A LOSS FOR WORDS

Can a dying language be saved?

By Judith Thurman

It is a singular fate to be the last of one’s kind. That is the fate of the men and women, nearly all of them elderly, who are—like Marie Wilcox, of California; Gyani Maiya Sen, of Nepal; Verdena Parker, of Oregon; and Charlie Mungulda, of Australia—the last known speakers of a language: Wukchumni, Kusunda, Hupa, and Amurdag, respectively. But a few years ago, in Chile, I met Joubert Yanten Gomez, who told me he was “the world’s only speaker of Selk’nam.” He was twenty-one.

Yanten Gomez, who uses the tribal name Keyuk, grew up modestly, in Santiago. His father, Blas Yanten, is a woodworker, and his mother, Ivonne Gomez Castro, practices traditional medicine. As a young girl, she was mocked at school for her mestizo looks, so she hesitated to tell her children—Keyuk and an older sister—about their ancestry. They hadn’t known that their maternal relatives descended from the Selk’nam, a nomadic tribe of unknown origin that settled in Tierra del Fuego. The first Europeans to encounter the Selk’nam, in the sixteenth century, were astonished by their height and their hardiness—they braved the frigid climate by coating their bodies with whale fat. The
tribe lived mostly undisturbed until the late eighteen-hundreds, when an influx of sheep ranchers and gold prospectors who coveted their land put bounties on their heads. (One hunter boasted that he had received a pound sterling per corpse, redeemable with a pair of ears.) The survivors of the Selk’nam Genocide, as it is called—a population of about four thousand was reduced to some three hundred—were resettled on reservations run by missionaries. The last known fluent speaker of the language, Angela Lojí, a laundress and farmer, died forty years ago.

Many children are natural mimics, but Keyuk could imitate speech like a mynah. His father, who is white, had spent part of his childhood in the Arauco region, which is home to the Mapuche, Chile’s largest native community, and he taught Keyuk their language, Mapudungun. The boy, a bookworm and an A student, easily became fluent. A third-grade research project impassioned him about indigenous peoples, and Ivonne, who descends from a line of shamans, took this as a sign that his ancestors were speaking through him. When she told him of their heritage, Keyuk vowed that he would master Selk’nam and also, eventually, Yagán—the nearly extinct language of a neighboring people in the far south—reckoning that he could pass them down to his children and perhaps reseed the languages among the tribes’ descendants. At fourteen, he travelled with his father to Puerto Williams, a town in Chile’s Antarctic province that calls itself “the world’s southernmost city,” to meet Cristina Calderón, the last native Yagán speaker. She subsequently tutored him by phone.

If it is lonely to be the last of anything, the distinction has a mythic romance: the last emperor, the last of the Just, the last of the Mohicans. Keyuk’s precocity enhanced his mystique. A Chilean television station flew him to Tierra del Fuego as part of a series, “Sons of the Earth,” that focussed on the country’s original inhabitants. He was interviewed, at sixteen, by the Financial Times. A filmmaker who knew him put us in touch, and we met at a café in Santiago.
It was a mild autumn morning during Easter week. The city was quiet after a series of student demonstrations protesting tuition costs. Keyuk, who was studying linguistics on a scholarship at the University of Chile, supported their cause. (“The word ‘Selk’nam’ can mean ‘We are equal,’” he noted, “though it can also mean ‘we are separate.’”) Keyuk is tall, loose-limbed, and baby-faced, with a thatch of black hair. His style is nonchalant—stovepipe jeans and a leather jacket. Since his teens, Keyuk has composed songs in Selk’nam, and he performs with an “ethno-electronic” band. But he carried himself with solemnity, as if conscious of the flame he tended—or, at least, said that he tended. How, I asked, could I be sure that he really spoke Selk’nam, if no one else did? He smiled slightly and said, “I guess I have the last word.”

