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***Unsettling settler colonialism in words and land: A case study of far Northern California***

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## **About the author**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines two case studies of unsettling settler colonialism in the far north of California: the inclusion of Yurok language electives in public high schools, and land return to the Wiyot Tribe. These two cases demonstrate repertoires of Indigenous resistance to historic and ongoing culturecide—the killing of culture—and show what unsettling settler colonialism looks like in the region. The central research question in this article is: How does unsettling happen in settler colonial-controlled public institutionalised spaces in far northern California? I argue that acts of Indigenous voice-raising and place-making constitute forms of resistance to ongoing erasure of Indigenous peoples in settler-colonised spaces. Concretely, both Yurok language course inclusion in public schools and land return of Duluwat Island to the Wiyot Tribe disrupt patterns of culturecide and promote new kinds of settler-Indigenous relations in the region.

## **Keywords**

Language; unsettling; settler colonialism; California; Yurok; Wiyot; land return

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## **Introduction: Of loggers and lumberjacks**

The school mascot stands on a wide expanse of lawn on a concrete pedestal outside the main entrance to Eureka High School (EHS): a grizzled logger with an axe over his shoulder and a round tin of chewing tobacco pushing through his back denim pocket. Colonised in 1850—the town’s slogan “I have Found It!”—Eureka, California captures the Gold Rush frenzy that swept the area. It also embodies the doctrine of discovery, the colonialist entitlement to land and resources that were “found”, a fiction given the existence of Indigenous peoples (Miller, 2008; Upstander Project, 2022; Wilkins, 2014). California’s early statehood was violent towards non-White<sup>1</sup> people and the land. During the mid-19th century, early White settlers decimated huge swaths of old growth redwood forest in Humboldt County and tried to wipe out the original inhabitants simultaneously (Lindsay, 2015; Norton, 1979).

Emblems of settler colonial domination are not limited to K-12 spaces. California Polytechnic University Humboldt (Cal Poly Humboldt), formerly Humboldt State University (HSU), is the only four-year college in the region, and maintains its mascot, the Lumberjack, despite controversy (Wood, 2019). Native students who graduate from the home of the Loggers might continue their studies at the home of the Lumberjacks. It is important to note that many Native American tribes log and earn profits to sustain and grow their tribes through logging. My critique of the mascots is not negating the economic role that logging plays across many demographics. Rather, the White Logger and Lumberjack mascots are culturally connected to the legacy of settler colonialism in the region, where logging, land claims and White militias went hand in hand in the second half of the 19th century.

In this article, I present two case studies of how settler colonialism is being unsettled in far Northern California. First, I examine the addition of Yurok into language elective curricula at two public high schools in the 1990s and 2010s. The Yurok Tribe, with a traditional homeland along the Klamath River and far north coast of California, is the largest tribe in the state and is vibrantly dedicated to Yurok language revitalisation. Second, I look at the return of Duluwat<sup>2</sup> Island in Humboldt Bay in 2019 as a materially and symbolically important moment of land return to the Wiyot Tribe. The Wiyot Tribe’s traditional homeland is along Humboldt Bay and parts of the Mad River and Eel River, and the tribe has worked for decades to regain Duluwat, the site of their World Renewal Ceremony. Overall, I argue that each of these two cases show the way that acts of Indigenous voice-raising and place-making constitute forms of resistance to ongoing erasure of Indigenous peoples in settler-colonised spaces.

Rather than a comprehensive account of unsettling in the region, these two case studies bring the impact of disruption into focus in two distinct spheres. The formal education sector is a main point of state contact for young people in the United States, and it plays a critical role in youth identity formation. Land return is a major topic in discussions of reparations and decolonisation, and it exists alongside truth commissions as concrete aspects of reconciliation. My purpose here is to show two ways in which unsettling is in motion in far Northern California, and how the pursuit of a decolonised future can play out in different arenas.

