The *Other*
Extinction Rebellion: Countering the Loss of Biocultural Diversity
Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua. Through the power of stories, images, and art, it supports our mission to educate minds and hearts about the vital value of biocultural diversity for the thriving of life on earth.

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Changing Our Lives, Sowing New Seeds

Luisa Maffi

With the climate emergency threatening life as we know it, an Extinction Rebellion movement has been afoot. We at Terralingua, however, believe there is another crisis against which the world should rebel too: the “biocultural diversity extinction crisis,” the ongoing loss of diversity in both nature and culture. That’s what we had in mind when launching the theme for the 2020 issue of Langscape Magazine: calling attention to the need for that other extinction rebellion.

That was in February. Little did we know that only a month later the COVID-19 pandemic would begin to spread across the planet, making our theme all the more poignant and urgent! Indigenous Peoples and local communities—who account for most of the world’s biocultural diversity—were among the most vulnerable to the effects of this scourge, which posed an existential threat to their lives, livelihoods, and ways of life. That added a whole new dimension to our theme: How were they responding to that threat to their lives, livelihoods, and ways of life? And again Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities were hit hard. That brought into closer focus the tangle of discrimination, and social injustice. It swept the globe like a pandemic health crisis, came a wave of political and social turmoil, provoked by the long-festering ills of systemic racism, health crisis, came a wave of political and social turmoil, provoked by the long-festering ills of systemic racism, discrimination, and social injustice. It swept the globe like a second pandemic, exacerbated and exacerbated by the first one—and again Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities were hit hard. That brought into closer focus the tangle of social, economic, and environmental injustices and inequities that has long stood in the way of a bioculturally just and sustainable world. And it posed a new question for our theme: What challenges and opportunities does the current historical moment present for achieving “unity in biocultural diversity” for all?

The cornucopia of stories, poems, photos, videos, and artwork we present in the following pages is the fruit of this wide-ranging exploration of our theme. Such a bounty of contributions from all corners of the world, offered at a time of unprecedented global hardship, is proof that our writers and artists—many of them young participants in our Indigenous Youth Storytellers Circle project—were determined to share their thoughts and feelings against all odds. We’re all the richer and wiser for their caring, generosity, and insights.

First we delve into the challenges that communities in North and South America, Asia, and Africa face in confronting and coping with the pandemic. We start in New York, where researchers Maya Dartus, Sienna Craig, Daniel Kaufman, Ross Perlin, and Mark Turin were in the midst of producing cutting-edge digital mappings of the spatial distribution of New York’s astounding linguistic diversity—about 650 different languages spoken there!—when the pandemic hit. Suddenly, they realized their language maps could be repurposed to help address health problems and other urgent societal needs the pandemic brought about in the city.

Cities under pandemic lockdown inspire Page Lambert’s prose poem “Reclamation.” With the urban bustle at a standstill, wildlife was seen returning within city boundaries, reclaiming their ground. What would happen, muses Page, if cities remained off-limits to human activities long enough for them to crumble and turn back to the earth?

Leaving cities behind, we drop in on several local communities around the world, each dealing with pandemic challenges (and opportunities) in its own creative way. Severn Cullis-Suzuki transports us to Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the west coast of Canada that’s home to the Haida people. During a period of pandemic self-isolation, she and her family discover a silver lining: finding the inner calm and stillness needed for full-immersion Haida language practice.

Afterwards, with the climate emergency threatening life as we know it, an Extinction Rebellion movement has been afoot...
identity—while also posing issues of long-term sustainability.

In their essay, Manju Maharjan and co-authors Yuvash Vaidya, Prakash Khadgi, and Sheetal Vaidya introduce us to the Indigenous Pahari community of Nepal. Paharis have long specialized in highly popular woven bamboo crafts, but the pandemic has cramped their ability to bring their products to market. Undeterred, villagers find ingenious ways to build resilience.

Off to East Africa, where we follow Simon Mitamo into the farming community of Taraka in Kenya. The pandemic has disrupted their way of life and ability to grow food, but people help one another cope, and Elders remind community members that they have survived pandemics before. Ancient rituals are revived to strengthen cooperation and stave off the threat.