Keyuk’s voice is a boyish tenor, but when he speaks Selk’nam it changes; the language is harsher and more percussive than Spanish. To master the grammar and the vocabulary, he had studied, among other texts, a lexicon published in 1915 by José María Beauvoir, a Salesian missionary. The sound of the language was preserved in recordings that the eminent anthropologist Anne Chapman made forty years ago. Chapman, a protégée of Claude Lévi-Strauss, was an early activist for endangered
languages in Meso- and South America. Cristina Calderón, Keyuk’s
tutor, was one of her subjects, and, having heard of Keyuk’s projects,
Chapman sought him out in Santiago, about ten years ago. She was
then in her mid-eighties; she died in 2010.

I joined Keyuk and his mother the next evening for dinner at a
restaurant in the old fish market, where the local sea bass is a specialty.
Ivonne is petite, blond, and animated, but, like Keyuk, she has a regal
poise, and it is hard to imagine her as a bullied outcast. We shouted
cheerfully above the din, though Keyuk seemed detached—as prodigies
grow out of their teens, they sometimes mistrust the curiosity they have
inspired. But when he spoke of the Selk’nam it was with intensity. “Our
mythology is rich,” he said. “Everything in our world—plants and
animals, the sun and stars—has a voice. On our map of the universe, we
called the East ‘the space without time’”—the realm of the unknown.
“We had a Paleolithic skill set yet a boundless imagination. They both
existed with a high degree of social conformity. Long after we dispersed,
we preserved our beliefs.” He added, “One precious thing, to me, about
the language is its vocabulary of words for love. They change according
to the age, sex, and kinship of the speakers and the nature of the
emotion. There are things you can’t say in Spanish.”

There are approximately seven billion inhabitants of earth. They
conduct their lives in one or several of about seven thousand
languages—multilingualism is a global norm. Linguists
acknowledge that the data are inexact, but by the end of this century
perhaps as many as fifty per cent of the world’s languages will, at best,
exist only in archives and on recordings. According to the calculations of
the Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat)—a joint effort of
linguists at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, and at the University of
Eastern Michigan—nearly thirty language families have disappeared
since 1960. If the historical rate of loss is averaged, a language dies
about every four months.
The mother tongue of more than three billion people is one of twenty, which are, in order of their current predominance: Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, English, Hindi, Arabic, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, Japanese, Javanese, German, Wu Chinese, Korean, French, Telugu, Marathi, Turkish, Tamil, Vietnamese, and Urdu. English is the lingua franca of the digital age, and those who use it as a second language may outnumber its native speakers by hundreds of millions. On every continent, people are forsaking their ancestral tongues for the dominant language of their region’s majority. Assimilation confers inarguable benefits, especially as Internet use proliferates and rural youth gravitate to cities. But the loss of languages passed down for millennia, along with their unique arts and cosmologies, may have consequences that won’t be understood until it is too late to reverse them.

"Fire department, I guess—point is I made too much pasta."

Little is known about the origins of human speech. It seems unlikely, though, that there was ever a pre-Babel world. The geographic isolation of small groups breeds heterogeneity, both of dialects and of language isolates, as it probably did among Paleolithic hunters. Nowhere is there a richer or more concentrated cluster of languages, some eight hundred, than in Papua New Guinea, with its daunting topography of highlands and rain forests. In New Guinea, as in other hot spots of endangerment, indigenous languages are a user’s guide to ecosystems that are increasingly fragile and—in the face of climate change—increasingly irreplaceable.

Richard Schultes, a professor of biology at Harvard, who died in 2001, is considered the father of modern ethnobotany. He was among the first to study the use of plants, including hallucinogens, by indigenous peoples in the rain forest and to publicize the alarming rate at which both were disappearing. (More than ninety tribes, he noted, vanished in Brazil between 1900 and 1975.) In the nineteen-forties, doing field work in the Amazon, Schultes identified the source of curare, a
derivative of which, d-tubocurarine, is used to treat muscle disorders like those associated with Parkinson’s disease. His students Michael Balick, now the director of economic botany at the New York Botanical Garden, and Paul Alan Cox, the executive director of the Institute for Ethnomedicine, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, continued his explorations. They have written with authority on the “ethnobotanical approach to drug discovery,” which is, in essence, field work guided by shamans and healers.

