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Kerri J. Malloy
San Jose State University, kerri.malloy@sjsu.edu

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Renewing the World: Disrupting Settler-Colonial Destruction

Northwestern California

Northwestern California's geography was shaped and contoured by six rivers: The Eel, Van Duzen, Klamath, Trinity, Mad, and Smith over eons. These rivers forged the gorges and valleys that have been home to the Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, and Tolowa since time immemorial. Interlocked with the natural world, the Indigenous people developed an intellectual and intuitive relationship with the environment that shaped their worldview (Norton 1979, 1). The natural world of the region is a lived space and with sties of social reproduction that influenced the knowledge and development of culture and traditions of the Indigenous populations brought forth there (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, 32). The region's individual and collective identity has been shaped by cosmology and cosmogony that is inseparable from its Indigenous peoples' histories, religions, cultures, and worldviews (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, 34).

For the Indigenous peoples of this region, maintaining spiritual balance has been a way of life since time immemorial. The cultural reality of spiritual balance is not a relic of the past. It is a way of life that coexists with the twenty-four-hour world demands that have expanded into the virtual paradigm (Parkman 1989, 529). Grounded in the belief that their obligation to the Creator and the world is to maintain balance the ceremonies of the Indigenous peoples of this region have global implications (Kroeber 1951, 405). The world renewal ceremonies of the Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, and Tolowa take place in specific villages, the physical centers of their worlds for one or two days or up to ten days, during which they pray, fast, sing, and dance, restoring the balance of the world (Kroeber 1951, 407–8). The pre-contact way of life was one of moderation that balanced the mundane everyday with the spiritual in an ordered world (Norton 1979, 37).

Northwestern California saw the world renewal ceremonies the Tolowas at the *Yontocket* in 1853 and Wiyots at *Tuluwat* in 1860 horrifically interrupted by massacres as they prayed for a better world for all humanity. The cultural and spiritual identities of the tribes were violently assaulted and nearly erased by settler-colonists intent on destroying a people they perceived to be less than human—an obstacle in their quest for land acquisition. An ordered world was thrown out of balance with the arrival of perfected anti-Indian violence that had been honed and rationalized since settler-colonists arrival on the eastern shores of the continent (Norton 1979, 38). What unfolded throughout the area was "geographically and moralistically…a microcosm" of the intentional targeting of Indigenous peoples' across the American landscape (Norton 1979, 58).

Yontocket

Located along the Smith River, in the county of Del Norte, is the village of *Yontocket,* where the Creator brought forth the first Redwood tree and placed the Tolowa as caretakers of the world(Parkman 1989, 529). Before contact, no word described all the Tolowa as sharing one national or ethnic identity (Reed 1999, xiii). Their villages shared a common language, and each acknowledged Yontocket as the center of their world (Reed 1999, xiii). The essence and uniqueness of the Tolowa are enshrined in this place, and it is the political and spiritual center of their world (Norton 1979, 54).

At Yontocket is where the Tolowa gather for the *Nee-dash*, the world renewal ceremony to fast, pray, sing, and dance to maintain balance in the world (Parkman 1989, 529). Over the course of ten nights, they sing, retell the story of their creation at this place and thank the Creator (Reed 1999, 16). Tolowas and individuals from surrounding tribes would come together to pray for "health, strength, and fortune would come to all mankind (Norton 1979, 54)." While their

religious beliefs and practices benefit all living beings in the world, that ideal was not shared by Euro-Americans who had settled in Tolowa territory.

Anti-Indian violence was the norm from the initiation of contact with the Tolowa, in what is now Del Norte County, and Euro-American settlers. Accounts of "vigilante justice, Indian retaliation, and white massacres" are found throughout the region in the 1850s (Collins 1998, 35). In his description of the Tolowa ethnologist and photographer, Edward Curtis states, "With the Tolowa at Smith river there was trouble from almost the very beginning.(Curtis 1924, 13:91) " The geographical isolation that had protected Indigenous populations from encroachment of Euro-American settlement vanished with the discovery of gold in the state. For the Tolowa, 1851-1856 became known as "the time the world was turned upside down," referring to the attacks on their villages, ceremonies, and way of life (Reed 1999, 46).

