



In collaboration with
Hali Dardar
Activist
Language Vitality Program Coordinator
at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

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Interviewer: Amanda Ostuni

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- 00:38** **Amanda Ostuni** Thanks again for doing this. I'm excited to have you participating. Did you need any recap, or are you good to go?
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- 01:00** **Hali Dardar** Yeah, let's just hop into it.
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- 01:03** **Amanda Ostuni** So, we have the three buckets I mentioned, but we'll start with you just sharing an overview of who you are, and what you do now, and then we'll go back into those specifics after your background. So, if you want, to start, just say your name and a little bit about what you do.
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- 01:21** **Hali Dardar** Okay, Hi. My name is Hali Dardar. I'm the Language Vitality Program Coordinator at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, as my day job, and I'm additionally the co-founder of the Houma Language Project. Since 2013, we've been working to—it's been a project of cultural vitalization through language reconstruction; It's been a digital online program for language reclamation.
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- 01:59** **Amanda Ostuni** Okay. We'll definitely get into the details of that. But for now, tell us about where you consider home.

01:59 **Hali Dardar** That's a good question. I don't—I don't really know the answer to that. I think that there's a few different places that are meaningful to me. I think that the land of—where my—both sides of my family, my father's side, who is Indigenous, and my mother's side, who is Louisiana French—both of them grew up in—both of their families grew up in the Galliano region, which is in Lafourche Parish, about 45 minutes away from Grand Isle, which is seen as like the coastal last island before you hit the deep Gulf. So, I think of that as a very important place that I try to visit as much as possible. I grew up in the Lafayette area, so that's in kind of Central Louisiana. So, I see that—I spent a lot of my formidable years there. So, I see that as a very important place, too, and that's where my family currently resides. I think New Orleans is also kind of a spiritual home for me. I've spent a lot of time living there. It's definitely a place where I see myself going back to within life, if it still exists [laughs] and then, and I currently live in Washington, D.C., which is where all my stuff and my corporeal body is now.

03:19 **Amanda Ostuni** Okay. And you said you mostly grew up in Lafayette. So, while you were growing up there, who and what comprised your community—siblings, extended family, neighbors; What was your network?

03:40 **Hali Dardar** Yeah. So, I think adding one more thing to where I find home, I think that there's a few digital spaces that I feel like are home, too. I think that we have a very robust—the Houma Language Project ecosphere is also become kind of a home for the past 10 years; a place that there's a lot of knowledge and time and effort and relationships that are there, too, so that's also a place of home. And then I have a series and a network of digital connections, too. So, my basic email address, I think, is the closest thing that I have to a home that kind of unites all of the things that I'm thinking about, and all of the beings that I am.

To answer the question about a network growing up, I didn't have a—I mean digital wasn't a network growing up—when I grew up, so I think, in my grade school years, my network was my immediate family, and then also my neighbors. We had a great play group growing up of neighbors and friends. Yeah, that that was mostly not necessarily school connections, but mostly neighbors and friends, and then very robust family connections. We spent a lot of time going back and forth to Lafourche, keeping up with cousins and families down there. I think that those are, those are some of my closest relationships also, growing up.

5:08	Amanda Ostuni	And how would you describe the Lafayette area. What kind of neighborhood or city ¹ is that?
5:16	Hali Dardar	It was a subdivision, I think. I grew up in this place called Sunset. So it was a small-town subdivision.
5:25	Amanda Ostuni	And how would you describe yourself as a child growing up, just in terms of personality and interests you had?
5:41	Hali Dardar	Pretty quiet, I think, outgoing. I think I enjoyed being around people that I knew, but I was also not really into being around people I didn't, I think.
5:54	Amanda Ostuni	And did you have a particular career in mind growing up?
6:04	Hali Dardar	Not especially, no. I kind of never really knew exactly what I wanted to be. It wasn't like a goal of something that I definitely wanted to be when I grew up.
6:15	Amanda Ostuni	Okay. Since you are involved a little bit in the in the environmental space, right, or have been rather, what was your home climate like? Did you experience any major weather events as a child?
6:36	Hali Dardar	I mean, yeah, everyone experiences hurricanes. I think the first one that I—I remember I learned how to roller skate backwards in the eye of Hurricane Andrew. So that was like a form—a lot of formidable memories around hurricanes. I think that for me, growing up, hurricanes were always fantastic times. It wasn't a time, I think; I really appreciate my parents making that very traumatic experience—as I grow older, when I'm, it's my job to shelter people against the pain of hurricanes, I really appreciate the way that they framed that at a very early age. It was always a great amount of fun, because most of my family from the Southern—most of my family lived more in the coastal area, and so we were considered the house that was kind of furthest away, most inland. so usually all of my cousins and my family would come to our house, and so we were the house of refuge, where people would come, and so just extremely large family gatherings for hurricanes is what I remember. For Hurricane Andrew, it was a little bit different. I think it mostly—the way that—the hurricane didn't really hit the coastal area as much; It mostly hit

¹ The correct term here is a "Parish".