In Samoa, Cox discovered that Polynesian herbal doctors had an extensive nomenclature for endemic diseases and a separate one for those introduced by Europeans. Their sophistication is not unique. The taxonomies of endangered languages often distinguish hundreds more types of flora and fauna than are known to Western science. The Haunóo, a tribe of swidden farmers on Mindoro, an island in the Philippines, have forty expressions for types of soil. In Southeast Asia, forest-dwelling healers have identified the medicinal properties of some sixty-five hundred species. In the nineteen-fifties, drug researchers for Eli Lilly and Company, working on several continents, studied folk remedies for diabetes based on the rosy periwinkle, and isolated an active ingredient—vinblastine—that is used in chemotherapy for Hodgkin’s disease. (The healers who led the researchers to their discoveries never saw any of the profits. Such “bio-prospecting” by pharmaceutical companies is a controversial practice that was largely unregulated until 1993.) Quinine, aspirin, codeine, ipecac, and pseudoephedrine are among the common remedies that, according to Cox and Balick, we owe to ethnobotanists guided and informed by indigenous peoples.

Daniel Kaufman, a linguist who directs the Endangered Language Alliance, a nonprofit institute on West Eighteenth Street, would be thrilled to hear that a cure for cancer had been discovered in a rain-forest flower for which we have no name, other than one in a dying language, but saving the flower is not his concern. I was introduced to
Kaufman last June at a screening of “Language Matters,” a documentary directed by David Grubin and hosted by the poet Bob Holman. Kaufman, who teaches at Columbia University, consulted on the film. He is a slight, studious-looking man in his late thirties, whose expertise is in the Austronesian languages of Madagascar and the Pacific. But the alliance, which he founded six years ago, grew out of his commitment to support the more than eight hundred endangered languages of the New York area, which has a higher concentration of them, Kaufman estimates, than any city in the world.

The alliance has recorded Shughni, from Tajikistan, which is spoken by a few families in Bay Ridge; Kabardian, from the northern Caucasus, which survives in a Circassian community in Wayne, New Jersey; and Amuzgo, from southwestern Mexico, still alive in Sunset Park, Corona, and Port Richmond—enclaves of immigrants from Oaxaca and Guerrero. Mandaic, an ancient Semitic language of Iraq and Iran, has only a few elderly speakers left, in Flushing and Nassau County. Garifuna, however, is firmly based in a mostly working-class community of some two hundred thousand people concentrated in eastern Brooklyn and the South Bronx. The Garifuna are descendants of West Africans who were shipwrecked in 1635 off the coast of St. Vincent, where they intermarried with the indigenous Arawaks and Caribs. The language that evolved combines Arawak grammar with African, English, and Spanish loan words. In the eighteenth century, the British deported the Garifuna to Central America; during the past fifty years, many have settled in New York.

“Let’s be honest,” Kaufman said. “The loss of these languages doesn’t matter much to the bulk of humanity, but the standard for assessing the worth or benefit of a language shouldn’t rest with outsiders, who are typically white and Western. It’s an issue of the speakers’ perceived self-worth.” He suggested that I meet some of those speakers not far from home—members of the Mohawk nation. “The older people are the only ones who can tell you what their youth stands to lose,” he said.
“The young are the only ones who can articulate the loss of an identity rooted in a mother tongue that has become foreign to them.” He told me about a two-week immersion program that takes place each summer at the Kanatsiohareke community center, in Fonda, New York, a village on the Mohawk River between Utica and Albany.

Until the eighteenth century, Fonda (which was named for the Dutch ancestors of Henry, Jane, and Peter), the neighboring town of Palatine (named for the Palatine Germans who took refuge there), and much of the land to the north and east, into Canada, was Mohawk territory. The Mohawk were feared for their ferocity, but it was chastened by a matriarchal system of consensus governance. One of the students in the intermediate class at Kanatsiohareke was a local I.B.M. employee who told me that he was learning Mohawk because the tribe had saved the lives of his German ancestors.

During the American Revolution, the Mohawk supported the British, and after the defeat they were forced to cede their territory. Their chiefs led them to Canada, and most of their settlements are still on the border of New York and Ontario. In recent decades, two factions have divided Mohawk loyalties: a party of modernizers that has aggressively championed casino development, and an Old Guard that fears the corruption that casinos invite. The founder of the Kanatsiohareke center, Sakokwenionkwas, whose English name is Tom Porter, belongs to the latter.

