Silverstein, ‘from the same folks who, as theoreticians, value the language-specific only in terms of a universalist and explicitly or implicitly formalist scientific project!’ (ibid.)7

If this discourse of ‘language endangerment’ as a global crisis of ‘biolinguistic diversity’ is not successful either as (socio-) linguistics or as (linguistic) anthropology, then we must ask what it does succeed at—for it has gained remarkable currency across the academic, popular-press, government, and NGO sectors over the past 10 or 15 years.

First and foremost, it has succeeded in raising the level of public awareness of the issue. The NSF/NEH Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) Project has already provided considerable funding for a number of projects—in only one recently reported example, awarding $160,000 to Jule Gomez de Garcia, an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at California State University – San Marcos who will work with 30 women survivors of genocide and atrocities in Highland Guatemala; the funds will enable the women to ‘spend nine hours per week honing their speaking, reading and writing skills in Ixil, an endangered Mayan language’, and will enable Gomez de Garcia and a colleague to set up ‘a Web site featuring voice and video files of narratives that will be provided by 30 women in the village’ so that they can testify in their native language to the depredations they suffered (Garrick, 2005). Meanwhile, on the Coeur d’Alene Reservation in Idaho, proceeds from tribally-owned gaming operations are being combined with a grant from the US Depart-

6 Indeed, the biolinguistic diversity rhetoric has proved an easy target for commentators who would eliminate efforts at language preservation entirely—see, e.g., Berreby, 2003; Miller, 2002.

7 There is now a large secondary or ‘tertiary’ literature concerned with rhetorics of language endangerment and language rights, which there is no space here to review in detail; see, e.g., Ladefoged (1992) and Dorian’s response (1993), and Errington (2003), and cf. the contributions of Hill (2002), Hinton (2002), and others to a special issue of the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology [vol. 12, no. 2] concerned with this subject.
ment of Agriculture Rural Utilities Service to provide free broadband Wi-Fi service to all tribal members, making available ‘streaming video and other high-bandwidth applications, especially those which help to teach the ancient tribal language of the Coeur d’Alene’ (Graychase, 2005).

Note the almost complete absence from these reports of the rhetoric of ‘endangered species’ or the comparison of languages to ‘old-growth forests of the mind’. The primary focus of the Ixil and Coeur d’Alene projects is not on the beauty of these languages’ grammatical structures (admiratio), but on their maintenance, retention, and use in discourse by members of the local speech communities.

The tension between the rhetoric of memorialization (or Wonder) and the rhetoric of regenerativity comes to the fore here. The Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) project, an interagency partnership between the National Science Foundation (NSF), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Smithsonian Institution, articulates its mission in terms of the rhetoric of memorialization:

These endangered languages constitute an irreplaceable treasure, not only for the communities who speak them, but also for scientists and scholars.

- Each endangered language embodies unique local knowledge of the cultures and natural systems in the region in which it is spoken.
- These languages are among the few sources of evidence for filling in the record of the human past.
- The great variety of these languages represents a vast, largely unmapped terrain on which linguists, cognitive scientists, and philosophers can chart the full capabilities—and limits—of the human mind.

At the same time, the criteria for funding center on the use of technology to make language data and documentation accessible—to linguists, but also to members of local speech communities, and the public at large: ‘DEL seeks not only to document these endangered languages but to integrate, systematize, and make knowledge concerning them widely available by exploiting advances in information technology’ says the Project Description. It seeks proposals for projects that

1. conduct fieldwork to record in digital audio and video format one or more endangered languages;
2. carry out later stages of documentation including the preparation of lexicons, grammars, text samples, and databases;
3. digitize and otherwise preserve and provide wider access to such documentary materials . . . ;
4. further develop standards and databases to make this documentation . . . widely available in consistent, archivable, interoperable, and Web-based formats;
5. conduct initial analysis of findings in the light of current linguistic theory;
6. train native speakers in descriptive linguistics;