Lafayette, so it was just my immediate family. That was the first hurricane that I feel like I truly have a relationship with. I remember my dad boarding up all of the windows. There was this thing that he would do that we thought was neat, was that every time he would only bring out his army men from when he was a child during hurricane time. So it became, this—we created this kind of ceremony around hurricanes, and something for us to get excited for. We would pick up all of the things, which I would later learn is like picking up all of the stuff, just in case that something terrible happened. But we would clear out the living room, and then we would make these very elaborate setup of army men for hours, days, whatever it was, so it seemed like as a child, forever or an eon. But it was really—I really appreciated the way that they took time to kind of bring out the best parts of the hurricane; This idea of everyone together, there is this moment kind of where time stops. There's a lot of talk about the weather. There's a lot of sitting outside, and it was never necessarily like hide from the hurricane; It was always, it was invited in, and it was kind of a part of what was happening for the days that it would happen, and then picking up was more of an activity of discovery, and understanding what was broken, and what needs to be fixed, rather than an opportunity of loss or grief. I really appreciated all of that framing that they did when I was young in a way that I didn't really understand until I got much older.

9:26 **Amanda Ostuni** How, if at all, does that mentality play in to any of the work that you do now, in terms of preservation, based on environmental injustice and such.

9:45 **Hali Dardar** I think that concept is a cultural concept, and what I would later learn is a cultural concept. I really appreciate my parents carrying that on, but I would not say that's original or unique to any other families. I think that the individual instance is unique. But the concept is not unique to the area. I think that there's a lot of people who have this sense of you know the idea of hurricanes or coastal life, and the way that people react to those instances is kind of a cultural shibboleth that happens with people who live in the area. It's—once you've gone through a certain amount of storms, it's kind of—you're indoctrinated into the way that that storm culture works, and it's—and so I wouldn't say that it's necessarily unique in any way. And so with it, I don't think that I say that I'm bringing that kind of ethos into the work as something creatively or innovative that I'm doing personally; I think that as someone who's experienced storms, living in a community that does experience storms, I think that the way—that's a

		very important process, our community understanding that someone who's doing any kind of actions or motions within the Gulf Coast region needs to understand that culture and go through and experience that to get a better sense of what that is like.
11:20	Amanda Ostuni	Okay. And just getting into the bridge between your childhood and what you are doing now, you got your Bachelor's degree in [Mass Communications-Journalism] Tell me a little bit about that decision, where that interest came from, where it started.
11:44	Hali Dardar	Well, I guess I first decided with my thought to go to LSU ² . Again, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do after I finished school. At the time, there was this program in Louisiana called TOPS ³ , which meant that if you had a certain grade point average, that you were able to go to a state school for free or for a very reduced tuition. I think that program, unfortunately ended, I would say in like 2016 ⁴ . But before that, if you were a student within Louisiana, and you made a certain grade point average, all of the tuition fees were waived, and you just had to pay the processing fees for things. So in that sense, it was financially feasible for me to go to a university within Louisiana. My sister is about two years ahead of me, so she was the first one to go to school, and she had selected LSU. Neither of my parents went to college, and so that kind of impacted my—so there wasn't like a sense I needed to go anywhere particular, or I needed to do anything particular. They—there was definitely the sense of 'if you're passionate about something, then that's the thing that you're going to succeed at.' So, finding the passion and kind of connecting it into to a life source was an important thing for me to do. So my choice to go to LSU was based on the idea that I wanted to select an in-state school, because that was economically feasible, and then it was the largest school. I knew that I didn't—I knew going into LSU that I didn't exactly know what my major was, but I knew that there was a lot of generic requirements to finish, and so I thought that by going to the biggest school, I would be having the most options as I go forward with things. So that's kind of how I picked LSU. And then I bumped around into a lot of things. I think I started in biology. I was really interested in the idea of researching and being there in the moment and seeing things. And then I switched over to theater because I liked the concept of storytelling. I later went into Marketing with the idea that that was—I had

² Louisiana State University

³ Taylor Opportunity Program for Students

⁴ Fact check: It appears that the TOPS program is still active as of 2023.

a brief stint in accounting that brought me into Marketing with the idea that understanding how the details of—how the business world works was very important; And then that, all those interests kind of landed me into this journalism class that I had to take as one of my mass communication requirements as a Marketing major.

And that's where I really hit my stride. It really connected this idea of being on the ground, seeing things and existing in a place, and kind of getting that experiential knowledge with my interest in storytelling that I saw in theater, with also my understanding of trying to interpret those things into a greater world motion, or connecting it into the larger story of life that's happening. So that's how I ended up in print journalism. I had the choice between Mass Communication video or digital media. I think it wasn't called digital media at the time. I think it was—video or print journalism were the two options. But most of the senior professors were in print journalism, and I thought that—I selected print journalism with the idea that I'd like to have them as teachers as much as I could, and that the basic context of storytelling wouldn't change beyond the medium, and that I could figure out video on my own.

15:13 **Amanda Ostuni**

Okay, interesting. When did you declare the communications—or journalism?

15:27 **Hali Dardar**

I don't remember. I graduated in 2011, so I probably declared my sophomore year.

15:38 **Amanda Ostuni**

What did your family think when you did settle on that, in terms of it connecting to tendencies or interests that you showed as a kid. Did they see the connections?