On to South America. Listening to Indigenous Elders and leaders in Colombia, Daniel Henry Rasolt reflects on the links of the pandemic to other global emergencies: climate change and biodiversity loss. Securing Indigenous land rights, he argues, is crucial to address these intersecting crises. His story is hauntingly illustrated with artwork by Vanessa Circe.

The next group of stories, poetry, and interviews turns the spotlight on edged issues of Indigenous sovereignty, racism, and discrimination. In Hawai‘i, we trek with Harvy King up the slopes of Mauna Kea, a mountain sacred to Native Hawaiians, where ever bigger and more powerful telescopes are being built. Asserting their self-determination, Native Hawaiians are staging a gentle rebellion mission of their own: decolonizing the country’s health system, which alienates and disrupts their way of life and their ability to grow food, but people help one another cope, and Elders remind community members that they have survived pandemics before. Ancient rituals are revived to strengthen cooperation and stave off the threat.

In a probing interview with Barbara Derick, a Tshilhup’ artist and storyteller from Canada, Weaving paintings and words together, Barbara takes us along on her life’s journey—one of rebellion against cultural genocide and of affirmation of her cultural roots, always guided by the healing wisdom of her maternal lineage.

Marco Romagnol is on a gently rebellious mission of his own: decolonizing biomedical science and medicine. In a heartfelt poem by Daryll Whetung, an Ojibway film editor and producer. Dedicated to his daughter, “This World Is Made for You” is an ode to the spiritual teachings we are given as gifts that we must learn to use to balance our lives and heal the world.

The next group of stories, poetry, and videos zeroes in on Indigenous youth from all over the world. The last group of stories, poetry, and videos zeroes in on Indigenous communities in different parts of the world that are fighting to protect their biocultural heritage. Felipe Montoya-Greenbeck recounts the epic struggle of a peasant community in Costa Rica that seeks to stop the building of a dam on a river with which people’s lives are intertwined—and wins, with a little help from a toad! Teja Jommalagadla’s prose poem “The Dam Departed” makes for a striking segue to Felipe’s story. An engineer by training, Teja minces no words about the dominant way of thinking that seeks to dominate, instead of harmonizing with, the forces of nature. That metaphorical “dam” must come down along with physical dams, so that water and life may flow again.

Two young Indigenous women from Borneo tell stories of local communities’ resistance to encroachment onto their lands. Filmmaker Pinarista Juliana, a Batakase and Dayak Ngaju, visits a village that is “fighting deforestation with tradition” by affirming their relationship to the land through the revival of a traditional festival. Activist Meta Septalisa, also a Dayak Ngaju, meets women farmers in another village who are tenaciously sticking to their farming traditions in their battle against unjust government regulations and land privatization.

In the lowlands of southern Mexico, the Lacandon Maya continue tradition with innovation in efforts to protect their threatened forest home. James Nations, who has worked with them for decades, brings us his story. We compliment that story with a video by Steve Bartz, a friend of both Jim’s and Terralingua’s, who passed away in 2020. Working with Jim in the 1990s, Steve filmed a historic encounter between the Lacandon and their Mayan neighbors, the Ira, with whom they share a common past and a common struggle to protect their forests and ways of life.

Jacquelyn Ross, a Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok woman from northern California, shares the predication of the endangered abalone sea snail. That wondrous creature is culturally and spiritually central to Coast Indigenous Peoples there, who are now seeking to reclaim the treasured shell’s marine home.

A similar attachment to a culturally important species and an equally strong determination to protect it transpire from two stories from India. Kanna Siripurapu, who works closely with the Gomaranti Banjara tribe of Telangana, relates their valiant efforts to protect both their beloved Peda Thuppu cattle and their nomadic way of life. Pratulla Kalkor, a young economist hailing from the Indigenous Nanda-Gauh people of Maharashtra State, attends a festival in his community that celebrates their Gaaloa cattle and the sacred grass the cattle feed on. And in his cultural traditions he finds an answer to his enduring dissatisfaction with the economic domino of endless economic growth regardless of the cost to nature.