## **Collaborative methodology as guiding framework**

Collaborative methodology, as a philosophy guiding the implementation of methods or specific data collection tools, means that researchers engage stakeholders in a given research framework as actors with agency, rather than objects or subjects of research. I have written about this methodology elsewhere and advocate for its use when doing research with communities that have

been historically or contemporarily marginalised (Firchow & Gellman, 2021; Gellman, 2021). Such collaboration attempts to avoid the extractive frameworks of past and some current scholarship (Deloria, 1969/1988; Snelgrove et al., 2014; Wilson, 2008). Instead, collaborative methodology acknowledges the responsibility of the researcher to share access to knowledge with those affected by the puzzles under investigation in ways that are meaningful to stakeholders.

In this project, I worked closely with the Yurok Tribe of Northern California, along with district and school administrators and teachers, to craft the Yurok language-focused portion of the research puzzle. I iteratively consulted with the Yurok Tribe's Education Department and Yurok Language Program, along with other stakeholders to develop aspects of the research puzzle, including research questions and specific questions in data collection instruments, as well as the study implementation process. The study was first approved to be carried out by the Yurok Tribal Council in 2016 and was renewed annually, as was the Emerson College Institutional Review Board permission for study, #17-062-F-E-6/1-[R3]. I provided written and oral analysis of the project on an annual basis throughout its duration, sharing back information as a resource to be discussed and used as the Tribe so desired. Conversely, my analysis of the Duluwat Island case rests on data as a participant-observer in the community, including being both physically present at government-led hearings and events, as well as analysis of local news sources about the land return.

### **Key concepts**

Indigenous cultural survival names the many ways that Indigenous resilience has been practised over generations, and it can take various forms (Lara-Cooper & Lara, 2019). At the individual level, people make choices about how they engage aspects of their cultural identity, such as speaking or working on learning an Indigenous heritage language (McCarty et al., 2014) or showing up for traditional events. Communal processes are also integral, like Indigenous families and groups hosting traditional ceremonies and working together to bring these events about (Risling Baldy, 2018).

Gerald Vizenor (2009), Anishinaabe scholar and writer, coined the term *survivance* to evoke the persistence of survival that Indigenous communities enact in the face of settler colonialism. Survivance connotes a quest for more than just physical survival; it includes cultural survival too. Similar, although not identical to survivance, I use the term *resurgence* to highlight a returning to power and momentum that occurs when Indigenous communities organise and push back against settler colonial policies and practices (Simpson, 2008). This follows the way that Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel (2012) defines resurgence, as a collection of practices that disrupt colonialism, and as a way of being that includes “having the courage and imagination to envision life beyond the state” (p. 89). In my fieldwork, some people use the term *restoration* in order to maintain a focus on healing something that still exists (McQuillen, 2017). Restoration also resonates with demands to heal nearby rivers through undamming and restoring water levels that allow for salmon spawning, something Indigenous communities in far Northern California rely on for food, ceremony, and other identity purposes. All three terms—survivance, resurgence, and restoration—invoke notions of continuity for indigeneity and a disruption of settler colonialism.

Lakota/Dakota scholar James Fenelon (1998b) connects the notion of culture-killing to settler colonialism. For him, culturecide is the step before cultural genocide but after cultural suppression in the spectrum of state domination of minorities. This use of culturecide as a concept of targeting a specific culture for destruction through a range of means and timelines, rather than persecuting the physical bodies of people themselves, fits with Raphael Lemkin's original definition that was

ultimately removed from the United Nations genocide definition for political reasons (Schreiber, 2017). When cultural destruction takes place without genocide, it can be labelled “culturecide”, and that is how I invoke the term here.

Culturecide describes the contemporary erasure of Native Americans in formal and informal spaces of the United States through intentional silences or acts of domination (Fenelon, 1998a; Gellman, in press). In the context of this article, everyday indicators of erasure include the naming of physical spaces with White names instead of Native names, the use of mascots to maintain White narratives in schools, and educational curricula that perpetuate myths of Native extinction and White domination. Indigenous language access in formal education curricula, as well as land return to Indigenous peoples, both constitute forms of unsettling settler colonialism by confronting culturecide.

To be clear, seeing the problem, whether in schools or in relation to land stewardship, is only the first step. Indigenous Californian scholars have noted: “We cannot become self-congratulatory once we simply understand that what is happening is wrong. The second step, to undo the trajectory of attempted colonialism, is an actual un-settling of accepted institutions and arrangement” (Middleton-Manning et al., 2018, p. 197). Yazzie and Risling Baldy (2018) define “ontologies of decolonization” as a kind of “radical relationality” (p. 3) that includes challenging the status quo of White domination. Such unsettling of settler colonialism is not a passive process, nor a purely philosophic one. Unsettling in far Northern California includes meetings undertaken at numerous bureaucratic institutions and local government forums, and it is simultaneously less glamorous and more potent than might be expected.