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8 Not quite totally absent: the report about Gomez de Garcia ends as follows: “Some people might not think it is a big deal to preserve endangered languages,” Gomez de Garcia said, but languages help us understand how people live and how they think. “Language is the window we have into how the mind works,” she said’ (Graychase, 2005). This final sentence reads like an afterthought, suggesting that such sentiments are now de rigueur.
7. create other infrastructure, including workshops, to make the problem of endangered languages more widely understood and more effectively addressed.⁹

The focus, then, is clearly on documentation and accessibility of data, especially recordings of actual speech, and the project clearly envisions recruiting local community members in many phases of the process. It is all about ‘corpus planning’ (*langue*), not ‘status planning’ (*parole*).

Indeed, one cannot help but notice the absence in the DEL project description of any mention of the use of these languages in communication. Is the presupposition here that they have all ceased to function as communication media (in *parole*)? My own ethnographic experience (and in this respect I think my experience is typical) strongly suggests that when a language is spoken only by a few people in a local community, and by them only on rare occasions, its ‘functional’, symbolic, and interactional potency as a communication medium is in fact greatly increased rather than attenuated.

What, then, is the function being served by the rhetoric of memorialization and wonder (*admiratio*)? The mention of a ‘vast, largely unmapped terrain’ above contains a hint. Clearly steeped in Romanticism, it is perhaps more American than Herderian. Perhaps these texts, with their heady mixture of appreciation and melancholy, are functioning for their readers in a way that brings to mind the functions served for the newly-rich bourgeoisie of the 19th century by emerging American ‘nativist’ traditions in pictorial art.

American landscape painting in the 19th century was a form of art patronized (literally) by people who made their fortunes from the despoliation of the landscape, even as some of the practitioners of the art—notably the painter Sanford Robinson Gifford (after whom the Gifford-Pinchot National Forest in Washington State is named)—devoted their lives to preserving ‘unspoiled’, pristine, places.

In 2002 the Tate Britain mounted an exhibition called ‘American Sublime’ that sought to trace the growth ‘of an indigenous American pictorial language fashioned to describe and convey emotional responses to American landscape’ (Barringer and Wilton, 2002, p. 11). As the exhibition catalogue makes clear, these painters may have sought the pristine wilderness—but very often what they painted was its destruction and despoliation (a vast number of these landscapes are extremely florid sunsets). The essays in the exhibition catalogue point out how paintings like Fitz Hugh Lane’s ‘ghostly’ *Lumber Schooners at Evening on Penobscot Bay* [1863; no. 72]—which depicts boats carting planks of spruce and white pine to the Boston building trade—‘mutely testify to the wilderness’s destruction’.ⁱ⁰ Likewise, Sanford Robinson Gifford’s *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* [1866; no. 21] presents a ‘melancholy scene of destruction . . . in which charred tree stumps in the foreground contrast with the pristine sky and mountain landscape in the distance’ (Barringer and Wilton, 2002, p. 51).

The connection between the contemporary discourse of language endangerment and 19th century landscape painting as practiced by Thomas Cole (founder of the so-called ‘Hudson River School’), Gifford and others is anything but fortuitous: according to one

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¹⁰ The spruce and pine on its way to Boston Harbor in 1863 was more likely going into service to the global textile trade. New England’s second deforestation happened then, mostly to make boxes to ship the ‘world’s worsteds’—for example, out of Lawrence, Mass.—and shoes from Haverhill. By the 1860s, painters like Cole and Lane were in fact mourning the re-vanishing of a restored landscape. For this point I am indebted to Kristen M. Harol (in an email of 18 August 2005).
commentator, the emergence of this style of painting is ‘one historical case of cross-fertilization between the visual arts and the natural sciences’, and ‘coincides with the beginnings of ecological consciousness in the US’ (Savage, 2001, p. 9). Connected to the larger cultural phenomenon of ‘landscape tourism’ (Truettner and Wallach, 1994, pp. 29–31)—in which ‘the subjugation of Native American populations, the development of the railroad, and the ever-expanding frontier of new settlement and development made “nature” less remote, safer and easier to reach and enjoy for both artists and tourists’—it turns out that ‘the reverence for nature . . . cannot be disentangled from the very forces that were encroaching upon nature and destroying it’ (Savage, 2001, p. 10; and see Cole, 1836; Wallach, 2002).