16:01 **Hali Dardar**

They've really given me the freedom to explore and do what I what I wish, and so I, there wasn't like a question of whether—their approval wasn't necessary. They never made it so that their approval was necessary within things. I think their main goal was that I graduate in something, and within the timeframe that TOPS would cover my tuition. So those were the two pressures that they really pushed—the only two pressures I really had. I think that they understood the connection to storytelling. It's in journalism—I think they understand, I think they saw that that connected, but I never really asked them that question.

16:39 **Amanda Ostuni** And you went right into your masters; What prompted you to make that decision?

16:46 **Hali Dardar** Yeah, so in 2010, in my junior year, I spent my spring semester abroad in the Netherlands. At the time, my Mass Communications school was trying to develop a partnership with a Mass Communications school in the Netherlands. So I went there as one of the first transfer students to see if the program would work, the connection, and at Hanze Hogeschool⁵, I was studying, I think it was a marketing-based concept of—we had to put together a marketing pitch for a certain client, was kind of our work. I enjoyed that a lot, and I really liked that process, I really liked the way that they did school, and I met a guy that I liked. So, I fell in love, and so I went back, finished out my degree for the last year, and then after I was finished, I thought, 'well, let's just go see where this love interest goes.' So I moved—he was German—but he was also studying in the Netherlands. So, I spent the summer—I went WOOFING, which is like organic farming. I went farming in a cow dairy farm, in Hildesheim... Somewhere in doing that I decided that they're—just thinking I really appreciated the time farming. I think I got a better sense of things; I painted a barn. I never thought I would paint a barn in my life. I harvested potatoes, milked a cow, met a lot of great people, made cheese. It was a great time, but I think it was also one of the first times where I had a moment to breathe for myself. There was this definite pressure to finish up TOPS on time and complete my studies, and because I had changed majors so much, I was—it was quite a pressure to do that within—I had a very, very busy and very tense last year of college. So that time was really the first time where I felt like I was able to make an original movement on my own. I was kind of released from the pressure of what—my familial or parental obligations of completing an undergraduate degree. So that was one of the first times that I really got to think about what I really want to do. And 'do I want to apply this journalism degree? And where do I want to see things going forward?' And I thought that—the decision that I made on that farm was that 'going abroad is helping me, and that this is something that I want to continue to do, and I need to figure out a way to make this long-term.' And at the time, my Visa was running out, so I was wondering 'what's the best way to do that?' and I was in a point in the relationship where I wanted to take it a step further. So that's pretty

⁵ Formal Dutch name is Hanze Hogeschool Groningen. American English name is Hanze University of Applied Sciences.

much why I decided to go to grad school. It was just kind of this –most people have a lot more–my grad school path was definitely unique. It was definitely not nearly as thought through or cautious as some people would like it to be. It was definitely a lark. I originally went to Rijksuniversiteit⁶ for a journalism degree, but after sitting in the first two classes, I felt like I wasn't getting anything out of this, and that I was really concerned that this just wasn't—it wasn't stretching me in the way that felt like it would be worth my life savings that I had saved at the time to put towards the degree. And so, then I had a friend—a lot of friends—most of my friends were studying in this this program called Arts, Culture, and Media. So I sat in on a few classes of it, and I—it really clicked as like—it felt like something that I wanted to know more about. So that's why I went to that program.

20:39 **Amanda Ostuni** Was there something in particular about it that really made it stick out; a moment, or just the general purpose behind it?

20:50 **Hali Dardar** Yeah. So, in that very crazy year between my abroad semester—so my senior year was extremely busy. I was taking, I think, 24 credit hours plus auditing a German course. And I had an internship at the Louisiana Wildlife--Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, and so like every moment of my day was pretty much crammed. Somehow within that crazy time, I don't know how this art project started, but I just know how it ended. At some point, I got it in my head that we should be— that QR tags were the—QR tags had just recently come out. It was like one of the first years, so at the time, smartphones were there, but they couldn't read QR codes without a special QR code reader app on your phone. But I thought that this was really neat, and I thought this was really a great way to bridge—I was really interested in this idea of digitizing cultural history, or the liminal space between digital reality and storytelling. I was really exploring that, and I was really exploring the idea of relationships through distance; 'How do you have meaningful relationships'— for me, it was across the ocean with this person that I was madly in love with at the time—but it also brought up a lot of questions about, like, 'what is it to have a relationship, or what is it for cultures, or what is it that makes time online meaningful? And what is this idea of showing care and concern? Not just, like what is filial concern over—like what are the different types of love that you can express over the Internet? And can [the internet] be used as a tool for that? And how can we

⁶ Formal Dutch name is Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. American English name is University of Groningen.

incorporate that into the way that we're thinking?' And so that was—those are some things that were muddling in my mind.