### **Case studies and methods**

To document Indigenous language access as an example of unsettling, I draw on an original dataset documenting the impact of Yurok language elective access at two public high schools in far Northern California. Eureka High School (EHS) is a regional, majority White school in the center of Eureka, a town of approximately 27,000 inhabitants. EHS has a diverse student body, with the percentage of students identifying as a category other than White<sup>3</sup> growing each year, at near 50% in 2022 (EdData, 2022), with generally 4% Native American students in a given year in the late 2010s (DataQuest, 2020b). Prior to the addition of Yurok language classes to the curriculum, Spanish, German and French were offered to fulfill the state language requirement, and French was dropped within a few years of adding Yurok.

Hoop Valley High School (HVHS) is a rural school with a majority of the student body identified as American Indian<sup>4</sup> (DataQuest, 2020a), and it has included Yurok language in the curriculum since 1996. HVHS is situated on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, which borders Yurok and Karuk traditional lands, and its student body is mostly composed of Hupa,<sup>5</sup> Karuk and Yurok-identifying students, with a small minority of White and Latinx students. While in some years HVHS has not been able to offer Spanish for lack of a teacher—the commute from more populated coastal towns like Arcata or Eureka is more than an hour on extremely curvy mountain roads—its language offerings of Hupa and Yurok have been generally stable for the past 20 years.

EHS and HVHS offer four years of Yurok language elective. Two years of any language elective allows students to meet the California A to G college-readiness requirement necessary for admission to the University of California system. Yurok language-keepers—generally enrolled tribal members who hold the most advanced knowledge of the language, of whom there are 24 as of 2022—work as language teachers and run Yurok classes levels 1 through 4. From 2017 to

2019, I did mixed-methods research at the two high schools and surrounding communities. All research required active, opt-in consent from both students and their guardians via written permission forms, and response rate averages ranged from 20% to 50% participation per invited class. Students and their guardians could decide to participate in some aspects of the research but not others, with surveys the most popular mode of participation and focus groups the least selected. At the completion of the data collection, a preliminary analysis report based on the data was shared back to the district superintendents, school principals and teachers across both schools. I also did presentations on the data to faculty and staff during professional development hours at both EHS and HVHS.

Qualitatively, I observed more than 110 class periods,<sup>6</sup> carried out 79 interviews with students and 20 with teachers and administrators, and facilitated five focus groups along with informal hours spent mingling with students, teachers and staff at lunch and break times, as well as on carpooling commutes to HVHS. Quantitatively, I distributed a survey that 110 students completed, which addressed issues of school and community climate as well as civic, cultural and political participation. These data were drawn from students in Yurok classes as well as from Spanish, Civics, and US History classes that were included as controls in both schools.

### ***The land back case of Duluwat Island***

The second case study, that of Duluwat Island's return to the Wiyot Tribe, did not include collaborative methodology. Primarily this is because I drew on a dataset of news articles I have curated over the past nearly 20 years from local publications in the region, especially *North Coast Journal (NCJ)* articles and their digitised archives.<sup>7</sup> The *NCJ* bills itself as a "Weekly of Politics, People, and Art, serving Humboldt County" and appears both online and in print in front of grocery stores and other central buildings in the far north coast. I have been a reader of this publication for most of my adult life, in print when I am in the community and online when I am not. To systematise the articles, I reviewed a set of more than 50 archived *NCJ* articles in response to keyword searches, including for "Wiyot", "Indian Island", "Duluwat", "Tuluwat" and "reparations". In addition, I surveyed articles from the Yurok and Wiyot Tribe websites, the Eureka-based *Times Standard*, the Arcata-based *Mad River Union*, and publications such as *Indian Time* to triangulate information when needed. In total, I analyzed 63 articles from all sources combined.

