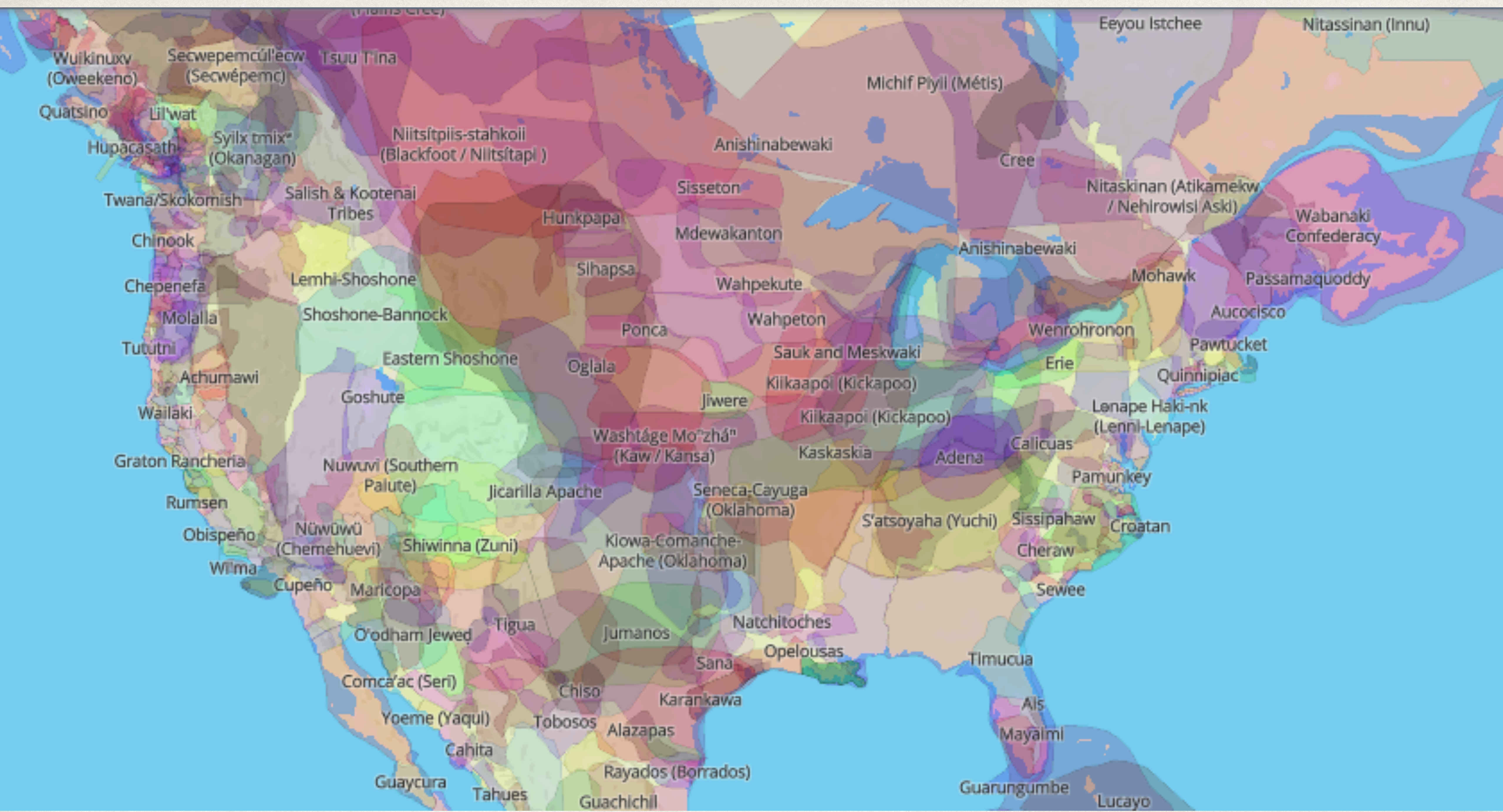


Indigenous Ways of Hearing

Music, Sound, and the Environment—9/16/25





Robin Wall Kimmerer

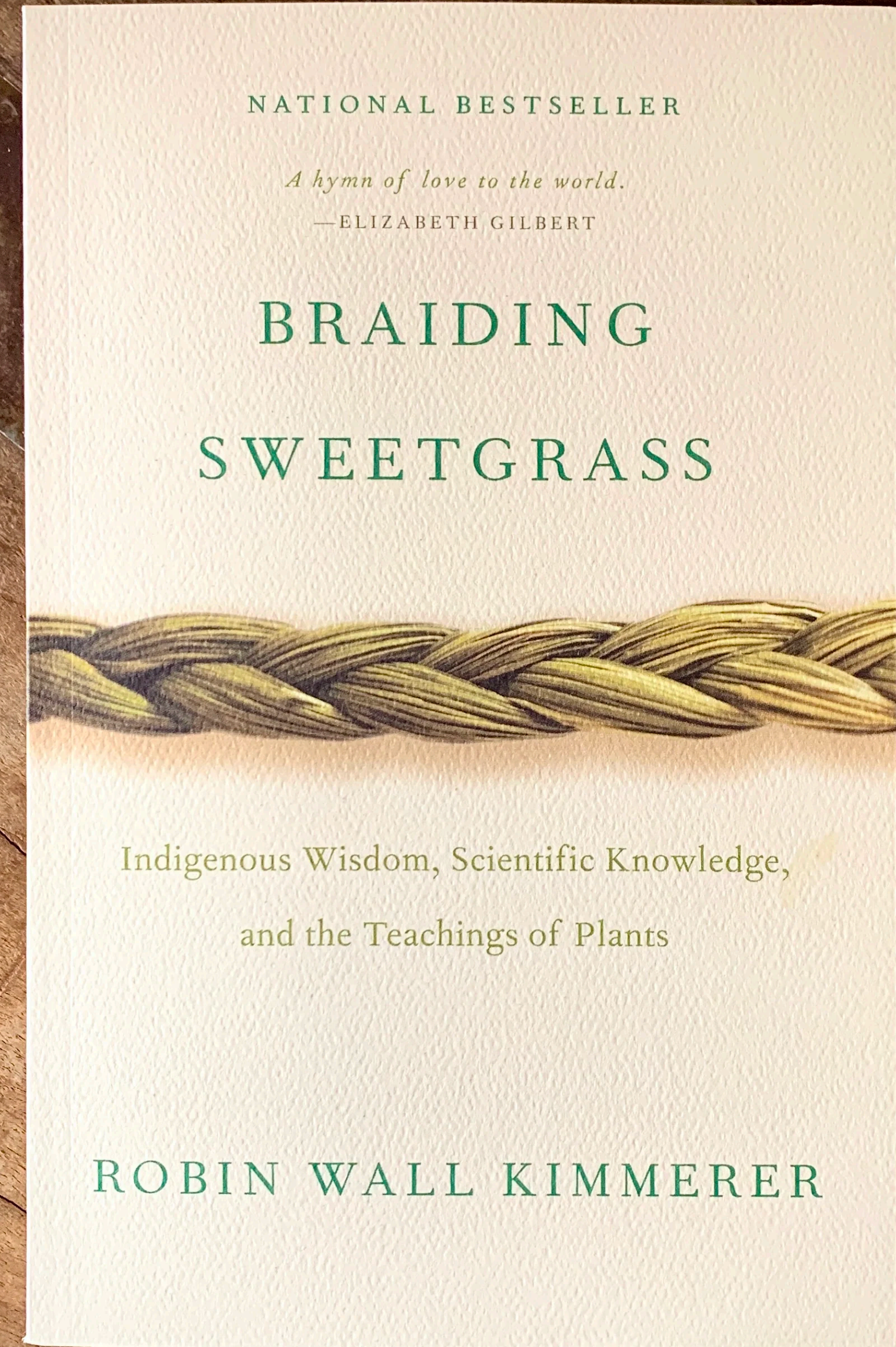
b. 1953



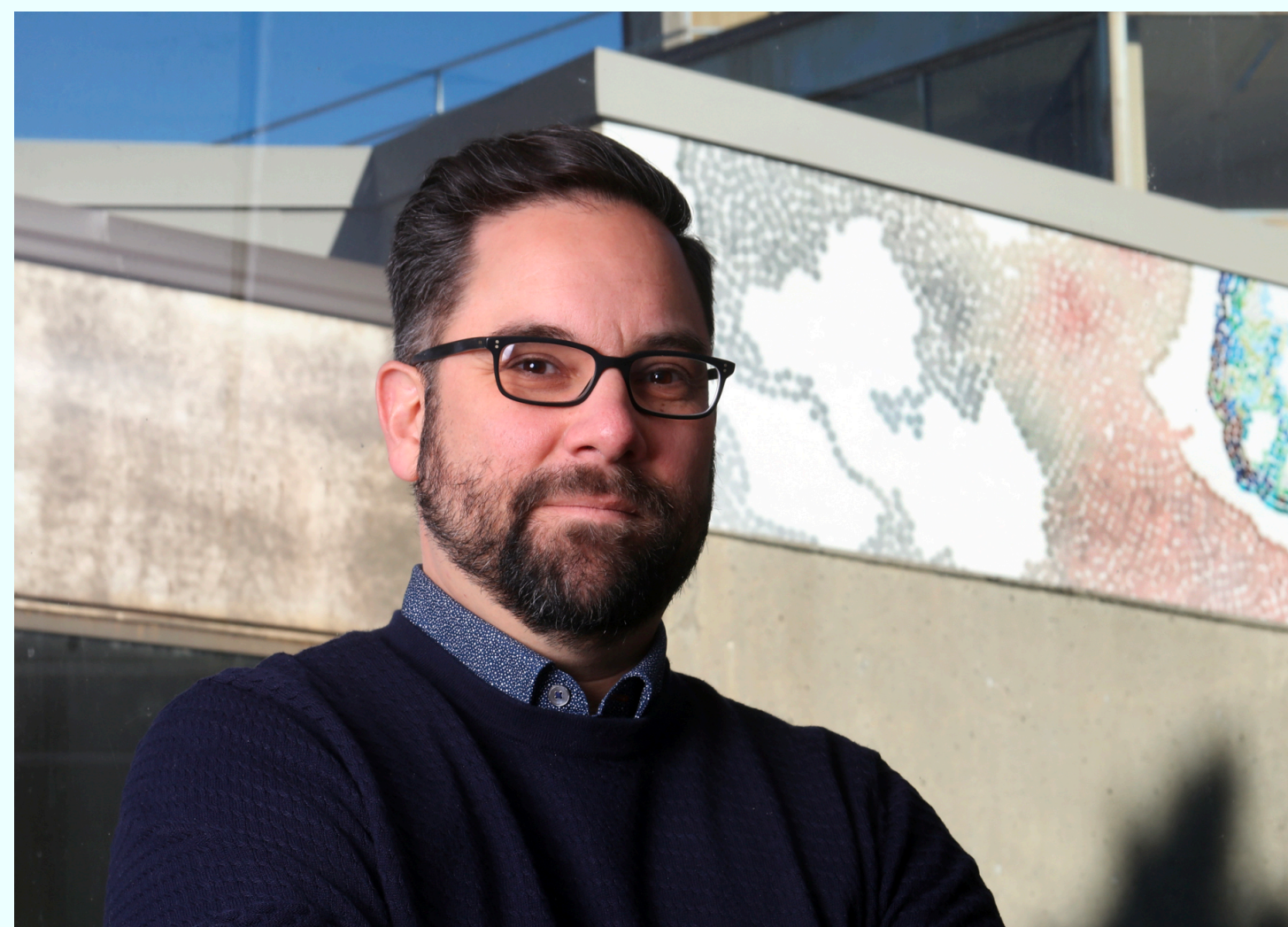
is a Native American botanist, author, an American Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology; and the director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF).

She combines Western science with Indigenous environmental knowledge.

Kimmerer was born in 1953 in Upstate New York to Robert and Patricia Wall. Her time outdoors created a deep appreciation for the natural environment. Her enthusiasm for the environment was encouraged by her parents, who began to reconnect with their own Potawatomi heritage while living in upstate New York. Kimmerer is an enrolled citizen of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

