

Got Land? Thank an Indian: Settler Colonialism and the White Settler in the Karuk Ancestral Territory

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Abstract

From the time of European invasion of what now constitutes the United States, the settler colonial system has aimed to exterminate Indigenous Peoples and replace them with settlers on the land. While settler colonialism benefits the settler at the cost of the Indigenous, all life on Earth suffers from the continuation of this system. This research examines how white settlers living in the Karuk Ancestral Territory, located in Humboldt County, California, understand our role in the settler colonial system. The goal of this study is to begin a collective pursuit of a white settler ethic of accountability, which is a difficult task even in preliminary stages, as it requires the admission of being a beneficiary of and accomplice to the vicious system of settler colonialism. This could bring about the loss of an already fragile identity and an insecure settler future. Yet settler society has a responsibility to face our role in the settler colonial system.

Introduction

This article is written from the perspective of a white settler. For nearly two decades, I have lived in the Karuk Ancestral Territory, situated on the Klamath River in Humboldt County, California (see Figure 1, next page). Many of the people currently living in this place, both Indigenous and settler alike, are interested in living a sustainable lifestyle and surviving amongst the environmental, social, political, and economic uncertainty of the times. Here some bridges have been built between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents and a somewhat cordial coexistence exists; nevertheless, tensions do stem from a settler colonial system that benefits one group of people at the expense of another. The acute awareness among members of the Karuk tribe of displacement from their ancestral territory can be read on the T-shirt of one Karuk elder: “Got Land? Thank an Indian!”

I came to live in the Karuk Ancestral Territory in search of a better life, one that was not destructive to, but rather more connected with land and life. I did not realize I was moving to a place where Indigenous Peoples had remained in their aboriginal territory and retained connection to their traditional way of life, in spite of European invasion. Neither had I considered that the neighborhood in which I grew up was also occupied Indigenous land. In

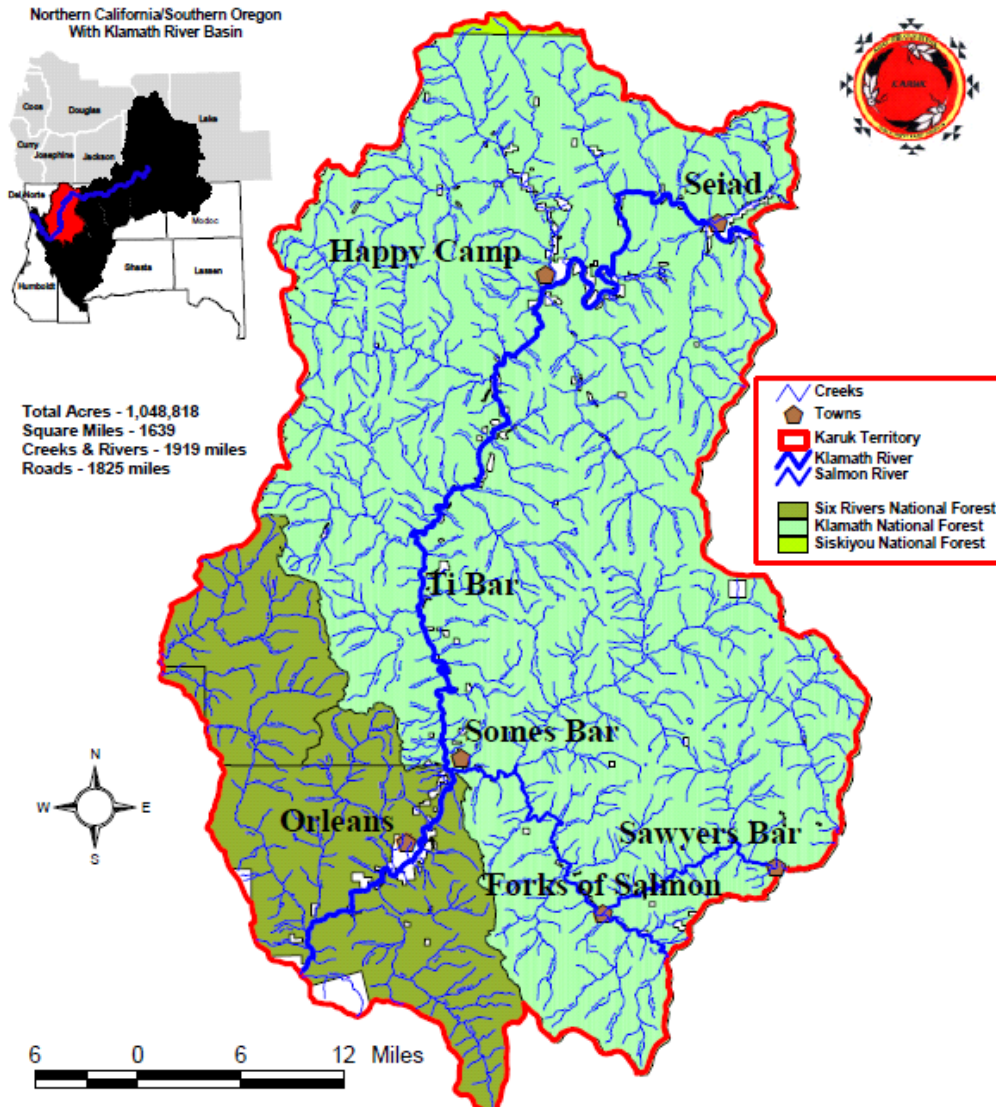


Figure 1. Karuk Ancestral Territory (map by Scott Quinn).

fact, growing up, I largely thought about Native Americans as a “thing” of the past. I learned in school, on television, in movies, through the media, and from accepted social discourse that the original people of North America no longer existed. As a child, I had a thick cardboard book that depicted a ball, a book, and an “Indian” together on the “things” page. My indoctrination to view Indigenous Peoples as less than human began quite early. This is no accident, but rather part of the justification of the settler colonial system.