For each relevant journalistic article, I performed a manual, noncomputer-derived discourse analysis of each article looking for keywords as to how Indigenous and White people were described and how historical and contemporary events were presented. Overall, the left-leaning *NCJ* articles took a pro-land return stance and centred Indigenous voices in explaining what such a return meant. The *Times Standard*, a more centrist paper, included perspectives from multiple stakeholders. The reviewed publications generally maintained a respectful tone regarding Duluwat, and informed the public about the details of how land return worked and what it meant to Wiyot and other Indigenous peoples.

The Duluwat Island land return example is a tangible case of decolonisation in far Northern California. The island sits in Humboldt Bay, just off the coast of Eureka, and in 1860 Tuluwat Village was the site of what was commonly known as the Indian Island massacre, with as many as 250 Wiyot women and children murdered by a White militia composed of ranchers from the Eel River Valley. State-sponsored White settlers used manifest destiny rhetoric to cover a range of human rights violations in the region, including assassination, landgrabs, human trafficking of Indigenous people and their enslavement (Magliari, 2020; Norton, 1979, Risling Baldy & Begay, 2019). Such genocidal tactics in the 19th century happened alongside culturecidal practices, as

Whites' forced recruitment of Native children to attend a range of California boarding schools in the late 1800s through the first half of the 1900s. In Humboldt, Del Norte and Trinity Counties, Whites followed the example of the Carlisle Indian School of Pennsylvania (1879–1918), trying to “Kill the Indian, save the man” through culturecidal education policy (Adams, 1995; Running Bear et al., 2019). The Hoopa Valley Indian School, one of many boarding schools in California where previous generations were beaten for speaking Indigenous languages, was previously located in the same spot as today's HVHS.

Yurok language access in public high schools and Duluwat Island's land return serve as two examples of unsettling settler colonialism within one micro-region. These cases are both hyper-local while also having generalisable implications for Indigenous communities elsewhere. Language inclusion in public schools and land reparations are both plausible in many places, and learning from the successes and obstacles to unsettling in one region may serve to inform efforts elsewhere.

### **Results: Yurok language access as resistance to culturecide**

At the core of victors' history translated through the United States education curricula is the erasure of Native peoples as agentive and contemporary actors. From White myths of Thanksgiving celebrations to happy Indians in mission schools, the California curricula often presents Indigenous peoples as part of a placid folkloric past that allows young people to grow up believing, as one EHS student told me, that “Indians were extinct” (Anonymous participant, 2018a). What interrupted this highly problematic view curated in public education was enrolling in Yurok language classes. As several White students recounted, and as the following section shows, Yurok language classes and the accompanying cultural and historical lessons they provide play a key role in correcting misinformation.

#### ***Yurok at Eureka High School***

EHS occupies several city blocks in the center of Eureka, a blue-collar town that boomed with the logging industry and busted with it too. Buildings are primarily one storey—prior to a gymnasium construction project in 2022, the two-story central classroom building was the tallest around. The soft yellow paint is trimmed with the red and green EHS colors, to evoke the flannel shirt of the Logger mascot. In Humboldt County, drug use, participation in the cannabis industry and the blackmarket in general form a counter-culture backdrop that informs youth identity, dreams, and style. The reality of this blackmarket, combined with racial and ethnic diversity in the midst of a majority White community, has led to reputational issues for EHS. Even as EHS's test scores remain strong, there has been significant White flight of families moving their kids out of the district and into charter schools in recent years, which, in contrast to charters in many urban settings, have a higher percentage of White students than the public schools in Humboldt County. EHS remains a regional high school with strong vocational programs, including woodshop, mechanics and multiple agriculture-related classes, and a robust Future Farmers of America chapter.

School climate has been an ongoing problem, with numerous issues of racism and discrimination documented over many years. In 2013, Eureka City Schools was sued by the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California (ACLU NorCal) over issues of racism and discrimination by school staff towards students (ACLU NorCal, 2015). Yurok was added to the curriculum right around the time of the lawsuit—which was settled in 2015 with a mandate for increased cultural sensitivity across the district—with the hope of fostering more cultural exchange among students and the entire school community (McQuillen, 2019).