A quotation from de Tocqueville brings us back full circle to the contemporary discourse of ‘endangered languages’:

It is this consciousness of destruction, this arrière-pensée of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with a melancholy pleasure; one is in some sort of hurry to admire them. Thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilization. One feels proud to be a man, and yet at the same time one experiences I cannot say what bitter regret at the power that God has granted to us over nature (quoted in Barringer and Wilton, 2002, p. 51).

3. John Peabody Harrington and his archive: non imitandum sed admirandum

If the preceding section on the literature of ‘endangered languages’ identified its object of analysis and critique as a form of travel literature linked both thematically and historically to 19th century American traditions of painting the sublime in the form of once-pristine landscapes spoiled by ‘progress’, then in this section I venture onto the ground of hagiography.

Or more accurately, anti-hagiography, since in this section I show how, by a kind of contagious magic, a person who would otherwise be anathema to any cosmopolitan, right-thinking person can be rescued—‘salvaged’, as it were—to admiratio.

Though he probably wrote down more words—usually one on each sheet of paper—of more now-extinct American Indian languages than any other single person, John Peabody Harrington (1884–1961) was almost the photographic negative of our image of the post-Enlightenment scientist. His fieldwork priorities were dictated not on the basis of what the results of the fieldwork might contribute to emerging scholarly debate in linguistics or anthropology—of which he was in any case ‘scarcely aware’ (Lawton, 1975, p. xix)—but rather on the basis of which of his imagined ‘competitors’ had been there last, or might go there next.11 He was obsessed with secrecy, and could be ruthless in his extraction of linguistic data from informants; not a believer in Habermasian free and open debate, he

11 ‘Harrington had heard that [A.L.] Kroeber was interested in the Zuni, and therefore he wanted me to get a sample of the language’, writes Harrington’s ex-wife Carobeth Laird in her searing memoir of their seven years of marriage (Laird, 1975, p. 102), one of many examples that might be cited.
expended great energies to ensure that the results of his work never reached anyone—least of all his scientific colleagues, most of whom he held in a mixture of envy and contempt.  

Today, in an irony of appropriately Brobdingnagian proportions, Harrington’s vast archive is literally a site at which people of Native Californian descent are discovering the voices of their own ancestors and learning about their own cultures—sometimes literally ‘regenerating’ lost languages. The Harrington archive is also important to EuroAmerican linguists and anthropologists—but they find in the same archive a troubling mirror of themselves.

A feature story published in the *Los Angeles Times* over the 4th of July weekend of 2004 describes the Harrington archive and the project underway at University of California – Davis, where a group of researchers, including people of Native Californian descent, ‘are transcribing Harrington’s notes—a million pages of scribbled writing, much of it in code, Spanish or phonetic script—into electronic documents that can be searched word by word’ (Anton, 2004).

The article positions its subject from the very first as a grotesque:

> Few understood the true significance of John Peabody Harrington’s work when he died at age 77. For some 50 years, the linguist and anthropologist had crisscrossed California and the West, cheating the grave by finding the last speakers of ancient Native American tongues and writing down their words and customs. Secretive and paranoid, Harrington was a packrat who stuffed much of his work into boxes, crates and steamer trunks. After his death in 1961, the papers turned up in warehouses, attics, basements, even chicken coops throughout the West and eventually made their way to his former employer, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C (Anton, 2004).