Porter is a commanding figure in his early seventies, who speaks in a quietly hypnotic voice. He was born on a reservation, the son of an ironworker—one of the legendary Mohawk who built Manhattan’s skyscrapers. Porter and his son both followed him into the trade. “It’s a myth that Mohawk don’t suffer from vertigo,” he told me. “I was afraid of heights all my life.” His grandmother encouraged him to marry a maiden of old-fashioned virtue, and while he was on a trip to
Mississippi, a matchmaker introduced him to Alice Joe, a Choctaw. They settled on Mohawk land west of Albany, where he worked as an ambulance driver, a carpenter, and a teacher. Their six children were raised speaking both Choctaw and Mohawk. When Porter was twenty-one, the clan mothers chose him as one of the nation’s nine chiefs. He retired after twenty-five years, though he is still much in demand for his eloquent funeral orations.

Porter bought the Fonda property at auction, twenty years ago, with help from the local community. Kanatsiohareke was conceived as a bulwark of “longhouse” values: reverence for nature, parents, ancestral spirits, and the language. “Mohawk isn’t just a form of speech,” he said. “It’s a holistic relationship to the cosmos.” The Porters host concerts and lectures in addition to the language camp, and some of their land is farmed organically. But Kanatsiohareke is a homespun operation: the compound includes an old red barn, a ramshackle farmhouse, and a rustic B. and B. with a craft shop that sells T-shirts and baskets.

"About your cat, Mr. Schrödinger—I have good news and bad news."

The Mohawk are one of five hundred and sixty-six tribes recognized by the United States whose presence on the continent predates “contact”—the advent of Europeans. Only about a hundred and seventy indigenous languages are still spoken, the majority by a dwindling number of elders like Marie Wilcox, of the Wukchumni, who is eighty-one, and who spent her youth doing farmwork south of Fresno. About fifteen years ago, she started recording her tribe’s creation myths and compiling a dictionary of its unwritten language. Navajo, which helped to decide the outcome of the Second World War (the Japanese were never able to decrypt messages relayed among native speakers—the celebrated “code talkers”), is an exception. It is used in daily life by two-thirds of the nation’s two hundred and fifty thousand citizens, who refer to it as “Diné bizaad,” “the people’s language.” Fluency, however, is declining. The election of a new tribe president was suspended, in October, by a dispute over the
requirement that he or she speak fluent Navajo. A leading candidate, Chris Deschene—a state representative from Arizona and the grandson of a code talker—was disqualified for that reason. “I’m the product of cultural destruction,” he told the Navajo Times, when he was asked why he couldn’t speak Diné. (He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, and, after retiring as a major in the Marine Corps, he earned two graduate degrees, in engineering and law.) A new election will take place in April.

About twenty-five thousand North Americans identify themselves as Mohawk, but only about fifteen per cent speak the language well enough to conduct their daily lives in it. Transcribing Mohawk is an arduous task. In the eighteen-seventies, Alexander Graham Bell, a recent immigrant to Canada, fell in love with its sound and created an orthography. (The Mohawk made him an honorary chief.) The grammar is at least as challenging as that of Latin. Noun roots are modified by a welter of adjectival prefixes; the addition of the letter “h,” for example, can alter a meaning dramatically. If you err in trying to describe a man as “tall,” you may have said that he has “long balls.” Verbs are muscular and poetic. “To bury” someone is “to wrap his body with the blanket of our Mother Earth.” A man who fathers a child “lends him his life.” In the ethos of Mohawk culture, as in its language, “I” cannot stand on its own—the first-person singular is always part of a relationship. So you don’t say, “I am sick.” “The sickness,” in Mohawk, “has come to me.”