In the late fall of 1853, the Tolowa had gathered at the village of *Yontocket*, just 13 miles from the county seat in Crescent City, for *Nee-dash* (Madley 2012, 177). As the Tolowa assembled, so did settler vigilante forces. Tolowa's oral tradition reveals what occurred that night. Eddie Richards, whose mother passed the story on to him, stated that "They set fire to the house, the Indian's house. You could see them cutting heads off. They stick them things [knives] into them: pretty soon they pick them up and throw them right into the fire" (Gould 1966, 32). Bodies of victims were either burned in the fires or were taken downstream by the current in the Yontocket slough, making an accurate death toll incalculable (Madley 2012, 178). According to oral accounts, the village was burned to the ground, and hundreds of Tolowas were killed (Collins 1998, 35–36). Tolowa men, women, and children fled into the waters of Yontocket Slough, seeking refuge from the gunfire, only to be shot, their blood turning the waters red

(Madley 2012, 178). The Yontocket massacre was not a singular act of mass violence; it was part of three-years of anti-Indian violence that engulfed Tolowa territory.

The Tolowa would endure through a century of violence, racism, and discrimination at the hands of the successors of those who carried out the massacre in 1853. Forced into boarding schools, restricted from speaking their language, and having their federal recognition stripped away in the Termination era, they fought tirelessly for their rights and preserved their religious beliefs. The responsibility that was given to them by the Creator was not lost. It remained with them as they worked to preserve their language, culture, and traditions in the face of incredible odds. For the Tolowa, the world renewal ceremony continues in the present with the remnants of the past's terrors.

In 2010, one hundred fifty-seven years later, the Tolowa gathered on the winter solstice to hold a candlelight vigil to remember and honor those that had lost their lives in the violence in the 1853 massacre (Spencer 2014). The vigil is a method of moving past the trauma of historic anti-Indian violence and engaging in an open dialogue. No attempt is made to "gloss over the realities of what happened (Spencer 2014)." Moving the annual vigil to different village sites over the last decade is a way of remembering all those whose lives were lost to settler-colonial militias in their campaigns against the Tolowa. Incorporating the vigil has at start of *Nee-dash,* the time to seek balance for the world and reconcile with past (Spencer 2014).

Tuluwat

South of the Tolowa, along the Pacific Coast, is Humboldt Bay. In the middle of the bay lies a 275-acre island where the Creator placed the Wiyot at the village of *Tuluwat* (Malloy 2021, 20). Like their relations to the north, the Wiyot are caretakers of the world who share a common language and acknowledge *Tuluwat* as the spiritual and political center of their world (Malloy

2021, 20). Here in the place that the Wiyot were brought into this world is where they gather to pray for humanity and dance to keep the world in balance.

In 1860, the Wiyot were nearing the completion of their world renewal ceremony. As night fell on February 25, the men left the island to food and supplies that would be needed in the coming days, leaving women, children, and the elderly behind (Rhode 2010). In the dark morning hours of February 26, a group of settler-colonists crossed the one-mile channel from the City of Eureka and proceeded to kill every Wiyot that remained on the island (Rhode 2010). Jane Sam survived the massacre by hiding near the edge of a marsh; she watched as the murderers took "beads, baskets, fur, hide, bows, and arrows" from their dead victims, burning what they could not abscond with (Rhode 2010). The estimates of the number killed range from fifty to two hundred depending on the source, regardless of the number the Wiyot were brought to brink to extinction.

The fasting, prayers, singing, and dancing for a world of were silenced that night. Over the next week, Wiyot villages throughout the Humboldt Bay region were attacked in an attempt to consign a culture, religion, and language to historical and anthropological texts (Butler 2011, 2:23). The island would serve as a constant reminder of the atrocity committed there and the origin of the division between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities around Humboldt Bay. After the massacre, the island was divided into parcels to be bought and sold by the settler-colonists who had succeeded those who committed that atrocity of that night. A hundred and forty years would pass before *Tuluwat* would be restored to the Wiyot.