In the first section of this paper, I carry out a review of existing literature regarding settler colonialism, the settler, white privilege, and white supremacy. Next I discuss the methods used to conduct this research. Thirdly, I unpack white settler identity and how settlers comprehend their position within the settler colonial system, which manifests itself as a complicit settler subject in the Karuk Ancestral Territory. In the concluding segment, I outline some unsettling ideas and situate the white settler in the complicated conundrum within movements for decolonization.

This research seeks to find a starting place from which to collectively pursue a white settler ethic of accountability—a difficult task, even in preliminary stages, as it requires the admission of being a beneficiary of and an accomplice to the vicious system of settler colonialism, and could bring about the loss of an already fragile identity and an insecure settler future. Settler society has a responsibility to acknowledge our role in the settler colonial system.

Methods

Because I am conducting research that seeks to create a more just world and believe that the knowledge necessary for societal transformation is best collectively produced, I have chosen what is called a “convivial” research approach. Convivial research understands that every community is best suited to analyze its own issues and to strategize direct action for positive change. When I was introduced to the idea of convivial research, a friend explained to me that “we are all researchers.” People on the Klamath River, as people everywhere, are the experts about their own lives. “Similar to participatory action or militant research, the convivial research approach presented here insists that a successful research project specifies an object of study, research agenda, direct action(s), and system of information and that these be the result of collective efforts to solve local problems and advance the shared interests of a community of struggle” (Mitotedigital, n.d.).

Of interviews conducted with 10 white settlers living on the Klamath River, five were women and five men. Their ages ranged from the late 20s to late 70s. One was born outside of the United States and two were born in the Klamath River region. Almost all of the subjects were chosen because of their engagement with settler colonialism and a desire for a better world. Two informants define themselves as anarchist activists. Seven of the participants moved to the Karuk Ancestral Territory because they were dissatisfied with living in mainstream America and most came to the mountains in search of a closer connection to the natural world. The settlers interviewed represent an elevated and unusual level of consciousness regarding these issues, and yet the archaic mentality of settler society is clearly evident in their testimonies.

Research was culminated with two “coyuntura” gatherings, each three hours in length. Coyuntura is a popular education tool designed to help communities engage in praxis around collectively named contradictions:

As a space of epistemological rupture, coyuntura refers to a gathering convened for the purpose of producing new knowledges by exposing the epistemological obstacles or the taken for granted views, attitudes, values, and concepts present in the group that undermine an agreed plan of action. (Mitotedigital, n.d.)

People attending the first coyuntura on the Klamath River were able to self-identify as settlers, shared lived experiences as non-Indigenous people living in a settler colonial state, and begin a process of collectivizing our understandings in order to create new knowledge. The second meeting was culminated with a commitment to continue to meet monthly as a group and engage in the coyuntural analysis process. One settler testifies to the value of having a vocabulary with which to dialogue about settler colonialism: “Finding the words for settler colonialism, calling myself a settler, all this process of finding language to express it, puts words to vague feelings and emotions that makes you better able to sort things out and get to somewhere with it.”

Settler Colonialism

Although many people were brought, not necessarily of their own will, to settler colonial situations as slaves, indentured servants, or refugees, anyone not Indigenous living in a settler colonial state is a settler on stolen land. Race, class, gender, and ability affect the level of benefits received, but all settlers profit from the settler colonial system.

Patrick Wolfe (1999, p. 2) succinctly explains that “invasion is a structure and not an event.” This system of oppression is ongoing and is articulated clearly by the conditions present in both Indigenous and settler societies in the Karuk Ancestral Territory. Wolfe (1999, p. 1) writes that “settler colonies were not primarily established to extract surplus value from Indigenous labor. Rather, they are premised on displacing indigenes from (or replacing them on) the land.” In this area, as in other settler colonial situations around the world, non-Indigenous residents indisputably benefit from this system of land dispossession.

Historical violence against Indigenous people is well documented. Of the estimated 125 million Indigenous Peoples in North and South America before contact, 90% of the population was lost (Churchill, 1997, p. 1). To give one example from the Klamath River, an attack on an Indian village in 1855 left 26 men killed, 23 women taken “prisoner,” and children not mentioned, possibly sold as virtual slaves to whites as “servants” (Raphael & House, 2007, p. 159). As one witness described the event,

[the volunteers] called the Indians from their homes, shook hands with them, and immediately after-wards, each white picking his man, numbers of Indians were shot. They then took away with them some squaws, “under the name of prisoners,” whom they “outrageously abused... This is the battle which has been described heretofore in the newspaper in such glowing colors.” (Captain Judah, quoted in Raphael & House, 2007, p. 159)

This is the foundation of settler society on the Klamath River today and the legacy of conquest inflicted on the relatives of Karuk people, not so long ago.