Harrington is described as ‘a recluse who didn’t care about money’—true, his mother was a Peabody—who ‘dressed in tattered clothing and slept on the dirt floors of his interview subjects’ homes’, who ‘rented [his teenage assistant] Marr’s grandmother’s home in Santa Ana and used it as a base for several decades, turning it into a warren of papers and boxes that left little room to walk’, who ‘had no phone and would routinely not answer the door’ (ibid.). His assistant Marr ‘was instructed never to tell anyone where he or Harrington were going or what they were doing’. It is an understatement to say that ‘in contrast to others in his field, Harrington was not the least bit eager to publicize his discoveries. Quite the opposite’ (ibid.).

Warming (unaccountably) to its subject, the article goes on to characterize Harrington as a person who was ‘full of contradictions’: ‘sensitive to the nuances of native cultures’, he was nevertheless ‘a fervent anti-Semite’, a ‘workaholic who never quite finished a project’. He was ‘a social misfit who had no close friends but could charm suspicious strangers into divulging their most profound secrets’ (ibid.).

Along with the reclusiveness and paranoia comes an archive so vast in scope as to be awe-inspiring in its own right. In the Foreword to a brief biography of Harrington published in 1976, Lowell John Bean remarks: ‘For those who have not worked directly with

12 An exception was C. Hart Merriam, ‘one of the very few [academic] men whom Harrington did not denigrate’, in part because ‘there was no doubt about his not being a Jew’ (Laird, 1975, p. 86). ‘Nothing’, on the other hand, ‘could convince him’ that Kroeber—who ‘loomed over his professional life like a menacing giant’—‘was not a Jew’ (ibid., p. 32).
this collection it is difficult to convey the immensity and grandeur of it; or its squalor and seeming lack of order’ (Walsh, 1976; quoted in Callaghan, 1977). The LA Times article resumes:

‘Six tons of material—much of it worthless’, recalled Catherine A. Callaghan, now 72, a linguist who sorted through the Harrington papers when they arrived at the Smithsonian (Anton, 2004).

It is important to see that the archive contains much more than written documents—indeed, it is a huge ‘cabinet of curiosities’. Callaghan continues:

‘There was blank paper, dirty old shirts, half-eaten sandwiches. The low point came when I found a box of birds stored for 30 years without the benefit of taxidermy . . . . But mixed in with all of that were these treasures’ (ibid.)

In the fifth paragraph comes what a journalist would call the article’s ‘buried lede’:

Forty-three years later, Harrington’s massive legacy is regarded as a Rosetta stone that unlocks dozens of all-but-forgotten California Indian languages. But the work of deciphering it is far from over (ibid.).

Writing can ‘lock’ language down, and even hide it away—but once written down, it can also be ‘unlocked’, a theme I return to at the end of this section.

Harrington’s approach to fieldwork is illustrated by quotations from letters he wrote to his assistant Jack Marr, whom he had trained to do independent fieldwork projects. When Marr reports that an informant is ill, Harrington writes back:

‘Tell him we’ll give him five dollars an hour, it’ll pay all his doctor bills and his funeral and will leave his widow with a handsome jackpot’, he wrote Marr regarding a sickly Chinook Indian elder in Washington state. ‘DON’T TAKE NO. Hound the life out of him, go back again and again and again’. When another subject, a Chinook man nearly 100 years old, suffered a stroke, Harrington was heartbroken—for himself. ‘Have just gotten over crying . . . this is the worst thing that ever happened to me’, he wrote Marr. A few sentences later, though, Harrington encouraged him to remain optimistic. ‘You know, a paralysed person often GETS OVER the first stroke, it is the third stroke that carries them off. And between strokes they get well and sit up and talk’ (ibid.).