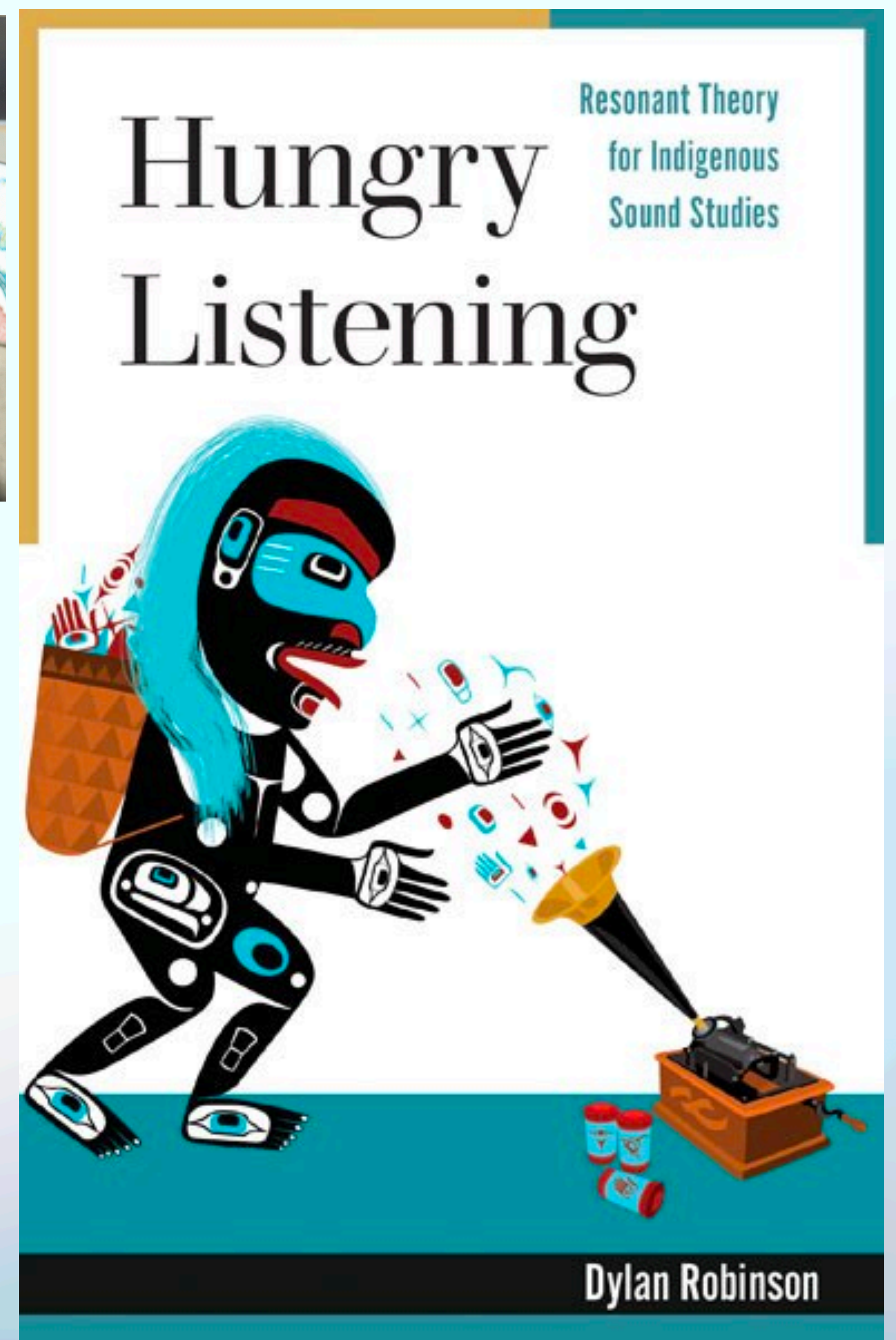


Dylan Robinson



is a xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) artist, curator and writer. A professor at University of British Columbia, Dr. Robinson's curatorial work includes the international touring exhibition Soundings (2019-2025) co-curated with Candice Hopkins. His current research project xoxelhmetset te syewa:l, *Caring for Our Ancestors*, involves working with Indigenous artists to reconnect kinship with Indigenous life incarcerated in museums.

His book, *Hungry Listening* (University Minnesota Press, 2020), examines Indigenous and settler colonial practices of listening, and was awarded best first book for the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. Other publications include the edited volume *Music and Modernity Among Indigenous Peoples of North America* (Wesleyan University Press, 2019); and *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016). As co-chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council for the Canadian Music Centre, he is currently leading a process for the reparation and redress of music that appropriates Indigenous song, and misrepresents Indigenous culture.