In the advanced seminar at Kanatsiohareke, Mina Beauvais, whose Mohawk name is Tewateronicakhwa, was teaching students the optative, an arcane mood, akin to the subjunctive, that exists in Kurdish, Albanian, Navajo, Sanskrit, and ancient Greek. The students also had to contend with compound words, some longer than those of German, which aren’t pronounced as they are written. You need a bard’s memory and a singer’s breath to speak Mohawk as Beauvais does: she makes it sound incantatory. I took and failed a test that she gave her class: to
repeat tabotenonhwarori’takseniskwe’tsherakahrhatenia’tonháitie. (It is a single word that means “the fool comes tumbling down the hill.”)

Beauvais, who grew up near Montreal, is a native speaker in her late seventies. She is small and sturdy, with a wry patience bred of hardship. When she was seven, the state compelled her parents to send her to a school “for Indians,” at which students were beaten for speaking their native tongue. Tom Porter’s grandmother hid him, at the same age, so that the authorities couldn’t put him in a boarding school. The forcible assimilation of First Nation children in punitively austere, mostly church-run institutions was made compulsory by Canadian law in the eighteen-eighties and continued until the nineteen-seventies. “That system almost destroyed us,” Porter said. “When you deprive a kid of his language at the sponge time of life, the most precious learning years, a bond is broken.”

Attendance at the camp was lower than in the past; there were just four students in the advanced seminar, though all were parents who hoped to pass the language on to their young children. Gabrielle Doreen, a stately woman of thirty-seven, who wears her graying hair in a long braid, is the mother of four. While honing her grammar, she was teaching kindergarten at the Mohawk “nest” on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, in Ontario. The nest—totahte—is an immersion program for preschoolers. Doreen had enrolled in the camp with her fiancé, Lou Williams, an Oneida. He was moving from his native Wisconsin to Ontario, he told me, “because in Mohawk tradition men join their women’s clan.”

Iehnhotonkwas—Bonnie Jane Maracle—started as a student at the camp when it began, in 1998, and became its coördinator in 2005. “We originally had much better attendance,” she said. “But eight Mohawk communities now have their own immersion classes, so people can study closer to home.” Other First Nations—the Ojibwe, in Minnesota;
the Blackfoot, in Montana; the Inupiat, of northern Alaska—also have nests, and the trend has been gaining momentum since the passage, in 2006, of the Esther Martínez Native American Language Preservation Act, which provided funding for language survival and restoration programs from pre-K through college. (Martínez, who lived in New Mexico, was a linguist, a storyteller, and a champion of her native Tewa. She died at ninety-four, the year that her namesake legislation was enacted.) There are now some thirty institutions of higher learning on or near reservations that offer instruction in indigenous languages.

K. David Harrison, an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College, is the director of research at the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, based in Salem, Oregon, and heads National Geographic’s Enduring Voices Project. He is prominent in the field and writes prolifically about endangerment. Part of his mission, he told me, is to help communities “technologize their language.” It heartens him, he said, to see “Mohawk kids texting in Mohawk.” (The tribe also has its own television and radio stations.) The Yurok, of Northern California, are one of many tribes with a Web site. And smartphone users can download apps to study Nishnaabe (of Ontario), Salteaux (of Saskatchewan), Potawatomi (of the Great Lakes), Arikara (of North Dakota), or Mi’kmaq (of Canada’s Atlantic provinces and the Gaspé Peninsula). Harrison’s institute also hosts a YouTube channel. “Living tongues have to evolve to deserve the term,” he said. “I am working on a dictionary of Siletz”—a critically endangered language native to Oregon—“and the community is having an interesting dialogue about contemporary words like ‘computer.’ Should they import it from the English or coin a phrase that means ‘brain in a box’?”

An app, however, can’t replace the live transmission of a language to children at what Porter calls “the sponge time.” The Maori of New Zealand were the first to develop the language-nest concept. (A nest is a sanctuary from predation as much as an incubator.) The nest movement in the United States, which began in Hawaii, where it is
called Pūnana Leo, was inspired by the Maori movement, Kōhanga Reo. They both date to the early nineteen-eighties, although they have roots in years of community organizing to reverse colonial policies. The Hawaiian language was banned in public schools from 1896 until 1986—two years after activists, skirting the law, opened the first private nest. Today, some twenty-four hundred students attend one of nineteen Hawaiian language-immersion sites around the state. Researchers have suggested that students taught in Hawaiian perform as well, if not better, than their peers who, like most Americans, are educated monolingually. At the best immersion-program site, ninety per cent of the class goes on to college. And graduate students at the University of Hawaii, Hilo, can now earn a doctorate in their native tongue.