Two anecdotes from Carobeth Laird’s Encounter with an Angry God (1975) illustrate how Harrington’s fetishistic obsession with written documents mediated his relationships with the people around him:

Harrington was convinced that every linguist, every ethnologist, Jewish or non-Jewish, but particularly the former, was devoting time and effort to securing a glimpse of his (Harrington’s) fieldnotes. . . . One day [in 1918] when I had not accompanied him to the office [at the Bureau of American Ethnology in Washington, DC] he came home early with a slim folder of someone’s unpublished notes. (Edward Sapir’s I think. Sapir was a brilliant ethnologist of whom he spoke often and enviously.) These notes must be copied immediately, Harrington said, whispering even in the privacy of our apartment and trembling with excitement. I promptly set to work, and when I had finished he returned the manuscript to whomever had conspired with him or
to whatever drawer he had lifted it from. I remember no single word of what I wrote. But if the notes were Sapir’s and if they had to do with Southern Paiute, this was the most important single event of our stay in Washington. For if my perhaps unjustified assumptions are true, the sight of this material may well have sparked Harrington’s decision, a little more than a year later, to send me to Parker, Arizona, to work among the Chemehuevi Indians; a decision which eventuated in our permanent separation and turned my life into an entirely different channel (Laird, 1975, p. 87; emphasis in orig.).

In the last sentence here, Laird is alluding to the fact that she ended up divorcing Harrington and marrying one of their Chemehuevi consultants, George Laird. A year or so after the events described above, when the three of them were sharing a house, she recalls lying on the couch, reading ‘Cosmopolitan or Redbook, or something of that ilk’, and doing so ‘as openly and unashamedly as if I had been back in my parents’ home’:

Harrington kept sliding glances at me but did not fly into a rage. However, the moment came when he could endure my idleness no longer. ‘If you’re going to read’, he said with rare restraint, ‘read something worthwhile’. From the table beside him he picked up Sweet’s Primer of Phonetics . . . and tossed it to me. . . . One corner of the book struck me solidly on the side of the abdomen. Both men leaped to their feet. Both exclaimed with a single voice. George said, ‘Did it hurt you?’ Harrington said, ‘Did it hurt the book?’ In the years after George and I had a family of our own, ‘Did it hurt the book?’ became a family joke (Laird, 1975, p. 135).

Descendants of California Indian groups, meanwhile—uninvolved in the psychodrama of Harrington’s relations with his then-wife, his assistant, or his scientific colleagues—continue to put the ‘vast, largely unmapped terrain’ of his archive to a variety of uses:

Harrington’s work has been used by California’s Indians trying to establish federal tribal recognition, settle territorial claims and protect sacred sites from development. It has also played a crucial role in reviving languages. The Muwekma Ohlone tribe in the Bay Area, for instance, is using a dictionary compiled from Harrington’s research to teach its members the Chochenyo language, which had been dead for more than 60 years. ‘They’ve gone from knowing nothing to being able to carry on a short conversation, sing songs and play games. Now they’re starting to do some creative writing’, said UC Berkeley linguistics professor Juliette Blevins, who works with the tribe. ‘We are reconstructing a whole language using his material’ (Anton, 2004).

Here follows the first of two vignettes illustrating the effect that engaging with Harrington’s archive has had on California Native descendants:

When Gloria Morgan, a member of the Tejon tribe in Kern County, read that UC Davis was seeking Native Americans to help computerize Harrington’s work, she jumped at the chance. Morgan discovered that Harrington had recorded her great-great-grandmother Angelita singing songs in the Kitanemuk language, of which there are no fluent speakers today. ‘I didn’t grow up exposed to my own culture, so this is such a huge thing’, said Morgan, 30, a 911 dispatcher. ‘I had never even heard of Harrington before this’. Typing Harrington’s notes into a spreadsheet is tedious work. But with each page, Morgan has learned something. A description
of a death ceremony. How paint was made using deer marrow. That her ancestors had words for 40 different native grasses but didn’t know what a shark was. ‘A hundred little things that wouldn’t mean anything to anyone’, Morgan said. ‘Except if you’re a Tejon’ (Anton, 2004).