- Western music is largely though not exclusively oriented toward aesthetic contemplation and for the affordances it provides: getting us through our work days, setting and focusing moods, and creating a sense of home. Indigenous song, in contrast, serves strikingly different functions, including that of law and of primary historical documentation.
- A striking example of this clash between Western aesthetic and Indigenous “functional” ontologies of song is apparent in *Delgamuukw v. the Queen* (1985), a land claim trial in which Gitksan and Wet’suewt’en sought jurisdiction over their territories in northern British Columbia, Canada.

A cultural hearing aid

Very few people who live within the 57,000 square kilometres of Gitksan and Wet’suewt’en territory managed to sit in on the supreme court hearings of the title action case in Smithers during May and June.

Cartoonist Don Monet spent many hours listening to the powerful explanation of Gitksan and Wet’suewt’en culture by four hereditary chiefs.

One of his most effective interpretations of Chief Justice Alan McEachern’s cultural hearing problems (*The Interior News*, June 24, 1987, page A2) cannot be fully appreciated unless people know what actually happened in court.

When lawyer Peter Grant asked Chief Mary Johnson to sing a Gitksan song as an essential part of her evidence on the “Ayook,” the ancient but still effective Gitksan law, Judge McEachern objected. He said he did not want any “performance” in his court of law. “I can’t hear your Indian song, Mrs. Johnson. I’ve got a tin ear.”

In the cartoon, Mrs. Johnson says, “That’s okay, your highness, I’ve got a can opener.” As a matter of fact, Chief Mary Johnson did once address the judge as “Your Highness.” It may have been a slip of the tongue, but it certainly expressed the customary respect shown to



any Canadian judge, albeit in a most unusual form. The whole courtroom, including Chief Justice McEachern, broke out in friendly laughter.

The cartoon shows Chief Johnson using her “can opener” to overcome the cross-cultural deafness caused by the judicial “tin ear.”

Most of us non-aboriginal Canadians also wear a tin ear. It seems natural because we have worn it all our lives. We are not even aware of the significant sounds we cannot hear.

What we are missing may be a valuable key which could help to open the way toward peace with justice on earth and in the Bulkley and Skeena valleys.