Political activism has been a catalyst in nearly every narrative of a language rescued from the brink. The most famous example is that of Welsh. Resistance to English rule has an eight-hundred-year history in Wales that is intimately connected with the struggle to preserve its Celtic language, Cymraeg. In the documentary “Language Matters,” Bob Holman and David Grubin pick up the saga in the mid-nineteen-sixties, when the British government flooded the ancient village of Capel Celyn, one of the few remaining Welsh-language communities, to create a reservoir that supplied water to Liverpool. This act fuelled an independence movement and demands to give Cymraeg parity with English in the public sphere. The BBC launched a Welsh radio station in 1977. Since 1999, instruction in Welsh has been compulsory for students in state schools up to the age of sixteen. According to the most recent census, in 2011, nineteen per cent of the population speak the language. That means, of course, that eighty-one per cent do not.

“What you find ‘boring’ spies from all over the world would find extremely interesting.”

The struggle to preserve a language often creates an atmosphere of siege. I felt that sense of embattlement at Kanatsiohareke and, again, last September, when I sat in on a radio show sponsored by Dan Kaufman and
broadcast from the Endangered Language Alliance offices, on Eighteenth Street. The show, “Voces sin Fronteras” (“Voices Without Borders”), was improvised—conversation punctuated by music. There were three hosts of indigenous descent—Leobardo Ambrocio Ajtzalam, José Juarez, and Segundo Angamarca—who alternated between Spanish and their respective native languages: K’iche’, of Guatemala; Totonac, of Mexico; and Kichwa, of Colombia and Ecuador. Their listeners were a small online audience of fewer than two hundred people and a larger one of uncertain size in Guatemala. Radio, Kaufman noted, is an important tool for language activists. It reaches remote populations that might not have access to other media and boosts their morale.

The music was upbeat, but the faded maps on the office wall, the tangle of wires from a jury-rigged console, and the esprit de corps around a scuffed conference table might have been those of a guerrilla redoubt. A fourth endangered language crackled over the airwaves—that of left-wing revolution. “Fellow-combatants!” the men exhorted. “A mother tongue is a human birthright. We must fight for our own!”

If peripheral languages are to survive, they will have to find a way to coexist with what Bob Holman calls the “bully” languages. David Harrison told me, “The ideal of stable bilingualism is a given. Nobody wants these communities to remain isolated.” (China and Russia, however, consider ethnic languages a threat to their hegemony and have taken measures of varying severity to suppress them.) Even when there is persecution, the challenge, as Harrison sees it, is to “increase the prestige of a language so that the young embrace it.” In that respect, the fate of endangered languages may ultimately rest, as Mohawk does, with couples like Gabrielle Doreen and Lou Williams. They are determined to set an example for their children—both of fluency and self-worth. Then it will be up to the kids. Mina Beauvais spoke Mohawk with her only son, but, she said, “he married a Canadian English lady and didn’t pass it on.” Tom Porter told me, “We will do what we can, and if the young don’t cherish our way of life the Mother will take it back.”
n rare occasions, an extinct language has been resurrected. Jessie Little Doe Baird, a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, in Massachusetts, received a MacArthur grant, in 2010, for her efforts to revive her people’s extinct language, Wôpanâak. The tribe had been decimated by disease in the seventeenth century, and the last speakers died a hundred years ago. But written records of the language were relatively plentiful. A Wôpanâak Bible was published in 1663, the first translation of Scripture in Colonial America. John Eliot, a Puritan missionary who called himself “the Apostle to the Indians,” created an orthography with the tribe’s assistance, and taught its members to read. The Wampanoag welcomed literacy and left an archive of deeds and documents.