We close with a powerful piece by Guillerro Rodriguez Navarro about people and nature in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia. Long isolated because of its unique geography, the Sierra is now under assault from logging, mining, and other relentless development. Seeing their earthly home being destroyed, the Sierra’s Indigenous Peoples have decided to speak out. Their spiritual leaders, or Mamos, warn that protecting their home is protecting the heart of the planet. We echo the Sierra’s call to protect their biocultural heritage.

And what lesson can we draw from this rich tapestry of stories? Says one of the wise Mamos of Colombia: “Why do we want to damage the earth and water? . . . Let’s change our lives, sow new seeds.” When we emerge from the pandemic, we’ll still have to confront, and rebel against, the climate crisis, biocultural diversity loss, and social injustice. Changing our lives, sowing new seeds—that’s what we’ll need to do.

Biosocially yours,
Luisa Maffi
Maps have long been used for a variety of purposes, including to characterize land use and land cover patterns or to delineate the extent of territorial jurisdictions such as national or regional borders. In this way, cartography has long been a tool of the nation-state. Much like censuses and surveys, imperial governments have used maps to organize, classify, and carve up the world in order to occupy it and control its resources. More nefariously, maps have also been used to facilitate Indigenous land dispossession.

On the other hand, Indigenous Peoples around the world have produced their own maps for thousands of years for navigation, cataloguing, demarcating their traditional territories, and charting land use, to mention but the most obvious uses. And maps are also effective communication tools that allow for marginalized voices to be heard and for different understandings of place and space to be represented, challenging hierarchies and freeing people’s own stories from the bonds of dominant colonial narratives.

In our own work, we explore how cartography might play a role in creating a more just, inclusive, and equitable world. We believe that cartography offers powerful tools to highlight the risks of biocultural extinction and the importance of all forms of diversity. We see digital language mapping as a methodology that can be used in support of biocultural diversity. In particular, language mapping can yield a more accurate account of the distribution of linguistic diversity and can better represent the way in which language communities understand their own linguistic and spatial borders and their changing sociolinguistic identities.

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The beginnings of linguistic cartography—the creation of maps displaying features and locations of languages—coincided with the emergence of the concept of the nation-state in the nineteenth century. The fundamental underlying notion was that a “nation”—as a unit of analysis and as a political reality—ought to correspond to a single language. Associated with that notion was the belief that monolingualism was a desired norm and that multilingualism remained a historic problem to be overcome. To this day, nation-states continue to use territorial maps to define the geographical reaches of the physical, social, and linguistic worlds they imagine for themselves and to obscure other worldviews that do not align with such normative ideologies.

Yet cartography can also be subversive. There are good examples throughout the history of language maps that defy dominant colonial narratives and weave new stories of resistance and revitalization. The maps that accompanied the Linguistic Survey of India conducted in the early twentieth century, for example, diluted the political authority of the British Empire by revealing the elasticity of language boundaries. In Canada, the interactive Native Land Map creatively illustrates the fuzziness of overlapping language spaces and refutes the misconceived but enduring idea that an Indigenous territory is home to but a single language community.

These and other groundbreaking and more community-led language mapping efforts, such as the First Peoples’ Map of British Columbia, highlight the possibility for digital cartography to visualize how language communities understand their own linguistic borders. Digital language maps can help represent the fluidity of multilingualism and explore the intersection of language use, linguistic identities, and power.

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Yet, technical challenges remain in representing language communities, language mobility, and plurilingual realities in cartographic form. Most digital language maps, such as the important...
UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (http://www. unesco.org/languages-atlas/), represent languages as specific points in geographic space. Visually, this tells us nothing of the extent of language communities, whether these communities speak other languages, or what relationships might exist between the language and the land. Furthermore, a traditional static map focusing on language endangerment sorts and displays languages solely according to standardized measures of vitality, an approach that some language activists consider reductionist and even potentially harmful.