And during my internship, I was doing this great project, where there was this—there was a boat shed at the back of the—so during my internship was the time where the BP oil spill had just happened a few months earlier to that. And so that was kind of where I first started cutting my teeth on the idea of environmental justice, because I got a really good view of what was actually happening in a way that—working in the Public Information Office, I heard the things that we were communicating, and I heard the things that we were not communicating, and it was really eye-opening, and I think that it was really a formidable experience. But another part of it was that we had two—the two interns that were working at the time at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, [Redacted] — there were two emergencies that happened while we were there. The first one was the BP oil spill, so a lot of the communications professionals were just—didn't have time to work with us, they were just 100 percent working on that process. The other thing that happened was that there was a 100-year flood of the Mississippi River, which displaced a lot of wildlife and disrupted fisheries.

So the Wildlife and Fisheries Department was really concerned about that. I think it—it wasn't a human disaster in the same way, but it was definitely a wildlife disaster in a way that was kind of unprecedented. So the office was generally concerned with these two things that never happened, and so the interns were kind of put to do their own thing, which was excellent for me. And one day somebody came out and they wanted a picture of a woman fishing, and they didn't know where to find it. So my task was to go through all of the photos and find one. So, I was going through all of the old light box slides, and then someone tipped me off that 'oh, I think there's some photos in the boat shed,' and I later learned that that was a complete overstatement—understatement. I go into this massive boat shed in Baton Rouge, and there are like 30 file cabinets, all full of photos, black and white photos that were taken during the Works Project Administration—the WPA [questions name] in the 1920s during the Depression. They hired all of these photo—photographers to go out and take photos of—just do ride-alongs with all of these wildlife agents to take photos to document the wildlife of Louisiana, and the photo collection was incredible. I was just—I spent the rest of my time just obsessed with this collection.

Not only was it pictures of wildlife, but it was also images of Indigenous cultures and communities in a way that wasn't stated Indigenous cultures and communities. It was just the things that you see when you're following around a wildlife agent in a-100 years ago. And these questions—these were all just in this non-temperature-controlled boat shed. Because it was just—it wasn't their priority, and I totally understand that. So I made it my personal concept of like 'I'm just going to digitize as many as I can while I'm here.' So I talked to my director and I got a scanner and I just started digitizing as many of these photos as I can, and I put them on Flickr—Flickr at the time was the new, coolest thing. So, I put them online. And that was really the first time I was trying to think about the idea of taking things that people have and making it digitally available, and making it more publicly available and putting it on the web.

All of that to go—I know you were asking another question, but that was a really important moment for me of just that kind of—I feel like was the start of my career or my practice of what I do. And around that same time, QR tags came out, and I spent a lot of time working with the people who were developing the website and working on Wildlife and Fisheries' website. And they were thinking about different ways they could do inventory and tag things with QR tags, and it made me this idea of like, 'can we add, can we put—can we superimpose the images of the past into the present with QR codes?' And then I started thinking about that within this digital collection. But then I started thinking about this within the idea of could we do this across LSU? And I came up with this idea, this project where I got a bunch of my artist friends, I got all of their digital portfolios that they had, made them into QR tags, and printed those QR tags, put them into Easter eggs. I got like 3,000 Easter eggs, and then I distributed them across LSU's campus a few days before Easter. And the idea of that was that, first of all, it was an Easter egg hunt across the entire campus. I remember it being—I had like three or four people helping me distribute this massive box of eggs, and we all had our backpacks—we all had bicycles, and it just—like backpacks in the front, just throwing Easter eggs across the whole campus. It was a plastic nightmare when I think back on it now, but it was also just like a really great piece of whimsy, that it was just kind of—it was this moment of 'we're doing all of these things, and they're all very digital,' and there—there was this question of—this idea of 'who curates the Internet and we are the

people of the Internet and we can do what we want within that space, and if you won't give us the physical space to do it, we'll do it online.' So that was kind of this interaction and engagement—we were doing it across LSU campus with that. So that's when I started really thinking about the concept of media and community art, and how it connects with some of these actions and communications.

So, when I went to the Netherlands, and when I was there, I was sitting in classes. It felt like what we were talking about in arts, culture, and media was connecting to that kind of work in a way that felt very whole and very satisfying; that journalism was really just trying to get the story, and I felt like I could definitely improve on my storytelling, but I didn't feel like I would learn any more necessarily in that space. And I wanted to find a place to stretch myself and think about something else that I might not be able to get somewhere else.

29:12 **Amanda Ostuni**

Interesting, wow. I didn't even know that QR could be thought of in that way. How does the way that you saw QR and the things you started doing with it—how does that compare to what it was meant for? Is that the kind of thing; I guess what would be your kind of QR 101 for people who aren't familiar with it, to explain what it's for, and why you've found that use in it?