Also well documented is how settler colonialism continues to affect Karuk people today, negatively impacting health, economics, religion, and culture (Salter, 2003; Norgard, 2004; Stercho, 2005; Holmlund, Alkon, & Norgard, 2009; Norgard, Reid, & Van Horn, 2011). Leaf Hillman, a Karuk ceremonial leader, explains:

In order to maintain a traditional Karuk Lifestyle today, you need to be an outlaw, a criminal, and you had better be a good one or you’ll likely end up spending a great portion of your life in prison. The fact of the matter is that it is a criminal act to practice a traditional lifestyle and to maintain traditional cultural practices necessary to manage important food resources or even practice our religion. If we as Karuk people obey the “laws of nature” and the mandates of our creator, we are necessarily in violation of the white man’s laws. It is a criminal act to be a Karuk Indian in the twenty first century. (quoted in Norgard, 2004, p. 25)

The Karuk homeland was originally over a million acres, abundant with natural resources. Today only 0.0007 percent of this land remains in Karuk hands (Norgard, Reed, &

Van Horn, 2011, p. 32).¹ Almost all of the “private land” in the Karuk Ancestral Territory is owned by settlers, as is currently the circumstance on a local perma-culture ranch whose abundant garden is built around a Karuk graveyard. This is a manifestation of settler colonial dispossession.

The purpose of this paper is to research the un-scrutinized settler who has thus far escaped the gaze of the academic microscope. Whereas an industry has been made upon the studies of Indigenous Peoples since colonization, filling the gap in knowledge on the role and responsibility of the settler is imperative to understanding settler colonialism on the Klamath River today. Patricia Limerick (1987, p. 36) states that “few white Americans went west intending to ruin the natives and despoil the continent, but the evidence of this outcome is hard to ignore.”

Wolfe (2011, p. 274) further explains that colonized peoples are racialized in different ways according to the needs of the colonizers. He distinguishes between race as a doctrine and “racialization as a variety of practices that have been applied to colonized populations under particular circumstances and to different (albeit coordinated) ends.” Requiring Indigenous Peoples to have a certain percentage of native blood to be deemed a tribal member forwards the goal of elimination of Indigenous Peoples. On the other hand, as more slaves meant more wealth for the slave owner, the “one drop rule” in the United States declared individuals black if they had a trace of African blood. These stark differences in blood requirements to racially define people are profitable to the colonizer and strategically implemented at the expense of African and Indigenous Peoples. Wolfe (2011, p. 275) argues that “racialization represents a response to the crisis occasioned when colonizers are threatened to share social space with the colonized.”

Karuk people are prohibited from having a healthy life expectancy and still settlers remain complicit to the continued holocaust that we/they witness everyday. My Indigenous neighbors and friends attend memorials, sometimes weekly, to honor their deceased. Karuk people are unjustly well versed in death and mourning. Driving along the Klamath River, flowers, bandanas, and memorials of death are strung along the roadside as a reminder of lives lost because of the genocidal systems that have created unlivable conditions for Indigenous Peoples. The death of native people is politically normalized. White settlers are not dying this way.² Considering colonialism in a global context elucidates the inequality of this racialized, disparate life expectancy.

What Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics” (2013) offers a fresh and challenging discourse regarding the current state of world politics.³ He questions a person’s ability to create his or her own truth within the context of colonialism and capitalism, thus challenging what he calls the “romance” of sovereignty. Are Indigenous nations truly sovereign under the empire of the United States? Mbembe looks at the occupation of the Palestinian people and refers to the example of the suicide bomber, the most desperate and extreme picture of human oppression in

¹ The fact that almost all of the land in this region is “owned” by the US Forest Service is important to the issues inherent in settler colonialism, but is not the focus of this particular paper.

² I was explaining to a friend who is Indigenous how difficult it is to forward conversations with settlers about our role in settler colonialism because it makes them uncomfortable. She provided a crucial perspective that it makes her quite uncomfortable that her family and friends are frequently dying as a result of settler colonialism.

³ I would like to thank Manolo Callahan for expanding my thinking about settler colonialism in the Karuk Ancestral Territory to a global context.

the world, and deems the state of the bomber that of the “walking dead.” These individuals are not sovereign over their own lives. Clearly, the severity of dehumanization that the suicide bomber illustrates exceeds that of the more subtle manifestations of death in the Karuk Ancestral Territory, but the condemnation of human life remains the same. John Mohawk (2008, p. 57) questions these imposing ways that are commonly understood as “rational thinking” when he asks if “clear thinking is prevailing in the world system that is at this very moment, deciding who gets to eat, who has a place to lay down and who does not have a place to lay down, whose children will survive, even their infancies, and whose will not.” The settler colonial system is justified through a white supremacist, hegemonic discourse that dehumanizes the “other” while systematically denying those with brown skin their right to live.

The ideas of “whiteness” and that white people are superior to other racialized groups represent another aspect of racial formation. The system of white supremacy justifies the denial of basic human rights, and many times life itself, upon people of color, while entitling white people to unearned privilege. White supremacy is also a way of thinking and “knowing” that assumes an inherent superiority upon whites. Despite that the history of invasion and genocide wrought by settlers and colonization is well known, images of white purity and superiority are engrained in settler consciousness. These beliefs have permeated and distorted reality so deeply that white people who benefit from these structures are permitted to elude their existence. I use the term “white settler” many times throughout this article, as almost all settlers on the Klamath River are white and the grouping of whiteness allows the preferential privileges that white supremacy creates to be actualized.⁴ White supremacy is not just a manifestation of the Ku Klux Klan or racist skinheads, but is a pillar of capitalist and settler colonial systems and is inherent in everyday thinking.