The Wiyot, having survived the attempted extermination, federal government policies to assimilate them, and the dissolution of their reservation during the Termination era have remained an integral part of the Humboldt Bay region. In 2000, the 1.5-acre parcel acre of the

Tuluwat village site was purchased by the Wiyot Tribe for $106,000 (Donahue 2013). A few years later, in 2004, the City of Eureka transferred 40-acres of its holdings on the island to Wiyot Tribe, making it the first municipality in the United States to return the land to Indigenous people (Dorn and McVicar 2004). The Wiyot initiated the processes to return to *Tuluwat* in February 2014 to complete the world renewal ceremony cut short in 1860. The responsibility to maintain the world in balance had not been forgotten. The world renewal ceremony was completed, and preparations began for next year's ceremony.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century came to a close, the City of Eureka transferred its remaining holdings on the island to the Wiyot in a public ceremony on October 21, 2019 (Greenson 2019). The community that gathered that morning were descendants of massacre survivors and the beneficiaries of the near extinction of the Wiyot. Together they were writing a new chapter in the region's history. In keeping with the religious precepts of the Wiyot, an era of reconciliation and healing was initiated in the coming together of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to take unprecedented action in returning land to Indigenous people.

Religion and Identity

The tribes of northwestern California hold their world renewal ceremonies at the world's physical and spiritual centers. For the Yurok at *Kenek*, the Karuk at *Katemein*, the Wiyot at *Tuluwat*, and the Tolowa at *Yontocket* (Norton 1979, 13). The duality of these physical and spiritual places forms the socio-historical matrix of individual and communal identities of each tribe (Oppong 2013, 14). Tribal identities, religion, law, and worldview are interconnected with the region's geography—"the mountains and rivers, forests and prairies"—unable to exist on their own (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 492). Segmenting the physical, spiritual, and knowledge

experience within the region's belief systems is not possible, as they are interpenetrating and work together to give meaning to faith (Buckley 2002, 101).

The Indigenous people of California were subjected to increased anti-Indian violence after the state's admission to the Union. The extermination campaign that had started in the 15th century on the eastern coast of the continent and progressed westward over four-hundred years engulfed California's northern reaches in an accelerated genocide over five decades. The physical violence was complimented with state and federal Indian policies aimed at the assimilation and erasure of Indigenous people (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 500). Policies infused and born out of racism were advocated and implemented by the joint forces of the government, education, and Christian faith to dismantle tribal identities and culture to impose the ideals of Euro-American civilization (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 500). Indigenous religions were made illegal in the early part of the 19th century, with particular emphasis on the prohibition of "heathenish" dances and the practices of "medicine men (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 500)." Indian agents yielded incredible power over their Indigenous wards, working tirelessly to suppress the religions that had existed since time immemorial. The burning of dance houses, destruction of dance grounds, limiting of food rations, imprisonment, and military force were all standard tools employed by Indian agents in efforts to squelch the religious practice of the first peoples of this continent (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 500).

Religion is an expression of the deep sense of unity of an individual and a community in a common way of life (Oppong 2013, 13). Members of the community demonstrate their place and belonging to the community through participation in ceremonies, traditions, and respect for places and objects understood to be sacred (Oppong 2013, 13). As an institution, religion enables the development of the bonds of fidelity to a community and the attachment to an ideal that

influence identity formation (Oppong 2013, 14). The religious principles connected to these places and embedded within their respective worldviews enabled the tribes to maintain cohesiveness in their identities, amongst each other, and develop a sense of survivance in the face of anti-Indian violence (Norton 1979, 13).

The desecration of the centers of the world through genocidal bloodshed goes beyond the attempted destruction of a people—it strikes at the heart of their identity. Transforming sacred places into mass graves, sites of mourning, and depression jeopardize how the world will be renewed as a place of balance and prosperity to one turned upside down and bathed violence. These acts did not merely attempt to eradicate the past, present, and future of Tolowa and Wiyot. They imperiled the future of the world, an unforeseen outcome of dehumanization and greed for land. Undermining the cohesion of identity that the centers of the world forged for the Tolowa and Wiyot was meant to expunge the "essence and uniqueness" that made world renewal peoples through the deconsecration of their holiest of places (Norton 1979, 54). As with the religions exported from Europe, the Indigenous faiths did not rely on one site of spiritual importance to carry out the responsibilities that the Creator bestowed. Throughout the region, other major and minor sacred sites maintained the spiritual bonds with the past, present, and future of the world renewal people. The extermination campaigns of the 1800s had targeted anti-Indian violence on the physical and spiritual centers of the world, making it apropos that the assaults on the region's Indigenous religions in the 1900s would take place in the High Country.