29:51 **Hali Dardar**

Yeah, I think it's different now. I think like post-2020, every time I go to a restaurant it's so natural to just pull out my phone and get the QR code. It's not something that we think about, and I'm really, really excited about that. That's what I thought was gonna be next year in 2011, 10 years ago. So it's really cool to see that it's possible. But for years, there was a disconnect on that being actually a possibility. And I learned that through the Easter egg project. The first project is that—you have to download an app, back then you had to download an app—it wasn't necessarily just within the process of scanning. And the other thing was that back then not everyone had the Internet. So it wasn't this idea of having—constantly being locked in wasn't a thing. I actually, when I did this project, I actually had a Nokia "brick" phone. We had, in another art project, we had made it into the shape of a banana through this—so it was actually pulled it out, it was an actual banana. And I had a friend—so every time you would ring, we would ring 'banana phone dudududu.' It was really cool. I don't know where—oh I know what happened to it, banana phone's gone. But I couldn't even open up the QR tags, I guess that's what I meant to say, was I couldn't even open up the QR tags that I was making at the time, and very few people did. I saw people interact with the Easter eggs, and they just—it

was lost. It just completely left. But at the time what I understood from QR codes is I think that—I ran across it in—it was in inventory that I found that they exist. My father has an Internet architecture company, so he develops Internet pipelines for large organizations. So I was—a lot of times in my youth, I would be helping out with their company and their business and doing things. So I think it was there that I first realized the idea of QR codes were a thing, and it was just wireless access points. So we were doing a large install of like 500 wireless access points, and each one of them had this little, instead of a bar code at the back to scan for inventory, they had this little square, and I think that was the first time that I interfaced with this idea of a barcode, and at the time it was just like a better way to do inventory, was what I think Cisco was using it for at the time. But to me, it just kind of clicked—like 'this is a sticker, this is an icon, this is something that is an artifact that's business card-sized, this thing can—it can go a lot of different places that—it was made for an efficient use, but it could be used in so many different ways.'

32:48 **Amanda Ostuni**

So was that part of—I saw that for your Master's program, you looked at digital documentary. You looked at how to design digital documentary guides, I guess, for cultural participation. That's probably a terrible summary, but what were some of those ideas with the QR code part of that—how did you get to that project idea?

33:26 **Hali Dardar**

Absolutely. So, what I was really interested at the time was this changing of spaces. So, you have what we were—back then what we understood as quote: 'the real world'—this idea that technology is—wasn't as prevalent as it is now. There was a definite divide; there was this moment of ceremony where you go to your computer and you get online. And it was this idea—what I was playing with was this, like different ways that we can make that barrier a little bit more permeable. 'How can we get projects that we take the organization of digital spaces and superimpose that into chaotic reality? And how do we take the mushiness, the cultural elements, and the interactions that happen within physical spaces and make and digitize them and put them online?' And so those are the two kind of aspects that I'm still interested in, and I like to consider often, just this idea of there's this permeability. And I think that it's different now, and I think that it's much more, like now within culture and the way that we exist, it is a lot more permeable than it was in the earlier days of the Internet. So the idea of these QR tags and stuff was trying to

superimpose the organizational reality of the Internet onto physical spaces. And the idea of these documentaries, or these documentary projects—I say it was a documentary, but what I was really interested in was, 'how do we have organized cultural participation online? And what's the difference between telling a story and making a story in a digital sense? What's the difference between a game and a meaningful cultural interaction?' So, I tried to make this—I tried to explicate a different way that you can—I tried to develop a series of terms or a series of different ways that people can talk about digital interactions. Or, if you're going to call them a documentary, whether it's a digital game, it's a digital interaction, it's a digital play, or it's just like an online experience, I gave this explication of four to five different concepts you can use to start discussing the different elements of these things. So, to help you kind of create a framework to discuss, for you to under—to people to get their bearings on, 'is this a game, or is this reality? Is this a meaningful cultural interaction or is this a story?' And just trying to—finding the elements between those things.

36:17 **Amanda Ostuni**

So, is there an answer for that? What does a meaningful cultural interaction online look like; what is it that you're exactly trying to build?

36:31 **Hali Dardar**

That's diff—I mean, that's something I'm still trying to—I don't think that there's an answer; There's not one thing that you can look at and be like, 'that's it!' But there—you can talk about different ones in a different—you can use terms and kind of mental models to think about and criticize the aesthetics of what people are doing and compare it to other interactions. And I don't think that there's anything that's definite, but there's definitely a way that you can consider a framework that you can perceive things that helps you better navigate the space. I think the elements that I kind of break out are narrative elements of storytelling; 'is this—is the narrative a real narrative, or is this a fiction?' So trying to get that idea of the narrative that's developed, kind of dicing out the narrative from the plot on things, and thinking about 'is this the journalism moment or is this the fiction moment?'

The other thing that you can look at is game theory of like 'what are the rules of the game? Are there a lot of rules or structure to the interaction that's happening?' The more rules that are happening, the less—the more organized it is, which is great, but also the less realistic or the less immediate it is. So there's this—there's that push and pull there of 'how much are people actually able to control what's

happening?' And then the third part is the cultural part, and I think that that's what really changes. You know, something could be a game for one person, and it could be a reality for a-completely different group of people. And it all depends on cultural values and interaction patterns that are-that influence the way that you perceive things. There's this question of just better understanding 'what is culture and how are people interacting with the space?' And this idea of the difference between participation and representation, I think, is another important thing. Like are you able to participate in this space? Are you able to bring yourself and contribute yourself to this space? And if not, then this may not be a thing that is a cultural, relevant thing. And then also is it representative? So, are the things that you're seeing within the space or within this interaction representative of your own experiences and memories? Or is this something that feels like something new that's outside of yourself; and those kind of individual cultural dynamics play into whether things are considered a storytelling event or a real event online.