Michael Yellowbird (2004, p. 40) deems cowboys and Indians “the master narrative,” and explains how the narrative “confirmed Indians were inferior to whites by way of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of western movies and TV programs that showed huge numbers of Indians could be easily defeated by a few cowboys with large, shiny, phallic-shaped pistols and an endless reserve of bullets.” Due to the hidden strain of white supremacy over Indigenous Peoples, toys depicting cowboys and Indians with weapons remain socially acceptable today.

White people also live with an unearned privilege. Peggy McIntosh (1988, p. 1), who produced the “white privilege knapsack exercise,” which is used in critical race studies classrooms around the nation, explains how “schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will.” Macintosh explains how white people carry with them a “knapsack” of unearned privilege that allows for preferential treatment in a myriad of ways. She offers an articulate analysis of white privilege, but discourse that goes beyond the unpacking of the knapsack of privilege is sorely lacking. My research seeks to contribute to a gap in knowledge regarding the responsibility of white people given our/their position. Settler acknowledgement that we/they benefit from white privilege without actions for change are not enough. Andrea Smith (2013, p. 264) purports that “the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think

⁴My partner Shawn Bourque provoked me to consider the harm in using the words white and supremacy together, which forwarded my thinking to realize that it seems to reinforce that which it seeks to critique; it is better framed as an “ism.”

themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges.”

Current world systems leave life beholden to capital, for without it we do not have access to our basic human rights. Cole Harris (2004, p. 172) writes, as Marx and subsequently others have noted, that the

spatial energy of capitalism works to de-territorialize people (that is, to detach them from prior bonds between people and place) and to re-territorialize them in relation to the requirements of capital (that is, to land conceived as resources and freed from the constraints of custom and to labor detached from land).

Settler privilege is articulated through the unrelenting expansion of settlers on the Klamath River where continued expropriation of Indigenous land provides a degree of economic self-reliance for settlers. Harris (2004, p. 172) describes how

in settler colonies, as Marx knew, the availability of agricultural land could turn wage laborers back into independent producers who worked for themselves instead of for capital... As such, they were unavailable to capital, and resisted its incursions, the source, Marx thought, of the prosperity and vitality of colonial societies.

A capitalist economic system compounds the ill effects of settler colonialism. From the moment of colonization, “boom and bust” economies have profited largely the settler. The marijuana industry on the Klamath River today is a perfect example of this. Settlers, controlling almost all the private land, profit from the growing of marijuana while this economy remains less accessible to Indigenous Peoples, who make up roughly half the population in the Karuk Ancestral Territory.

Although many settlers on the Klamath are aware of the crimes that are committed against their Indigenous neighbors, they remain complicit because the current settler identity depends on a status of innocence and entitlement to the land. In the Karuk Ancestral Territory there is unwillingness on the part of many white settlers to acknowledge that they have an active role in settler colonialism, a system of unequal power, privilege, and oppression that is supported by ideologies of white supremacy. In order to deal with the complexities of the settler position in society, a collective settler subject must be created. Corey Snellgrove (2013) succinctly articulates that “there are no good settlers...there are no bad settlers...there are settlers.”

Albert Memmi (1967, p. 20) recognizes the extreme difficulty settlers have in acknowledging power and privilege when he wrote of the self-rejecting and the self-accepting colonizer. He deems that

it is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships. From now on the colonist lives his life as a contradiction, which looms every step, depriving him of all coherence and tranquility. What he is actually renouncing is part of himself, which he slowly becomes.

This contradiction is the impetus for my research, however difficult it may be to pursue this dialogue with settlers on the Klamath. The extreme discomfort for the settler in questioning our/their entitlement to the land pales in comparison to the ramifications of the settler colonial system upon Indigenous Peoples.

In Orleans, a town in the Karuk Ancestral Territory, there is a social space in the center of town where a group of teenage boys gather in the summer to play cards. Social discourse among white settlers on the Klamath refers to these youth as a “gang” and any wrong doings around town are attributed to them. Negative narratives about Indigenous Peoples justify the systematic condemnation of human rights. Non-native people on the Klamath River must begin to participate in attacking the real problem, the system, and not innocent youth who are negatively profiled simply for existing. Waziyatawin (2012, p. 126) addresses this dynamic in *For Indigenous Minds Only*, when she writes about “de-problematizing Indigenous youth.” She explains how settler society is the problem, not the young people themselves:

Colonizing society uses approaches that serve to blame the youth, parents, communities or Indigenous nations rather than identifying these issues as a direct consequence of the colonization of our people. We cannot solve these social circumstances while the root causes—all the systems and institutions of colonialism remain in place.

Some settlers yearn for reconciliation with Karuk people. The South African model of reconciliation, however, is problematic because the beneficiaries of apartheid walked away pardoned, without relinquishing anything. Snellgrove (2013) suggests that

disrupting settler society, and avoiding fatalism, requires a two-fold recognition: of settler colonialism and Indigenous resurgence. Destroying settler society, and allowing the rise of ethical relations, requires a two-fold active response: destroy the material and discursive foundations of settler colonialism and actively engage with Indigenous resurgence.