Notice how Morgan’s relationship to Harrington’s inscriptions and recordings is mediated by kinship, descent, and ethnicity: she is helping to prepare a digital archive of words uttered and songs sung by her great-great-grandmother. The relationship of linguists and anthropologists to the archive and its contents, on the other hand, is mediated by forms of scientific expertise licensed by institutions. The article shifts focus right here to describe the pernicious, even debilitating effects of prolonged exposure to Harringtoniana on non-Indian researchers:

Scholars of Indian anthropology are drawn to Harrington’s archive as the definitive work of its kind. There’s only one problem: His handwritten notes are as comprehensible as Aramaic. ‘It’s impenetrable’, said Martha Macri, director of the UC Davis Native American Language Center and co-director of the effort to computerize Harrington’s papers. ‘It’s too hard to read his handwriting. Few people can tolerate looking at it for long periods of time’ (ibid.).

Note how the non-Indian researchers are portrayed here—they are ‘drawn to’ the Harrington archive, and yet it proves ‘impenetrable’, too hard to read, intolerable. Toward the end of the article, this theme of the effect of the archive on its curators resurfaces:

The size of the archive makes a mockery of time. Spend a month plowing through what took a lifetime to compile, and you haven’t even scratched the surface (ibid.).

Notice: just as Harrington, in his million pages of notes, barely ‘scratched the surface’ of the now-lost conceptual riches of Native California languages and cultures he described, if you are an archivist you can spend a month working with the Harrington archive and you ‘haven’t even scratched the surface’ of its documentary riches, or its apparent disorder, or its squalor.

A Smithsonian editor who worked for years to commit the archive to microfilm wrote, in a 10-volume overview of the collection: ‘One can easily fall prey to the “Harrington Curse”: obsession’. After six months of separating Harrington’s papers from his dirty laundry, Catherine Callaghan had an epiphany. ‘I could see myself becoming more and more like Harrington. I had wanted to devote my life to pure research as he did’, she said. ‘But I realized I could not survive as a human being that way’ (ibid.).

Harrington’s ‘research’ (if that is even the right word) was too pure to be human, apparently. In fact, he seems to have been consumed by the activity of documenting (consuming?) languages:

For a man who worked so desperately to save something, Harrington gave surprisingly little thought to how his stuff would be used—or whether it would, in its vastness,
simply be admired. ‘He thought these languages were dying off so rapidly that he could
not afford to take the time to publish any of his findings’, said Macri of UC Davis.

It seems possible that Macri is putting the best face on things. The practice of scribbling
notes in an idiosyncratic phonetic orthography (if not actually ‘in code’) and secreting
the documents away would suggest that Harrington’s own project was to ensure that the
material would not be used by, or even accessible to, anyone else.

Does this make it more valuable? ‘I don’t think he envisioned [his archive] being used by
Indian people’, Macri is quoted as saying. ‘I don’t think he thought Indian people would
be as resilient as they’ve been’.

This remark speaks volumes—literally. Harrington assumed that Indian people were
not ‘resilient’, and because of this—and because of his raging graphomania14 and related
personal morbidities—he committed to paper many millions of linguistic facts that would
surely not otherwise have ever been known, all in his own maniacally precise phonetic
alphabet. It is abundantly clear that Harrington defined his task as recording linguistic
facts for posterity at the last possible moment, even if it is less clear for whose benefit
he was doing this. The ‘facts’, moreover, are not organized in terms of any analytic framework,
such as one would expect a practicing empirical scientist to do even in notes made
for his or her personal use. Instead, it is literally a ‘collection’, often a single Native-
language word, with coded notes, in the middle of each 8½” × 11” sheet.

