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## Renewing the World: Disrupting Settler-Colonial Destruction in Northwestern California

Kerri J. Malloy

Northwestern California's geography has been 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, according to their oral traditions. Archeological research shows a record of Indigenous occupation of the area starting at least 8,000 years ago (Buckley 2002, 9). 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 region's natural world supported social reproduction that in turn influenced the knowledge and development of culture and traditions of the area's Indigenous populations (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. The cultural reality of spiritual balance is not a relic of the past; it coexists with the constant 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. They become the physical centers of their worlds for up to ten days, during which time they pray, fast, sing, and dance to restore the world's balance (Kroeber 1951, 407–8). The pre-contact way of life was one of moderation, which balanced the mundane everyday with the spiritual in an ordered world (Norton 1979, 37).

Northwestern California saw world renewal ceremonies for the Tolowas at Yontocket in 1853, and the Wiyots at Tuluwat in 1860. As they prayed for a better world for all humanity, both were horrifically interrupted by massacres carried out by settler-colonists. 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—merely an obstacle in their quest for land acquisition. An ordered world was thrown out of balance with the arrival of anti-Indian violence that settler-colonists honed and rationalized since they arrived 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 lies the village of Yontocket. Here, according to Tolowa oral tradition, the Creator brought forth the first Redwood tree and appointed the Tolowa caretakers of the world (Parkman 1989, 529). Before this contact, no word described all the Tolowa under 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 thus enshrined in this place. It is the political and spiritual center of their world (Norton 1979, 54).

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 ten nights, they sing, retell the story of their creation, and thank the Creator at this place (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 of Euro-American settlers since they initiated contact with the Tolowa, in what is now Del Norte County. Accounts of “vigilante justice, Indian retaliation, and white massacres” (Collins 1998, 35) were found throughout the region in the 1850s. 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" (Reed 1999, 46), referring to the attacks on their villages, ceremonies, and way of life.

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 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 to preserve 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, tinged with memories of past 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 who had lost their lives in the 1853 massacre (Spencer 2014). The vigil is a method of moving past the trauma of historic anti-Indian violence and engaging in open dialogue. No attempt is made to “gloss over the realities of what happened” (Spencer 2014, TK). Moving the annual vigil to different village sites over the last decade is a way to remember all those whose lives were lost to settler-colonial militias in their campaigns against the Tolowa.

## **Tuluwat**

Humboldt Bay is south of the Tolowa along the Pacific Coast. 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. They acknowledge Tuluwat as the spiritual and political center of their world

(Malloy 2021, 20). Here, in the place where 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 obtain food and supplies that would be needed in the coming days, leaving women, children, and the elderly behind (Rohde 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 (Rohde 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 (Rohde 2010). The estimates of the number killed range from fifty to two hundred, depending on the source. Regardless of the death toll, the Wiyot were brought to the brink of extinction.

The fasting, prayers, singing, and dancing for the world 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 2012, 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 the Wiyot Tribe, making it the first municipality in the United States to return 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 (Greenon 2019). The community that gathered that morning were descendants of massacre survivors and the near extinction of the Wiyot. Together, the City and Wiyot 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 assembly of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to return the 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: the Yurok at Kenek, the Karuk at Katemeyn, 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 each tribe's individual and communal identities (Oppong 2013, 14). Tribal identities, religion, law, and worldview are interconnected by the region's geography—"the mountains and rivers, forests and prairies" (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 492)—and are unable to exist on their own. Segmenting the physical, spiritual, and

knowledge experience within the region's belief systems is impossible, as they 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 fifteenth century on the eastern coast of the continent and progressed westward over four hundred years engulfed California's northern reaches in an accelerated genocide. The physical violence was complimented by state and federal Indian policies aimed at assimilating and erasing Indigenous people (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 500). The government, education, and Christian faith implemented policies infused and born out of racism. The goals of these policies were to dismantle tribal identities and culture and impose the ideals of Euro-American civilization (Bowers and Carpenter 2011, 500). Indigenous religions were outlawed in the early part of the nineteenth century, particularly “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, imprisoning people, and imposing military force were all standard tools employed in efforts to squelch the religious practices 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 sacred places and objects (Oppong 2013, 13). As an institution, religion enables the development of the bonds of fidelity in a community, and their attachment to an ideal that influences identity formation (Oppong 2013, 14). The religious principles connected to these places and embedded



within their respective worldviews enabled the tribes to maintain cohesive identities 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 jeopardizes how the world will be renewed. A place of balance and prosperity was turned into one turned upside down and bathed in 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 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 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). The medicine people go to the medicine rocks to fast, pray, and make “high medicine” (Buckley 2002, 174). The spiritual power of these places was so great that only those who were trained in the religion and prepared for what they would experience were 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, clustered on the bend of the Lower Klamath River, these places of spiritual energy and renewal 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. It 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. They left only a sparse scholarly genealogy to educate non-Indigenous people and agencies about 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 Country 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). Their 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 proceeded 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 to 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 ninth District Court in San Francisco in 1983. The association 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; the US Forest Service appealed the case, and the full district court 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, and 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 Country (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 consider the civil rights of Indigenous people guaranteed by the Religious Freedom Restoration of 1993, which provides for “claim or defense to persons whose religious exercise is substantially burdened by the government” (TK REF). They concluded 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 depended on it) was not an infringement of the exercise of religion. Those who practiced those beliefs were not being “punished for worshipping or forced to violate their faith” (Echo-Hawk 2010, 327). The logics of legal fiction were bent and strained to near breaking point in the crafting of the decision. 

Though the Supreme Court's decision falls short of the ideal 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. It 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 and 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 uncertain.

For the optimist, Congress's action to protect the High Country is reassuring. It leaves the pessimist wondering: will Congress one day rescind the legislative protections it enacted? The attempted injustice that the US Forest committed to perpetrating was done with the full knowledge of the irreversible harm that would be done to the Indigenous religions—a continuation of their delegitimization and inferiority to the major religions of the world. Intentionally targeting the sacred sites of the High Country was the continuation of the dehumanization used by settler-colonists to justify the massacres at the world renewal ceremonies and the anti-Indian violence that was commonplace in the 1800s.

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 other injustices throughout history, they moved forward knowing that their actions would cause irreparable harm to the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa religions.

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. It also sends the subtle message that Indigenous people are less than full citizens of the United States when their beliefs aren't protected as the faiths of other citizens are.

The precariousness of the ability to freely practice Indigenous religions reflects the uncertainty of Indigenous people's place in the United States. They have constantly had to fight for the right to worship in the manner that they have since their creation, and rally 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 wellbeing 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 world renewal ceremonies of the Tolowa and Wiyot were targeted 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. The collision of two world views—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—resulted in spiritual ceremonies being sacrificed for 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: the religious protections guaranteed to every citizen of the country did not extend to them. Even the legislation that saved the High Country from destruction did not extend the First Amendment's protections to Indigenous people. It protected only the land, not the freedom of religious practice.

The Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, and Tolowa have been disrupting 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 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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


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