Many settlers on the Klamath do feel guilty because of the “way things are” for Indigenous Peoples and try their best to be “good people” and support Indigenous community members, but individual efforts towards healing will not suffice. The idea that the power to create change is a solitary process is a problem. Snellgrove (2013) describes settler society as a “beast” that survives off individualism and imagines starvation of this monster would open up possibilities for accord between Indigenous and settler communities.⁵ Throughout my research process I have repeatedly come up against the accepted notion that it is unthinkable that white people would actively destroy systems that privilege them. My research challenges white settlers to set aside our individual selves and become accountable to our position in systems of oppression.

Nevertheless, discourse that deems the white settler pure and free of responsibility remains notorious on the Klamath River. Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012, p. 10) describe

⁵ Snellgrove’s article “On Refusal” provides a metaphor that articulates my belief in the necessity of the formation of a collective settler subject, one that does not let the settler off the hook and seeks the possibility for a settler role in decolonization.

settler “moves to innocence...which are those strategies or positioning that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all.” Laura Hurwitz and Shawn Bourque (2014) recognize that there are as many moves to innocence as there are settlers and they manifest in a specific way on the Klamath River. Several moves to innocence will be outlined in detail in subsequent sections.

The Settler Situation

There are many layers of colonization on the Klamath River. This is evident through the various settler groups still present, including descendants of original gold miners, missionaries, loggers, farmers, different waves of “back to the landers,” and now marijuana growers. Unfortunately, to the Karuk living on the Klamath River, the newest batch of settlers might look different than past invaders, but the implications of their presence are the same.

Both Indigenous and settler people are dehumanized by, and captive within, the webs of colonialism and capitalism. But we are affected and situated quite differently. As one informant describes,

Oftentimes when a piece of property comes up for sale there is tension or a certain vibe that this native family cannot afford to buy it and the kind of resentment that is there. There is tension about private land that is owned by white people, that has an oak stand or basket-picking place that native people want to use and have used in the past and don't have access to. Also the economic disparities where white people are rich and native people are poor and have nothing.

Settler society holds a place physically on the land that supports the persistence of the settler colonial system.

To move beyond the myth of innocence is to recognize that this collective tension is land-based. Settlers living in the Karuk Ancestral Territory know full well that the land they occupy is stolen, but they are pained to question their entitlement to it. An exceptional settler unpacks some anxieties:

The security of private property is an illusion. Insecurity is feeling like you need a title, or to own it or have it in an external way instead of knowing that you belong here. Our culture is a lot like that, grabby and real clingy to institutions that give a sense of security but ultimately betray a feeling of insecurity that are underlying and really deep.

Settler insecurity comes from a dread of acknowledgement that could bring about a loss of land, power, and privilege. Some settlers are willing to talk about this fear, but only in the context of other settlers than themselves. “What they fear is the loss of their ability to manage their land the way they want to—fear of both the possibility of losing property, and the ability to be sovereign,” one brave settler owns the terror. “I don't want to give up my ability to live here, it's the fear of that.” Another settler breaks it down further:

I think private property is kind of a security thing. Everybody feels more secure owning a place even if it is a more contrived sense of security. It is kind of manufactured. I might have a piece of paper that says I can live here and that this belongs to me, but the people who have lived here for thousands of years have agreements with the spirit people. And so the larger ramification of that might be more meaningful.

Compounding the quest for absolution is the settler's hurt in being a lost people. Generations of colonization, displacement, and genocide in European settler history prelude the colonization of North America and this has damaged settler humanity. As one settler explains, "All the loss, the loss of homeland and being secure and knowing that you belong in a place. We are all still struggling with that at this point it is so convoluted and weird it doesn't lend itself to frank discussion or dealing with it or anything." Some white settlers are pained to recognize their disconnection from their ancestors. One settler attests:

I did some calculations about the source of our name, our last name, and 17 generations ago my family name came into being. So 17 people who failed to tell 17 people could have passed on some story, given me some information. Somewhere along the way the communication broke down.

Being severed from a land-base as well as from ancestral relations is a long-standing trauma for settler society that remains largely unrecognized.

Settler identity is wounded and rife with contradiction. The settler in the Karuk Ancestral Territory feels a sense of guilt and yet this remorse remains sheltered in the safety of the subconscious. Settlers depend on trusted moves to innocence in order to live with themselves and this is articulated through interviews with settlers living on the Klamath. Subsequently, common discourse among the non-Indigenous associates settlers with the gold miners who came in the early 1850s, as the current settlers would prefer not to be linked with the wrongdoing of their ancestors. Asked what comes to mind when she thinks of a settler, one white interviewee said, "White people in 1850...moved inexorably westward with the cause of manifest destiny on their side." This informant analyzes the settler title:

Being a settler feels more like individual agency, how myself as an individual has interacted with my own life and my own thinking about what places are open to me. Where I could fit in, where I am free to go as a person. I was raised unlimited. I go where I want. Being called a settler is an acknowledgement of opportunity and being entitled to go wherever. It does call this into question because it ties it to a history of western expansion. The term settler calls into question some ethical issues.