—Walt Taylor, Smithers

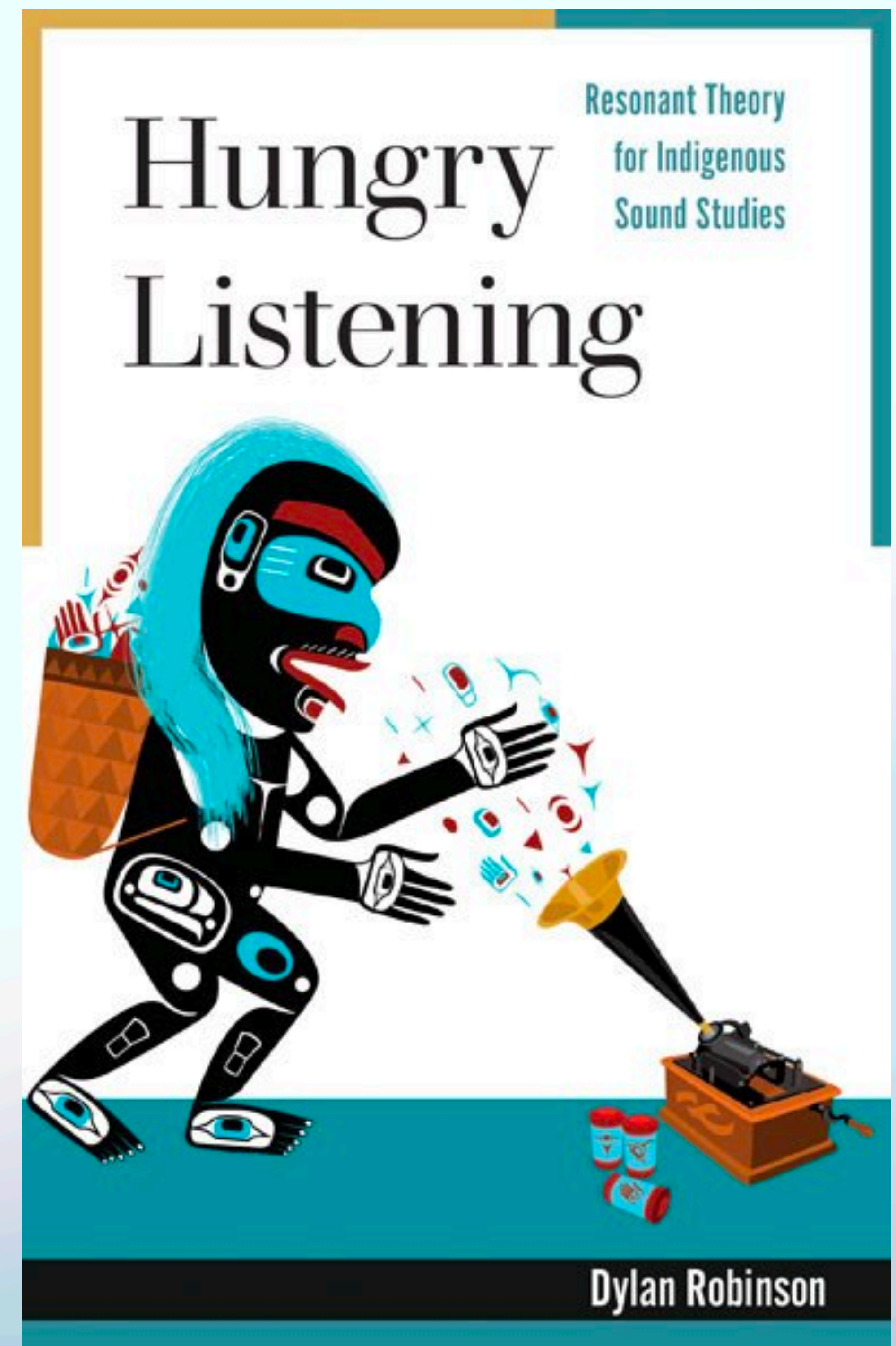
— The Three Rivers Report —
Wednesday, July 15, 1987

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(Walt Taylor, *The Three Rivers Report*, July 15, 1987)

Dylan Robinson

- **critical listening positionality:** a self-reflexive questioning of how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us
- as part of our listening positionality, we each carry listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability that are never wholly negative or positive



Raven Chacon

b. 1977, Fort Defiance New Mexico

- Raven Chacon is a Diné composer and visual artist.
- University of New Mexico: BA in Fine Arts, MFA in music composition from California Institute of Fine Arts
- well known for chamber music, site-specific installations, multimedia works, also performs as a lo-fi kind of noise musician with homemade electronic instruments
- His compositions have won much acclaim: His 2020 opera "Sweet Land" was named Opera of the Year by the Music Critics Association of North America.
- 2022: he received the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his composition "Voiceless Mass."



Raven Chacon

- **Growing up in a community that has seen a very different history and has struggled to present their identities in the dominant narratives, have you had any thoughts about that or what role you play? How do we change that people now are separate from the land?**
- As an indigenous artist, we are conscious that we are asked to represent that land with our art and at best, there are works that can give information about the places that we know, the long histories of what we know, the deeper stories about how the land works, how it is alive and takes care of people. When I think about the work I do with music, music is in a position where it voices sounds. It's not always in a position to be didactic or moralizing an issue and it doesn't have to be either. I do appreciate opportunities like this piece to see how this story can be told or how this urgent topic can be addressed by way of performance or music. If people are listening to me because I'm an indigenous person, I do recognize the responsibility I have in sharing the knowledge that I do have. I'm not from the Bay Area and there are Ohlone people or their descendants who have far more information about that place than I do. But the best I can do is talk about my relationship or travels in getting there and I tell my students that same thing. My students here on the Navajo reservation are making artwork or music that can tell about their own identity or their culture or the land that they're coming from. I think eventually they're going to have to find a way to share that knowledge and find links in that lineage or that relationship with the land where they're from and exchange that knowledge with people all over the world so that they can understand the contemporary situation that we are all involved in. At best, art can start those conversations for people who are looking for answers but are not necessarily seeking to be preached to. We know we're not living in a mode that is being beneficial to the planet, but I think what we're trying to do is understand each other and I think art can do that in ways that other interactions might fail to do.