When Baird was pregnant with her fifth child, Mae Alice, she had a vision in which her ancestors called on her to fulfill an old prophecy that their language would come back to life. She was a social worker with no experience in linguistics, but she drafted a plan to revive Wôpanâak and was accepted into the Community Fellows Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A distinguished faculty of linguists, including Noam Chomsky, supported her project. Mae Alice is now the first native speaker of Wôpanâak in some seven generations.

Kaufman also cited the case of Daryl Baldwin—Kinwalaniilhsia—a member of the Miami tribe of Oklahoma. The Miami (or Myaamia) originally lived in the Great Lakes area, where Baldwin was born. They spoke an Algonquian language that died out some fifty years ago, but there were texts and recordings of it, and some elders—“rememberers,” as linguists call them—taught him a few words. Baldwin earned a linguistics degree, specializing in Native American languages, from the University of Montana. He and his wife homeschooled their children in the Miami language, and in 2013 he founded the Myaamia Center, at Miami University in Ohio, to provide the community with cultural resources. Miami is now a growing language.
Kaufman was surprised when I told him about Keyuk—he hadn’t heard about his work with Selk’nam. I, in turn, was surprised to hear from Keyuk that he had given up his formal studies of linguistics. “I can reach more people through music than I could have as an academic,” he told me in an e-mail. When I pressed him for details, he was typically reticent, but he did mention that he had been working on a new Selk’nam lexicon and that, last May, he and a friend had met with a community in Tierra del Fuego. “We recorded some fragments that the elders remembered,” he said.

Keyuk’s friend turned out to be a twenty-four-year-old linguist, Luis Miguel Rojas-Berscia, who has corresponded at length on scholarly subjects with David Harrison. Rojas-Berscia himself is a prodigy. I reached him by telephone in his native Lima, where he was visiting his family. His childhood household was trilingual: his father is Peruvian, his mother is Italian, and his grandmother spoke Piedmontese. English was his fourth language—he learned it as a toddler—and the next seventeen tongues in which he is fluent, including Mandarin and Quechua, were, he says, “relatively easy to master.” (He has a working knowledge of fifteen others.)

After graduating from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, Rojas-Berscia moved to Holland, where he does research on language and cognition at the Max Planck Institute of Psycholinguistics. His doctoral thesis is on the Shawi, hunter-gatherers of the upper Amazon. The Shawi, he told me, number “about twenty thousand, but I give their language better odds than Quechua, which has ten million speakers.” That sounded counterintuitive but, he said, “Every language has its ecology. If it isn’t useful, the community will be forced to abandon it. Indigenous people in Latin America face all kinds of discrimination, and necessity dictates that, sooner or later, they adopt Spanish. Once that happens, the attrition is fast. Where a group is isolated from external pressures, they aren’t forced to accept the dominant language. So you can’t just go by the demographics.”
Selk’nam was the subject of Rojas-Berscia’s master’s research. A colleague thought that a young Chilean might be of help. It was Keyuk. “When I heard about him, I had my doubts,” Rojas-Berscia said. “I studied with some of the best linguists in the world, but how could a middle-school autodidact have mastered a language that died fifty years ago? I know that old Beauvoir lexicon he used—you can’t learn much grammar from it. So I devised a test. I held up pictures and asked him to describe them. The man is a mystery, but his Selk’nam is good.”

Rojas-Berscia had a travel stipend from the honors academy at Radboud University, in the Netherlands, which paid for the trip to Tierra del Fuego. The Selk’nam survivors whom he and Keyuk interviewed had forgotten their language, though not their identity. One of the elders was a tiny woman named Herminia Vera. She hadn’t spoken Selk’nam in eighty years, she told them, and, initially, she seemed suspicious of their interest. (Like Ivonne Gomez Castro, she had been mocked, as a girl, for her mestizo looks—though in her case it was because she looked “too European.”) As she warmed to Rojas-Berscia, he gave her his picture test, and the language of her childhood began to thaw. She and Keyuk engaged in a halting conversation about food, farming, and family heritage. “I don’t know who among us was the most surprised,” Rojas-Berscia said. Perhaps it was the glaciers (xus), the rivers (sikin), the beaches (kuxhijik), and the sky (sijn) hearing their own voice. Herminia Vera died two months later.

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