39:11 **Amanda Ostuni**

So how does this-how does your-the roles that you've had since your studies incorporate this interest and this concept; I'll start by saying is this: would you consider this part of what you're doing with the Houma Language Project?

39:36 **Hali Dardar**

I think that this is something that I do-this is kind of the basic thought or interest that I have, and who I am. So, anything that I touch has elements of this in it. I touch things, but I don't own things in that same way as just like, the Houma Language Project is a collaborative effort. So some of the energy that I'm putting towards and bringing towards that effort is definitely having some of these questions. And the same thing with language vitality initiatives that I'm working on, and all of my side projects for Bvlbancha⁷ Public Access, I'm definitely bringing this question-this line of questioning into what-the work that I'm doing. But it's collaborative in a sense that I don't own the direction of things. I'm-this is one of the many questions that people are being brought into that space. I think that this is definitely something that I still-that still kind of guides my direction.

One of the things that I did after writing [my thesis] is I realized that I had some interest in understanding of narrative through journalism. I had a better understanding of art through just personal projects, and going through this program, which was a very art-heavy program. But the other side of this

⁷ Public access channel in Bvlbancha, Louisiana.

that I felt like I was kind of blind to was the digital side of things. So when I came back from this program, I ended up going and working at the Center for Computation and Technology at LSU at a fabrication lab for a year and a half/two years, and I—one of the things that had kind of clicked in my mind was that I need to better understand the digital. I need to understand what I'm talking about when someone shows me code. I don't think I'll ever code. You know, that's not something that I'm necessarily, growing up in a family with a father that's working in the Internet, heavily, I learned very quickly that this is just not my full thing. But I did understand that I needed to understand this concept a little bit better if I'm going to be designing and architecting interactions. It's like I don't need to be a plumber; I need to understand plumbing, though. So this—that time was really—I took that job with the idea that I need to understand this component a little bit better, because I don't. So yeah in that sense, the idea of keeping a balance between those three elements of storytelling, art, and technology have always kind of driven me forward within the work that I do, and I think a lot of the Houma Language Project started with this idea of cultural participation of just like 'what is cultural participation? And how are we doing it now?' And can-I think the Houma Language Project was applying some of these elements to a known problem of a community that I am a part of in South Louisiana, that at the time, when we started this project, it felt like there was not a lot culturally happening and there wasn't a lot of places for youth, as myself at the time, to engage and connect with other youth, or to create the relationships and network necessary to keep culture and community going. So that's kind of the space where you know, that was the problem that both Colleen Billiot and I identified when we—in our first meeting when we started talking about what we wanted to do. I was interested that everything looks like a nail when you have a hammer. I have always thought that these ideas of art, technology, culture, and communication could help with this problem that was impacting me and others. And Colleen was coming for it—coming through with—with a background in international relations and tribal sovereignty and saw language as a part that was really the connecting part. She was very adamant about doing a language reconstruction project, and she was very adamant about doing a digital and in-person cultural revitalization project. So that's kind of how the idea fused together, and that's the roles we still—well actually no, that's not actually the—it's—in an interesting turn of events, that's—our roles in the project have kind of actually switched. She was the one that was

really adamant about language, and I'm the one who actually works in the language field now, although she is so much better at that at the process than I am, and has spent so much more time on the reconstruction process. But at the same time, she's organizing this massive—this large cultural event that's happening within the space. It's this really—in-person cultural thing. So, it's interesting that we came together through this problem, we brought the things that we were both interested in, and that through that, we've learned a lot from each other in a way that's kind of shaped and formed our careers.

44:33 **Amanda Ostuni**

And you are at the same time as you're working on or with the Houma Language Project, you're with the Smithsonian Center. What are you doing in that role? And how do they interact, if at all?

44:52 **Hali Dardar**

Yeah, they absolutely do interact. I think that one of the things—so we developed this project, the Houma Language Project back in 2013, and we've been working on it as a side—it'll—it's our forever side hustle for the rest of our lives and things. Through that space, we have come to many language challenges. There's—they're interesting—they're frustrating; they're very specific to the field of trying to use Indigenous languages in the contemporary life. The solutions that we have come up with are very much informed by my interest in these connections between technology, art, and storytelling, and we—the way that Colleen and I and the group has grown and worked is very—we grew outside of a lot of the organizational structures that usually run or are in charge of language work. Usually tribal communities, or like the tribal government is kind of in charge of a language project, or it's somehow funded by an outside funder. And all of these things influence language projects and—their structure conforms to these outside forces that are feeding them and keeping them alive.