The article closes with a second extended anecdote of an encounter between a person of
Native Californian descent and the Harrington archive, which must be quoted in full:

Joyce Stanfield Perry, a Juaneño tribal leader in Orange County, discovered the
depth of Harrington’s legacy in 1994 as she and others searched the Smithsonian
documentation to support federal recognition for their tribe. On a dusty shelf, they found a box of recordings one of Harrington’s assistants made in the 1930s.
On them was the voice of Anastacia de Majel, a tribal elder then in her 70s and
one of the last speakers of the Juaneño language. Her words were preserved as if
in amber. ‘We wept’, Perry said. ‘It truly was like our ancestors were talking directly
to us’. Perry, who also runs a nonprofit Indian education and cultural foundation,
estimates that 10,000 pages of Harrington’s notes refer to her tribe. As they are
entered into the database, a dictionary of her native language is emerging. So far,
it contains 1,200 words. Through Harrington, Perry has made discoveries about
her ancestors’ way of life that have affected her profoundly. ‘I didn’t know that ani-
mals would talk to my ancestors and that my ancestors understood them. I didn’t
know that the stars communicated with my ancestors or that when a crow flies over-
head that I’m supposed to say certain words to them’, Perry said. ‘It was humbling to
acknowledge how much our ancestors knew’. Perry’s backyard garden is full of rocks
that represent people in her life, a tradition she learned from Harrington’s archive.
Every room in her house has something in it that her ancestors told Harrington it
was important to have—sacred items that Perry won’t reveal to outsiders. ‘Harring-
ton is our hero’, she said. ‘There’s something magical about his work . . . It changed
how I pray and how I see the world’ (ibid.; ellipses in orig.).

14 ‘All that I really remember of him is a vague picture of a man writing, writing, writing’, writes Carobeth Laird
near the end of her memoir (Laird, 1975, p. 153).
It is interesting to note that Ms Perry is nowhere presented as having ‘fallen prey to a curse’ or being inexorably ‘drawn to’ an engagement with Harrington and/or his archive that turns out to be enthralling, maddening, or ‘intolerable’, or that threatens her ‘survival as a human being’—quite the opposite.

The documents are not ‘impenetrable’ to her. She engages with the inscriptions and recordings she encounters in Harrington’s records of her own ancestors’ way of life, populating her garden with ‘rocks that represent people in her life, a tradition she learned from Harrington’s archive’, and creating a kind of indoor museum as well: ‘Every room in her house has something in it that her ancestors told Harrington it was important to have—sacred items that Perry won’t reveal to outsiders’.

Modalities of encounter that we might associate with consumption are clearly involved here, but the mode of appropriation—perhaps more precisely, of re-appropriation—is clearly that of imitatio (regenerativity) rather than admiratio (memorialization and Wonder). ‘What is essential in such imitation’ according to Bynum ‘is an “other”, of course, but the encounter is made possible because an ontological similarity to that other . . . is built into the experiencing self’ (Bynum, 2001, p. 52–53). Ms Perry seems to seize on the materials in the Harrington archive so that she can use them both as ‘documentation to support federal recognition for their tribe’ and to as a way to create in and for herself an emotionally vivid sense of coevalness with her ancestors.

In the present case, descent and kinship, heritage, and cultural identity—essentialized as modes of ‘ontological similarity’ in different ways and to different degrees (e.g., perhaps as ‘blood’)—licenses her encounter with the Harrington papers in the first place, and mediates the sense of ‘ontological similarity’ produced in and by that encounter. Recall the characterization of the Harrington archive offered by Gloria Morgan, the erstwhile 911 operator who is now digitizing Harrington’s recordings of her great-great-grandmother: ‘A hundred little things that wouldn’t mean anything to anyone—except if you’re a Tejon’.

4. Conclusion

The descendants of Harrington’s California Native language consultants are engaged, together with linguists and other non-Indian experts, in a massive cultural and linguistic project of ‘reverse engineering’: the documentary materials that Harrington ‘encrypted’ and then hid away so that they would remain forever inaccessible to his (‘Jewish’) scientific colleagues, are now being made public, and for project participants of Native descent, the work of ‘decipherment’ is a work of re-appropriation and repatriation.