Conventional cartographic symbols are inadequate for representing lived experience, and mapping efforts have been limited by cartographic constraints that do not actually reflect linguistic realities. This is especially true for the spatial representation of complex language practices. We know that multilingual speakers, for example, choose to speak specific languages in different contexts. They may speak one language at home, another in public, and yet another in religious practice. We know that multilingual speakers choose to speak specific languages in different contexts. They may speak one language at home, another in public, and yet another in religious practice.

Drawing from other efforts to use cartography to redress inequity based delivery of public services, particularly among historically interface, we also seek to promote civic engagement and needs-visually and representationally accurate ways. Through a web-based to showcase the richness of linguistic diversity in New York City in and public health officials to communicate effectively with all members of the population is critical for containing and mitigating the spread of infection. It can be hard to translate complex and rapidly changing messaging and new terminology such as “social distancing” consistently into many different languages without an established and pre-existing infrastructure for doing so. In times of crisis, community networks become vitally important for timely and effective communication. Knowing the approximate locations of different language communities is essential context for city officials to craft appropriate and time-sensitive messaging.

Furthermore, people hospitalized because of this highly infectious virus can find themselves isolated and without the comfort of visits from family members—individuals who, under other circumstances, might have served as trusted and accurate, if unofficial, medical translators. This new reality has profound implications for both patients and health care workers facing language barriers during the pandemic.

We could have not predicted how relevant and increasingly urgent this objective would become when we embarked on this partnership in 2019. Early in 2020, New York City became the epicenter of the global pandemic brought on by a novel coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2, which emerged in China in November of 2019 and has since spread around the world, causing the severe respiratory disease known as COVID-19. Combining ELA language data and COVID-19 testing data released by the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, we plotted positive tests per capita and the distribution of linguistic diversity across the city on a map showing the interplay between the highest number of COVID-19 cases and neighborhoods with the highest linguistic diversity. We may speculate about why this may be the case.

During a pandemic, in which public health mandates and protocols can change on a daily basis, the ability of politicians and public health officials to communicate effectively with all languages, or what relationships might exist between the language and the land. Furthermore, a traditional static map focusing on language endangerment sorts and displays languages solely according to standardized measures of vitality, an approach that some language activists consider reductionist and even potentially harmful.

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Our digital map detailing the linguistic geographies of New York City’s urban spaces can help identify the public service needs of urban language communities. An advantage of an interactive map, particularly during an emergency such as a pandemic, is its capacity to combine geospatial data provided by agencies such as the New York City Department of Public Health, the Census Bureau, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) with language distribution data to spatially visualize patterns of vulnerability. CDC data that can be cross-referenced with language data include, among many other variables, the percentage of uninsured households, the percentage of crowded households or those estimated to have more people than rooms, or the percentage of households with people 65 years of age and older.

Incorporating such information into an interactive language map offers clues for understanding why it may be that linguistically rich areas of New York City have been hit particularly hard with COVID-19 and can help the city target public service delivery to the most seriously affected neighborhoods through focused translation into specific languages. The challenges in actually making this happen are many, from triangulating the data to making and disseminating the messages, but the need is clear. The fast-moving COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the importance of community-based language mapping and highlights the ever more urgent need for cartographers to attend to the diversity of language landscapes, including those in urban areas, and commit to mapping languages in ways that are more representative, collaborative, and participatory.

Cartography has a key role to play in highlighting the vital component of language in the biocultural diversity of our fragile planet. Language maps, whether in print or online, need to represent more than just points or polygons. There is great potential for utilizing cartography and visualization tools for illustrating the complexity of language practices, language mobility, and linguistic identities. Our collaborative approach to language mapping offers ways to explore how linguistic geographies may intersect with health disparities and other social vulnerabilities.

Underlying our partnership is a shared goal: identifying the role of maps for making sense of marginalization so that resources can be better mobilized to address and mitigate these inequities.

Acknowledgments: Ours is a collaborative partnership between the University of British Columbia, Dartmouth College, and the Endangered Language Alliance to develop tools to map linguistic diversity (https://languagemapping.ugent/vc).

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