The project that Colleen and I built were two tribal members, and later grew, but just two tribal members. There was no funding involved, and we were not—when we started the project, we weren't officially ordained by the tribe to do this. We got some approval from elders, and people really supported us, but the tribe kind of just left us alone. And because of that, we were able to kind of insularly grow and develop something that was outside these external influences that a lot of people have to deal with. We were able to just approach problems with just bright-eyed bushy-tailed minds, and just the tools that we both independently came to solve these projects. So I don't think that the, what we're doing is unique, and I think that it's not unique enough to say that we're

super special, but it's unique enough that the designs and the ideas that we're able to do may not be the same—may be the things that other people want to do, but not quite sure if they work yet, or it's too much of a risk for people to take on. So I think that that's been very helpful for me to understand is that we were able to design in this very free space, and we've designed some answers, and some stuff that we've fallen down a lot of cliffs that other people have not had—have safely walked over bridges with. And because we've made so many mistakes, or we've traversed so much difficult ground, we have a lot of experience in a lot of different places that resonates a lot with other people going through revitalization efforts across North America.

So that's kind of—led me to, I'm feeling--after three years of wondering—what's that word when you don't think you're supposed to be somewhere... impostor, syndrome, impostor... After years of imposter syndrome with this organization, I think that that's kind of the thing that I'm able to do, is that I'm not able—I'm giving a voice that's realistic, that's been through places, and is also willing to hear new and kind of off-the-wall ideas and help people work through those weird and off-the-wall ideas. And I think that that's the energy that I bring to this language revitalization space. So yeah, I partner with the—my other, my colleague that I work with, her office—she is a linguist officially trained and stuff, [redacted] what I bring, the energy is thinking about a very creative and a very different way to do things.

49:30 **Amanda Ostuni** How are you engaging with the cultures and the members of the cultures that you are servicing? What is their role in the work that you're doing?

49:49 **Hali Dardar** My—I'm a governmental servant. So, my job is to help people with how they approach me, how they want to be helped. So, we design a few projects, and I can talk about that. There's four main buckets of the work within the Smithsonian that we do within language vitality. The first one is training. We sponsor worldwide trainings on different places and different things; cultural vitality—I mean language documentation, emerging techniques, just the gambit of things that you need to know to be in the reclamation space. We sponsor training organizations, and we help support trainings as they happen across—we don't run trainings, but we support and partner with different organizations that do, like CoLang⁸ is the big one in North America that we work with, and we also have one

⁸ Institute on Collaborative Language Research: <https://www.colanginstitute.org/>

in the Sino-Tibetan Language Research Methodology Workshop institute in China.

The other thing that we do is incubation projects. This is the place where, if someone has an idea—thinking about how contemporary language changes the way that we're working and doing things. This is really our spot—our kind of lab spot where we can, we have a small amount of funding to support projects that are addressing some of these, 20—twenty-second-almost-century pro—issues, and are addressing them in a way that can be scalable and repurposed for other communities across the globe.

And then we do advocacy and networking. So part of my job is to help connect other organ—people who are working and dealing with the same issues, connect them and get them into the same room, so they can at least better, understand each other, and leveraging the Smithsonian brand to organize underneath—and then finally advocating, so being there and answering questions. If someone approaches us from the government who wants to know why language work is important or additive bilingualism is an important element, that's another thing that we do.

The main project that I run is something called the Language Archives Mentorship Project. Again, going back to the idea that—the space that I kind of do is just like designing from empathy and thinking about 'what did I need when I was in this spot?' So one of those projects that I made was the Language Archives Mentorship Project. It's an internship project for people who think that there's materials on their community or culture within the Smithsonian but don't know how to get it. There's another project called Recovering Voices that does this on a very much larger scale. But they bring people in, and it's this big to-do, and sometimes people just need help finding two-to-three things, and they don't actually need to come to D.C. to do that. So, the project is an internship where I just help—we meet online, and I help guide people through the Smithsonian system or write emails to different agents if they feel uncomfortable doing that. Hopefully that was the answer to your question.

52:54 **Amanda
Ostuni**

Okay. And with the work that you're doing now, and that you've done since—your first internship was in the environmental justice space, and you're not directly involved environmental issues now, but is there—what dynamic is there in terms of a presence of environmental issues in the cultural preservation work that you're doing?

53:23	Hali Dardar	<p>Yeah, definitely. I think that to clarify on the first one, my first internship was not in an environmental justice space. My first internship was an environmental space. And I think that that's a very important difference there, is that—it's just—that's just the place that I'm living, it's like no one—very few people at the time that I was working there at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries—very few people would say that they connected their work into environmental justice. A lot of people's work was within environmental justice or—and some people's work was very much not in environmental justice, and was just part of Louisiana Government operations. But I think that a lot of the work did fit underneath that, but it wasn't necessarily coming to that mind before the work began. And I think that is indicative of the—what I try to embody within the work that I'm doing also. There's, going back to language, and this is something that hit me very hard, is that English has a very—has a tendency to want to title things. So, because I get in the pool every once in a while, I would be called a swimmer. There's this idea that because I'm in a pool, I'm a swimmer. But if you're thinking about it within a German-language sense, there's no such thing as that word. You would have to be an official, certified Olympic winner to be called a swimmer. There's a very specific and detailed process that it takes to get to any noun, and within the English organization system, you can just call yourself something, and you're that. And if there's not that same type of organization or process to earn a title, a title is just kind of out there. So if you were—if I was in a German sense, I would never call myself a swimmer. If someone called me on the phone while I was in the pool, and they asked what I was doing, I could say at that moment, the very moment, that I am swimming, but only in that very small moment. And I think that that's an important, I think I take that into the work that I'm doing, is that I think that you lose a lot of specificity and impact if you're focused on gaining a title that doesn't have a specific process to get there, and it's better to do the thing that you understand needs to be done and that will be maybe one day connected into these other things if this process is made, but it's not your responsibility to live to a title.</p>
56:07	Amanda Ostuni	<p>Hmm. Okay that's interesting. But I guess, well, you said before, you sometimes help explain why preservation—language preservation is important. What would be your answer to that?</p>
56:23	Hali Dardar	<p>Why language preservation is important? I think that language is...how do I word this...in a lot of ways. I think that this idea of cognitive architecture is where I really started connecting into language. This</p>