The Gasquet-Orleans Road

A new threat to the religious systems of the Indigenous peoples of northwestern California came in the 1960s when the Department of Agriculture's United States Forest Service became intent on building a federal highway through the Southern Siskiyou Mountains, the High

Country (Buckley 2002, 176). The altitudes and spiritual importance of Doctor Rock, Chimney Rock, Fish Lake, and "men's peak" are the source of the moniker High Country (Buckley 2002, 174). There amongst the medicine rocks is where the medicine people go to fast, pray, and make "high medicine (Buckley 2002, 174)." These places' spiritual power was so great that only those who were trained in the religion and prepared for what they will experience are permitted to make the days long walk into the area (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 489). In the High Country, the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa medicine people seek spiritual guidance and "make medicine to heal the sick, control the weather, and bring peace to the world (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 489)." Formed from millennia of geological pushing and pulling, these sacred places clustered on the bend of the Lower Klamath River are places of spiritual energy and renewal that were endangered by the US Forest Service's commercial ambitions (Buckley 2002, 174).

Located within the boundaries of what is now the Six Rivers National Forest the High Country is under the management of the US Forest Service. In 1976, the US Forest Service determined that the construction of a logging road between Gasquet and Orleans, California would expedite the harvesting and removal of 733 million board feet of timber (Echo-Hawk 2010, 337–38). The proposed seventy-mile roadway would run through the heart of the High Country, destroying numerous sacred sites, became known as "the Gasquet-Orleans Road" or "the GO-Road (Buckley 2002, 177)."

The importance of the High Country was known throughout the Indigenous community of northwestern California. However, it was not knowledge that non-Indigenous people readily possessed (Buckley 2002, 177). Early anthropologists, including A.L. Kroeber, T.T. Waterman, and E.W. Gifford had recorded little about the significance of the High Country in their ethnographic reports, leaving a sparse scholarly genealogy to educate non-Indigenous people and

agencies of the place it holds within the religious belief systems of the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa (Buckley 2002, 177). In preparation for building the GO-Road, the US Forest Service commissioned a study of the Indigenous religious and cultural sites along the proposed construction route to fill in the gaps left by anthropologists. The study included the interviewing of 166 individuals from the Yurok, Karuk and Tolowa tribes who clearly documented the High Country's religious significance (Echo-Hawk 2010, 338). With the knowledge of the importance of the High County to Indigenous religions of the area, the US Forest Service determined that the GO-Road development would not have detrimental impacts on the area or the characteristics that made it sacred (Echo-Hawk 2010, 338). A determination was in stark contrast to the findings of the study, "that the entire area is significant as an integral and indispensable part of Indian religious conceptualization and practice (Echo-Hawk 2010, 338)." The study's recommendation was not to proceed with the building of the GO-Road to avoid causing irreversible harm to the High Country and the spiritual identities of the Indigenous peoples (Echo-Hawk 2010, 338). The US Forest Service rejected the findings of the study and proceeding with plans to build the roadway.

Rejection of the study's findings was met with the formation of the Northwestern Indian Cemetery Protective Association's in 1979, a coalition of Yuroks, Karuks, Tolowas, Wiyots, and Hupas seeking to stop the construction of the GO-Road (Buckley 2002, 192). The coalition filed for injunctions to stop the US Forest Service from desecrating the High Country's sacred sites and preserve their religious practices (Buckley 2002, 192). The legal battle between the government and Indigenous people worked its way through the court system, reaching the 9th District Court in San Francisco in 1983 and had been joined by the Northcoast Environmental Center and the Sierra Club (Buckley 2002, 193). The District Court found that the US Forest

Service had violated the National Environmental Policy Act, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, and the free exercise clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States (Buckley 2002, 195–96). The victory was short lived as the US Forest Service appealed the case the full district court which upheld the prior ruling leading to a final appeal to the United States Supreme Court in 1987. Oral arguments in *Lyng v. Northwest Cemetery Association* were heard on November 30, five months later the Court issued its opinion.