When asked if he considered himself a settler, one informant said, "The settler term, at times it applies and at times it applies less. Not sure if it applies as much in my situation. But I could be just not wanting to deal with it." Another respondent explained: "It depends on how far back you want to go. The whole human race is a settler. It is kind of interesting to read about human mass migration." The "migration narrative" is a common response when settlers want to escape the mark of a settler identity. As one settler said, "It could be argued that at one

point that Karuk were not here anyhow, science says people migrated here, so how is it different than the modern migration?” Hurwitz and Bourque (2014, p. 8) explain how in this move to innocence settlers use a historical “out” describing how people have always migrated around the planet and how Indigenous Peoples themselves migrated here. What this fails to take into account—besides Indigenous accounts of their own origin—is the vast time that Indigenous Peoples have inhabited, managed, and coexisted with their homelands (not to mention the silencing of violence that has displaced Indigenous Peoples).

Attempts to make Indigenous Peoples invisible have been thorough. An interviewee who grew up in the Karuk Ancestral Territory remembers that

as a kid my favorite thing to do was to go out and collect arrowheads. It was my way of originally connecting. In that sense it perpetuated the myth that the Indians were here and were gone. The local families were not making arrowheads any more and so therefore something had happened, there was a disconnection in my mind between the culture that was of the people that were there originally and the people were there now. Early on my sense was of a loss that this incredibly robust and beautiful culture was gone.

On the Klamath River, Indigenous Peoples have remained in place and traditional ways are practiced to the full extent possible within a settler colonial system. Yet for settlers public discourse around Indigenous Peoples as a “thing” of the past still lends itself to a “color-blind” approach to innocence. This appeared as a pattern when talking with settlers on the Klamath. The eldest settler interviewed articulates this move: “When we came in the 1950s people were part Indian, there are very few pure whites and very few pure Indians. I love it, American stir fry.” Another settler describes how “there is the matter of who is white and who is Indian exactly. Most Indians have some European ancestry and most of the white people have someone native in their background.” In order to skirt the issue, a common adaptation asserts that “race is a construct.” A settler who moved to the Klamath River in 1954 admits to the colonial mentality that still exists today, saying “it would have been better to go [sic] ahead and integrate these people that really should have got integrated into society much earlier.”

Many non-Indigenous residents of the Klamath River region seek accord amongst people living in the Karuk Ancestral Territory. One back-to-the-land settler talks about “the idea of one love, one people. It’s the spiritual evolution that we need for the world to be a better place, for this shit to not happen again.” Sweeping claims of unity let the settler off the hook and fail to acknowledge the ramifications of systems of oppression (Hurwitz & Bourque, 2014).

One honest informant discusses settler identity: “I think the fear is about wanting to be on the ‘good team.’ Am I on the good team? When I talk about it, with whites I am a champion. When I am with Indians, I am not so sure.” When asked to define white supremacy, settlers had no trouble finding some words to explain, as witnessed in one subject’s response:

That feeling of entitlement is white supremacy. It’s the manifest destiny that I was taught in high school. To me personally manifest destiny wasn’t a bad thing, it was just the way it was. It was that we were god’s chosen people. To them US history was the history of dead white presidents whose pictures lined the walls all the way around the classroom. It was very clear in high school: white is right,

might is right. We are better because we can kill other people better than everyone else.

Another settler describes how

it has been in the fields of our society for so long, that idea that the white race is superior that we do all hold that a little bit to varying degrees. It is unconscious, we might not admit it. But being raised in America you are steeped in racism and white supremacy. We hold that as part of the collective unconsciousness.

White supremacy is poisonous, as it dictates that Indigenous Peoples create their own problems, not the system that blatantly seeks to destroy them. One informant unabashedly puts the burden on the Indigenous: “Jews had people mistreat them. The Chinese, the Japanese and the Irish did. All of them have had really bad things happen to them. But you know what? You can’t keep holding grudges. If you did you will make yourself miserable.”

A justification myth includes the implication that Indigenous Peoples are not “responsible” and therefore settlers are better stewards of the land. One interviewee states that “people who are from here and their place is filled with cars and dirt. These are things I have a problem with.” Another white person echoes this sentiment: “Plenty of Indigenous people don’t seem to have that much interest in caring for the land. Will that segment of Indian society become responsible citizens and stewards of the land if white people leave? I kind of doubt it.” These narratives are so cavernous that even when facts regarding settler violence and conquest are known, the settler comes out “clean” and the Indigenous “dirty.” “I have definitely heard white people mocking native ceremonies because they latch on to anything bad that happens,” one interviewee admits. The perpetuation of such myths directly relates to settlers’ insecurity with the unjust position they occupy on the land. As one informant reveals, “When you are secure in your own identity, you don’t have to say someone else is bad.”

The “beast” (Snellgrove, 2013) of individualism arrives when another settler asserts that “Indians can’t just blame the system, people got to be responsible for themselves.” The sentiment of one informant illustrates how this trope promotes settler complicity: “Going back to just trying to do your best, to be a good person as an individual to the other individuals around you, I don’t know what the hell else to do.”

The words of a settler who was born and raised on the Klamath River articulate some understanding about why lines are drawn between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people:

Growing up on the river, there were native families up there. I think what was really clear in hindsight is that they knew how to protect themselves from white people, even well-meaning white people, because so much had been taken. You can fish with a native family every day for a whole summer and there are stories they wouldn’t tell when white people were there. There was knowledge of how to do things that they had been taught and for good reason they wouldn’t share.

