



Endangered Language Alliance

3 West 18th Street, 6th floor, New York, NY 10011

(646) 225-6613 | www.elalliance.org

A 501(c)3 Nonprofit Organization | Federal Tax ID: 27-2550783

CreateNYC and Endangered Linguistic Diversity

New York City is the most linguistically diverse place on earth, with up to 800 of the world’s approximately 7,000 languages spoken in the metropolitan area. Perhaps more than any other place, the city now constitutes a microcosm and symbol of global linguistic diversity. But there are indications that “peak diversity” may be now: half of all languages face near-term extinction, including many represented in New York, and a substantial sum of human culture, knowledge, and art is likely to go with them. Though now little known in New York itself, Lenape, the city’s original native language, is a case in point, with just a few elderly speakers remaining in Canada, although there is a small revitalization movement.

Within a few years of New York’s colonial founding, 18 languages were already reportedly spoken by its 400 or 500 inhabitants. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, in particular, New York has become a major destination for indigenous people from some of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world: Mexico, Nigeria, Nepal, India, the Philippines, among others. As a vital capital for a number of overlapping diasporas — African, Caribbean, Jewish, Latin American, Himalayan, Chinese and post-Soviet — the city is also a place where cultural and artistic traditions are not only maintained or abandoned, but also challenged and transformed through new encounters.

Beginning last year with our “Mother Tongues of Queens” map — published in *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* and featured at the Queens Museum — the Endangered Language Alliance has been engaged in the first-ever mapping of the city’s



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deep linguistic diversity, which goes well beyond what the census tracks. When the first version of the citywide language map comes out this summer, we hope it can serve as a granular guide to the city's cultural and linguistic landscape for policymakers, grantmakers, and artists alike. What the map reveals is that what may appear to be a monolithic national communities is usually made up of dozens of smaller ethnolinguistic groups with distinctive histories, identities, and immigration patterns. Their often unwritten languages, with no official status, are a window onto increasingly endangered traditions of music-making, verbal art, storytelling, ritual practice, and other folk arts that are rarely performed or recorded outside the immediate community. At the very moment when little-known languages are disappearing in unprecedented numbers around the world, many last speakers of languages and many bearers of endangered traditions are arriving in New York. The resulting richness, though embattled and invisible, is a crucial part of the city's cultural landscape. Taking steps to value it would position the city as a global leader on issues of language endangerment, language rights, and cultural preservation at a time when urbanization and migration are creating cities of unparalleled diversity worldwide.

A Cultural Plan for New York City should incorporate language throughout that recognizes and supports the city's linguistic diversity and the multilingualism of New Yorkers (half speak a language other than English at home, and a quarter are considered limited in their English proficiency). For the smallest and most vulnerable linguistic and cultural groups in particular, many of which may not be formally organized or connected to the arts community, New York's cultural landscape could be a far better and far more nurturing ecosystem than it is, as a matter of equity, access, and neighborhood character.



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There are substantial economic, educational, and cultural pressures and inducements to assimilate to a larger language — not only English, but Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, or Russian — but there is generally little outside support for the varied efforts that many communities are making to retain their languages even as they assimilate. Artists, creators, and cultural activists who work in languages other than English, are not proficient in English, or work in less “translatable” traditions are almost always at a disadvantage.

As a matter of policy and funding, we recommend that languages — not just in print or in public performance, which have tended to favor larger languages with writing systems — be appreciated and treated as cultural assets in their own right. To this end, policymakers and grantmakers should support the increasing number of efforts in the city to record and revitalize languages, as well as creative work in languages that have rarely if ever appeared on stage, in print etc., to afford those opportunities — both for the language community itself and for a wider audience.

Executive Order 120, signed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2008, improved language access by requiring all city agencies at least to communicate and provide services in the city’s six largest languages besides English (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Italian, and Haitian Creole). Courts and hospitals, in particular, now make a concerted effort with a much longer list of languages, and educational efforts are improving — in all cases, the use of a person’s mother tongue dramatically improves results. Likewise, access to one’s own culture in one’s own mother tongue should be a primary goal, in addition to general access to art and culture across the board. New York City is in the extraordinary position



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of having a critical mass of creators and cultural activists who can and do make work reflecting many more languages and cultures than are currently represented. Judging from the public events we have hosted around the city over the last 7 years, we believe there is also an audience for this work — for Pamiri storytelling, Himalayan oral histories, Garifuna *a cappella* traditions, Sicilian poetry, Mixteco tongue twisters, and much more. The pressing needs are for support, venues, opportunities, and visibility.

About the Endangered Language Alliance

Founded in 2010, ELA is an independent non-profit based in New York City, the only organization in the world focused on the deep cultural and linguistic diversity of urban areas. The unique network of researchers, activists, and students behind ELA works in close partnership with the city's immigrant, refugee, and diaspora communities, documenting songs, stories, and speech in over 70 languages and bringing these languages to a wider audience. ELA's work has been recognized by *The New York Times*, the BBC, NPR, CNN, and *The New Yorker*, among other outlets. Major support comes from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts), and a range of private foundations and individuals.