In its decision, the Supreme Court held that there were no principles of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution that protected the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa's rights to worship undisturbed in the High County (Echo-Hawk 2010, 326). Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in her first majority opinion for the court wrote that the government was not infringing on the religious practice of Indigenous people because the action of building a road did not prohibit them from practicing their faith (Echo-Hawk 2010, 327). The Court consciously did not take into consideration the civil rights of Indigenous people guaranteed by the Religious Freedom Restoration of 1993 that provides for "claim or defense to persons whose religious exercise is substantially burdened by the government," concluding that the destruction of the High Country did not place a substantial burden on the Yurok, Karuk or Tolowa (Carpenter 2012, 163). Justice O'Connor drew a fine yet distinguishable line between *prohibit* and *destruction*—determining that the destruction of the High Country and subsequently the religions that are dependent on it was not an infringement of the exercise of religion because those who practiced those beliefs were not being "punished for worshipping or forced to violate their faith," the logics of legal fiction were bent and strained to the near breaking point in the crafting of the decision (Echo-Hawk 2010, 327).

Though the Supreme Court's decision falls short of the ideal of a moral and ethical response that had been expected, out of its shadow stepped the United States Congress. In 1984, as the case was proceeding through the appellate system's legal maze, the California Wilderness Act was passed, which prohibited logging in much of the High Country (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 491). Six years later, the Smith River National Recreation Area Act was enacted into law prohibiting construction on the GO-Road's proposed site, mainly preserving the sacred sites of the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 491). While the destruction of the High Country was avoided, the United States' responsibility to protect Indigenous religion, places, and practices was left with a perils pregnant pause. For the optimist, Congress's action to protect the High Country is reassuring. It the leaves the pessimist with wondering, will Congress one day rescind the legislative protections it enacted?

Religion is a cornerstone of identity, shaping how individuals and communities see themselves and are understood. The threat of that foundational component being removed creates anxiety and fear. However, it also sends the subtle message that Indigenous people maybe something less than full citizens of the United States when their beliefs are protected as those faiths of other citizens. The precariousness of the ability to freely practice Indigenous religions reflects the uncertainty of place of Indigenous people in the United States—constantly fighting for the right to worship in the manner that they have since time immemorial against federal policies rooted in racism, assimilation, and erasure. Even against these odds, the Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, and Tolowa pray for a better world and the well-being of those who would restrict their belief practices.

Conclusion

The beauty of the redwood forests, river gorges, and gray sand beaches of the north coast of California hide the atrocities committed there. Pulling back that veil reveals the shocking violence used against people whose divine charge is to maintain the world in balance for all living beings. The targeting of the world renewal ceremonies of the Tolowa and Wiyot were planned to provide an efficient means of exterminating as many people as possible in one location. The world renewal ceremonies were gatherings that would bring people from villages throughout the region and neighboring tribes, they became places of death and destruction instead of healing and life. Two world views, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, collided resulting in significant spiritual ceremonies transforming into an offering to settler-colonial divine conquest. Despite the desecration of their centers of the world, the Tolowa and Wiyot moved forward and continue to renew the world in the twenty-first century.

With the failure of physical violence to destroy the religious beliefs and practices of the region's Indigenous people, new efforts were made to destroy the spiritual connection to the land by building a road through their sacred sites. As with perpetrators of injustices throughout history, they moved forward knowing that their actions would cause irreparable harm to the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa religions. Seeking a reprieve from the United States' justice system, Indigenous people were instead greeted with a rebuke that the religious protections guaranteed to every citizen of the country do not extend to them. Even the legislation that saved the High Country from destruction does not extend the First Amendment's protections to Indigenous people. It protects the land, not the freedom of religious practice.

The Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, and Tolowa have been disrupting the settler-colonial attempts to erase their religious beliefs for over a century and a half. As the second decade of the twenty-

first-century starts, it is unknown what attempts will be made to relegate the world renewal ceremonies to the pages of history. The non-Indigenous world has not attempted to understand Indigenous people's religions as more than an experience for the hirer or a new age phenomenon. The world will continue to be renewed for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the hopes that they can live in balance with each other.

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