Still, the settler largely expects that Indigenous Peoples should “get over it” and walk with settlers into the future. As an individual who settled on the Klamath River in the 1950s bluntly stated, “You living now and me living now, we had nothing to do with all that goings-on, three

or four hundred years ago.”⁶ His wife interjected: “We need to forget it and go on.” He countered: “Regardless of the past, that past should have been done away with. You know that’s something we can’t deal with anymore. It’s gone, It’s done. Not to say that they didn’t get mistreated.”

This settler explains the difficulty she faces in acknowledgement:

I am also reminded of the violence that was done towards these people [Karuk] that hold something so special, just the crime of what has happened, that is something that is really hard to hold and hard to think about and to feel. I definitely compartmentalize it. It is painful to feel, so I don’t really stay there or hold that very much. Each individual person is kind of a reflection of the system that we are in right now, and so here I am this one person who knows what has happened has awareness, has felt into it, but it is too painful. I am not far enough along in my process to grieve and hold that in the way that it needs to in order to move through it.

Another settler describes how

it is not a question that has an easy answer. Things get weird if you think about it too hard. Sometimes my philosophy is I just need to think about it less, do my best to be a decent person as an individual and not get so caught up in the larger system. Some people can change the world, but I don’t really see myself that way. You can only onyx about it for so long before it becomes a hamster wheel of navel gazing inside your brain.

Indigenous Peoples do not have the option to abstain from their position in the settler colonial system. White settlers have the privilege to choose at what level, and whether to engage at all, with issues surrounding settler colonialism.

Carrying the burden of my role in settler colonialism with me at all times is agonizing and maddening. I am currently building an ecologically sound, sustainable home, with walls made of woodchips and clay that will be standing for generations to come. Simultaneously, my partner and I pursue dialogue and action that deny our right to be here. It is agonizing to live such a blatant contradiction, again the impetus for this research.

Conclusion

In the Karuk Ancestral Territory two social structures compete. One has existed since time immemorial and the other has been forced upon the original.⁷ Each relies on starkly different value systems. Settler society and capitalism are founded upon values that reward self-interest and promote individual rights. These value systems largely dictate the quality of life on the Klamath River. The values honored by settler colonial society are unhealthy for all creatures and the natural world on which we depend.

⁶This informant wrote a column for an early settler newspaper and considers himself a historian; it is interesting that in this context colonization occurred “three or four hundred years ago,” not 164 years ago.

⁷I would like to express my appreciation to Manolo Callahan for this way of looking at the settler colonial situation on the Klamath.

The book *Original Instructions* offers a glimpse into Indigenous value systems. Rebecca Adamson (2008, p. 33) explains that

what made traditional economies so radically different and dangerous to western economies were the traditional principals of prosperity of creation versus scarcity of resources, of sharing and distribution versus accumulation and greed. Of kinship usage rights versus exclusive individual ownership rights and of sustainability versus growth.

Although colonization has negatively affected all life on the Klamath River and Karuk social infrastructure has been tampered with by settler colonialism and a capitalist economic system, Indigenous value systems still persist. Core principles requiring interdependence and reciprocity that kept Karuk communities sustainable for time immemorial are embedded in the culture and this no genocide can kill, only systems of oppression make healthy living inaccessible. In order to survive we must return to Indigenous ways of knowing about our role as human beings.

How might we proceed to change the values we rely on in a colonized world? Andrea Smith (2013, pp. 264-265) explains that we cannot think ourselves into a new subject position; we have to change the systems in order to transform ourselves: “Essentially the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we may have. If we want to undermine those privileges, we must change the structures within which we live so that we can become different people in the process.” An “unsettled” informant echoes Smith’s analysis: “You can fight against privilege, you can reject it as an idea, but you will still have it until things are dismantled.” Smith (2013, p. 272) also describes how creating new value systems means asking how we understand ourselves as people in relationship to the land and to all that lives: “If we understand ourselves as beings fundamentally constituted through our relations with other beings and the land, then the nations that emerge will also be inclusive and interconnected with each other.”

This discussion must clearly delineate between an appeal for Indigenous ideology and the desire to appropriate Indigenous culture and ceremonial ways on the part of non-Indigenous peoples. Settler society has no right to Indigenous spirituality, although the pain and loss of being disconnected finds many settlers longing for it.

An in-depth inquiry into settler colonialism begins with the challenge of disrupting accepted narratives and creating discursive openings that allow for visions of decolonization to become illuminated. Yet the lens of decolonization is blurred with decades of fantasy narratives that legitimize settler society. An end to these myths would demand fundamental societal change. There is not a blueprint for decolonization, and decolonization means various things for different people. Derrick Jensen (2009, p. 9) suggests decolonization is

the process of breaking your identity with and loyalty to this culture—capitalism, and more broadly civilization—and remembering your identification with and loyalty to the real physical world, including the land where you live. It means reexamining premises and stories the dominant culture handed down to you. It means seeing the harm the dominant culture does to other cultures, and to the planet. If you are a member of settler society, it means recognizing that you are

living on stolen land and it means working to return that land to the humans whose blood has forever mixed with the soil.

Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 3) assert that decolonization ultimately and literally means the complete repatriation of Indigenous land and life. In the current sense of “wealth,” white settlers have the most to lose from a decolonized world because we/they “own” the most. A woman respondent ponders the possibility that “other [white] people might have to pay some price and there is still injustice, that can be made more just, but it means you lose some of what you have gained from unjust means.” Repatriation of land means the abolishment of private property, not the transfer of “ownership” from settler to Indigenous hands. Technologies towards sustainable living have been developed over thousands of years, and Indigenous Peoples are best suited to provide leadership as to how we might proceed as human beings to begin to repair and restore the damage that has been wrought on our world by colonization and capitalism.

Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 1) explain that “what is unsettling about decolonization [is]... what is unsettling and what should be unsettling.” They argue that “decolonization is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (p. 26).⁸ Many settlers on the Klamath River push back against being decentered from conversation regarding the future. However, white people’s uneasiness is a small price to pay knowing that the holocaust against Indigenous Peoples continues.

“Keep trying, keep an open mind, and hopefully the answers to hard questions as to how we can live in this place as settlers or fifth-wave colonialists will come. How can we be here in a good way and earn our keep?” This white settler poses a question that does not have a clear answer. Settlers cannot help but dream about being pardoned from the ills they know exist, as articulated by another interviewee: “There is a time of reconciliation that is coming. We’re going to see positive change.” As a non-Indigenous person tormented by acceptance of the part she plays in a genocidal system, this researcher recognizes the temptation to hope for resolution. One white settler questioned if “it would be helpful to have some kind of reckoning, some kind of symbolic acknowledgement from the white community that we acknowledge what is happening today?” Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 26) refute such an idea: “Reconciliation is about rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future. Reconciliation is concerned with questions of what will decolonization look like? What will happen after abolition? What will be the consequences of decolonization for the settler?” A representative gesture will not change any of the structures that continue to oppress Indigenous Peoples.

I do not challenge settler colonialism solely to forward Indigenous liberation—I do so also, admittedly, to aid in my own survival. An activist settler speaks to self-interest in this struggle:

Once I figured out where I was and what was going on, that there were native people here that are still here and their food source was being destroyed and this was happening now. It was from a white liberal thing of wanting to help people,

⁸Reading “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” was truly unsettling and paramount to my continued understanding of my role as a settler. My participation in an Indigenous Peoples course with Michael Yellow Bird brought together many aspects of the way I grasp the current settler colonial situation and the value systems that are necessary for a better world.

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that's how I got involved. I wanted to help. You can call it solidarity and anarchism. Settlers are so in the wind and not grounded in place. Now I want to do activism to help myself and survive not selfishly, but I see my own stake in it more now. It has been a process of understanding.

The systems that bind us to this brutal existence do not serve us, but collectively harm us. We must redefine wealth and success. When probed to talk about colonial value systems on the Klamath, this settler revealed some important knowledge:

A capitalist thinks that everyone needs to be on the rise and upwardly mobile in a capitalist sense, but I think we can change white culture and what is acceptable and how we do things and maybe our own values and self-examining on our parts. It's a hard discussion to have. People who aren't open to understanding, and even people who think that they are open to other value systems, often aren't, so it is hard.

In seeking to create new structures for a healthy existence in the Karuk Ancestral Territory, it is necessary to examine our schools, our government agencies, and our non-profits to see how they assume white superiority and perpetuate oppression. Settler society can work to educate and organize ourselves to dismantle our current identity, built upon entitlement and unearned privilege, and recreate ourselves as people who refuse to remain complicit. We can be willing to step up to the frontlines of struggle, as white people are looked upon more favorably by the legal system and commonly have more financial resources at our disposal. Ultimately, settler society must be willing to give up land, power, and privilege. This is the rightful responsibility of human beings who find themselves in the position of benefitting upon the lives of people of color. I am not arguing that settlers should leave the Karuk Ancestral Territory. I am asserting that we do not have a "right" to stay. Bluntly stated, in a decolonized world I might ask to remain in the Karuk Ancestral Territory and the answer would be in the hands of Indigenous Peoples.

Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 36) asserts that "decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content." It is into an unknown future that settlers fear to step. Tim Wise (2011, p. 270) recognizes that

of course there is redemption in struggle, and victory is only one reason for fighting, only seems to be a surprise, or rather a source of discomfort to white folks. Invariably it seems that we in the white community who obsess over our own efficacy and fail to recognize the value of commitment irrespective of outcome.

As it stands today, white people cannot be considered relatives in the family of human beings. Decolonization for the white settler means a chance to return to humanity and contribute to the survival of life on earth.

Some settlers on the Klamath River have begun to engage in honest discourse that acknowledges the non-Indigenous role in settler colonialism. The time for these acknowledgements and actions is long overdue. This study aims not to bolster an Indigenous/settler dichotomy, but rather to suggest a starting place towards unity. As we come to understand settler colonialism in its current manifestations, and the settler role in this debacle, it should become clear that even if settlers are not to blame, we must become accountable to the situation.

To the Karuk, as Wolfe (2007, p. 387) writes, “land is life—or, at least, land is necessary for life. Thus contests for land can be—indeed, often are—contests for life.” Leaf Hillman (2012) explains his understandings about landholding and place:

There are things I call natural truths. Man can pass laws, man can have his policy, he can have his institutions. Ultimately if those laws or policies or institutions are doing things that conflict with the natural law then those things will fail and along with those failures, will come the failure of everything, humans included.

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