Similar things are happening right now in reservation (and in Canada, First Nations) communities across North America, albeit on a more modest scale—which is why the Harrington case is so valuable as an exemplar. In its very ‘monstrosity’, in the ‘awe-inspiring’ size and scope of the archive and in the indefatigable energies and insatiable appetites of its compiler, it points, like all monsters, beyond itself to a larger set of issues: What does it mean for a language to ‘disappear’, and how can we tell when it has disappeared? What is ‘a language’, such that a written text (perhaps in a detailed phonetic orthography) can give

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15 ‘As every medieval schoolboy knew’, Bynum reminds us, ‘monsters are named from the verb monstrare (to show)—that is, not from their ontology but from their utility’: ‘If to theologians, chroniclers, and preachers, the wonderful was indeed often the strange, the rare, and the inexplicable, it was never the merely strange or the simply inexplicable. It was a strange that mattered, that pointed beyond itself’ (Bynum, 2001, p. 71–72).
access to it, even long after the death of the last native speaker? What is ‘a culture’, such that a language—provided it has been written down or otherwise documented—can provide a ‘key’ to it?

In my discussion of these two cases—the popular and scholarly discourse of ‘endangered languages’ and the posthumous career of Harrington’s archive—I have tried to attend to language-as-written neither from a perspective that sees ‘literacy’ as a culture-independent ‘technology’, nor from an interest in the form of writing systems per se, but rather to understand how written documents can play active roles in the emergence of social relationships (cf. Warner, 1990; cf. Hull, 2003).

In the discourse of ‘endangered languages’, it turns out that writing—its presence or its absence—is what makes all the difference. Languages that disappear without ever being recorded or written are *Lost Languages*. *Dead Languages* are the ones ‘we’ know only on the basis of written text artifacts. One can fill out the rest of the continuum using terminology and definitions widely shared in the ‘endangered languages’ literature: *Moribund Languages* are ‘Languages no longer being learned as mother-tongue by children’; *Endangered Languages* are ‘Languages which, though now still being learned by children, will—if the present conditions continue—cease to be learned by children during the coming century’. Finally, *Safe Languages* are languages with ‘official state support and very large numbers of speakers’.\(^\text{16}\)

The point is that this discourse about language(s) establishes a horizon, a line, on the far side of which is oblivion, on the near side of which is a limited *and dwindling* inventory of countable linguistic objects (‘languages’).

The discourse of language endangerment situates the act of writing precisely astraddle that line, endowing writing with the power to move (a) language, word by painstakingly transcribed word, from one side of that metaphysical divide to the other. And so it is perhaps not surprising that Harrington, who clearly suffered from graphomania (among other diagnosable disorders), is—perhaps for that very reason—elevated to quasi-sainthood, notwithstanding his treatment of his colleagues, consultants, and others. As a first-hand witness to the disappearance of so many languages, he becomes the hero of a genre of ‘last contact’ stories, and begins to take on all the characteristics that are imagined as inhering in the languages themselves.

But even Harrington only ‘scratched the surface’. If languages that ‘disappear’ without being written down or recorded become *Lost Languages*—‘unknown unknowns’, then we are staring into an abyss: a sure sign that we are in contact with the Sublime.

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\(^\text{16}\) All quotations in this paragraph taken from SIL at http://www.sil.org/sociolx/ndg-lg-grps.html#Endangered.
was presented again on 11 November 2004 to the workshop “Semiotics: Culture in Context” at the University of Chicago; that version elicited valuable interventions in the event by Danilyn Rutherford, Susan Gal, and others, and detailed written commentaries after the fact from Jessica Cattelino, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Erin Debenport, Courtney Handman, Matt Kelly, Michael Silverstein, and James Slotta. The present—very different—version has benefited greatly from the comments (written and oral) of Erin Debenport, John Joseph, Janet D. Keller, Michéle Koven, Paul Manning, Michael Silverstein, and Talbot Taylor. Errors and infelicities that remain are my sole responsibility.

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