idea that the way that we communicate with each other is— reflects how we organize our thoughts and ideas, and the tool that we have to do that, or the organizing box or container is language. So the way that you organize your thoughts changes what you think about.

To give an example, like in some North American languages and another one in Estonian, there is, the use of pronouns is not really there. There's no difference between 'he' and 'she.' And so, I had an Estonian friend, and we were talking, and we were talking about things, and they were talking about someone they met on the street, and they couldn't remember if it was—they couldn't remember the person's pronouns. They couldn't remember if it was—how they would gender someone, because their language doesn't have that as an important concept or detail, that it's not something that's tracked within their minds. And that really just kind of shows about how different languages structure things in a way where you can't even get to some concepts within certain language bounds. And that shows how important—and I think that that for me is—the semiotics of that is why the idea of preserving languages is—preserving, maintaining, and celebrating languages is preserving and maintaining different thought structures. And you're not able to solve innovative problems unless you have innovative approaches. And you can't have innovative approaches if everyone's coming from the same kind of concept or base thought model. So it's very important for us to keep these—keep diversity alive in the way that we think, and that can only be done if we at the base level—the most radical way we can do that—there's a lot of other ways we can do that—but the most radical and the most important way that we can do that is to maintain different thought structures through language.

58:41 **Amanda Ostuni** And I don't want to force the environmental justice connection, but just in thinking about the project that we are doing, and a lot of what I've heard in researching the environmental justice issues happening in Louisiana, I know that part of the conversation is when tribes are being forced to relocate, there's an element of losing that culture and losing the language. So I'm just curious of how present that is in the conversation of the work you're doing, and I guess how that can be—is being addressed and delivered.

59:28 **Hali Dardar** Yeah, absolutely. And I'm gonna need to run after this... [unimportant sidebar chatter] I think that that's incredibly important. One thing that I learned when I was—I took a class on, a course on cognitive ergonomics, and it was just like 'how do you make

things comfortable for different minds to work within them?' And some—a fact that stuck out from that class is 80 percent of our brain is dedicated to geospatial understanding and memory, so like only 20 percent is going through audio or textual comprehension. The rest is based on spatially-oriented things, and that's why you can remember exactly how to get there without understanding the street names. So a lot of our memory, a lot of the things that we connect our memory onto is connected into the landscape or the geography that we navigate, whether it's a digital geography or a physical geography. And that's one of the reasons why you know, landscape is, when we're losing an environment, we're losing a knowledge base, particularly if you're coming from a community that doesn't have a very strong connection with written word.

So that kind of goes into media studies, where, if you're coming from a Western, or what we see as a research format, this is a—the research community is one that's very heavily based on text and written word. So this idea that there—there's an entire priesthood almost around reading and writing, and interacting with other people's thoughts in that way. In a similar sense, other communities and other cultures have that same kind of interaction with physical space and other cultures have that same interaction with oral history and oral storytelling, and a lot of times those two things are connected. So going, visiting a space is a place where memories are kept and this—there's a knowledge transfer that can only happen—you could reference a book, but that's very different than reading it. And in the same way you can reference a landscape, but it's very different than experiencing it. And in the same way for the person who's holding the information, and particularly for intergenerational storytelling, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing, a lot of memories are only stimulated within, when you're in within a certain landscape. So, there's like this idea that—and I—a lot of people have codified this different, and made this more ceremonial than I think that we could super impose into the South Louisiana space, because I don't think that we have it to that ceremonial amount, but I do recognize that there is a connection between people's ability to transfer generational knowledge and their ability to access the land that it was made on. So, when I'm saying generational knowledge, you think about that in like a large cultural, forever sphere. And that's true. But there's also this sense of what happened one generation ago, or what happened to your grandmother, and those types of things, I think, is what—before digital media came, where a lot

		of people were able to, put a lot of—document a lot of their life in a digital sense very easily, a lot of that information is only held in stories, and a lot of those stories are only held through interactions that are happening within a certain space or within a certain experience grounds that can only be accessed somewhere in particular.
1:02:52	Amanda Ostuni	That's really interesting. Okay, I will let you go. But I really appreciate your time, and I think this is really—I mean what you're doing is so unique and definitely speaks to, especially the oral history part and the mapping that we plan on doing, so I think it's great.
1:03:07	Hali Dardar	Thank you so much for this time to talk. I really appreciated it.
1:03:11	Amanda Ostuni	Thank you. Have a great afternoon.