EHS's Yurok teacher, James Gensaw, is a Yurok tribal member who teaches Yurok levels 1 and 2, and a combined 3/4 class five days a week while juggling multiple other jobs, including teaching Yurok at a second nearby high school. Mr Gensaw is part of a small cohort of Yurok people who actively participate in language revitalisation efforts, trying to grow the language from its current base of roughly 30 advanced-level speakers. Instrumental in broader regional initiatives, from Yurok culture-focused youth summer camps to an annual Yurok Summer Language Institute, Mr Gensaw also advises the Native American Club on the high school campus. Through storytelling, games and songs, his classes offer approaches to local history that differ from conventional history textbooks and therefore expand the cultural and historical knowledge of students who have opted into Yurok. He is the only Native faculty member in the school.

Much research has already shown how youth identity and participation is formed by a range of factors, including language use (Bettie, 2014; Phinney et al., 2001). I look at Yurok language access as an indicator of culturally sensitive and diverse curricula in the formal education sector. In that vein, Yurok language classes hold a large unarticulated mandate—to correct silences in the school system. For the student mentioned in this section's opening who thought that Native people were extinct, entering EHS and enrolling in the Yurok language class was eye-opening. Mr Gensaw makes clear in his classes that Native Americans, including Yurok, Hupa, Wiyot and Karuk people, are contemporary neighbours, and at EHS they are actively trying to grow the number of people who speak their languages and maintain Indigenous practices.

Interview data show reoccurring themes in many student responses. First, for Native American students, they directly acknowledge the positive identity that Yurok language classes proffer, as well as the educational aspect of Native presence in the school. Below is an interview excerpt with a student in her third year of Yurok at EHS:

Question: Can you tell me a little bit about your interest in Yurok?

Answer: Well, ever since I was little kid, my grandma put me in Brush Dance. And then I just kept on doing it even if I wasn't around my grandma. I helped girls put dresses on and make baskets and caps. I made necklaces and I'm in the process of making a dress.

Question: So you already had this cultural connection. Was it automatic for you to take Yurok when you saw that it was on offer?

Answer: It wasn't automatic but I knew it was a dying language and it wasn't used much. My grandpa uses it all the time so I decided to use it too.

Question: What does the language do for you?

Answer: I can talk to my grandpa more and it makes me feel better knowing it's not going to die without so many people using it. I mean, it's not used often but it's used.

Question: When you feel good about your identity as a Yurok person, how does that affect you?

Answer: You don't feel lost or hidden. You are inspired to show who you are and you're not afraid to do it. You have confidence in yourself that no one can bring down. If you're proud of who you are, as a Native American person, if you're truly proud, you're truly confident. And if you are confident of who you are, you're never going to be afraid to show it. You're not going to be afraid to be outspoken. You're not going to be afraid to start something new. You're not going to be afraid to tell the truth. Things that are hidden, you'll tell it and you'll tell it right.

Question: Do Yurok classes educate students beyond just language content?

Answer: If you're in the Yurok class, you're learning the truth about the history that we have instead of something that's a lie and hidden because they want our country to look perfect. And it doesn't matter if you have the heritage if you're just serious about it. If you're not serious,

you're not learning it. You're just there. It's going in one ear and out the other and you're not continuing on something that's important in your life if you want it to be. (Wonnacott, 2018)

This student interview was representative of dozens of others with Yurok or Native American-identified students in the Yurok language classes at both EHS and HVHS. In general, students with this profile had some kind of family motivation to learn the language; they were at least partly, and in some cases, very involved in cultural activities that reinforced the importance of Yurok; the classes helped them feel proud of their identities as Yurok people; and they saw the class as also serving the purpose of helping to break down White ignorance about Native American people. More than a dozen interviews at each school confirmed these themes.

Second, as mentioned previously, for White students who took the class, a central benefit was having previous myths disbanded and increasing allyship in Native American cultural survival. Below is an excerpt of an interview with a White female student at EHS taking Yurok 1:

Question: Talk to me about the role of non-Yurok people learning Yurok.

Answer: Well, I think that really, while it's important that people know the language, actual Yurok people should be in the forefront, but non-Yurok people I guess are kind of like allies to the language. We kind of can help spread the word a little bit and get more people to know that, hey, this is a language. It exists. It brings these neat things to linguistics. And so I think that we should try to preserve it even if just for that, but definitely to keep the culture alive too.

Question: What does that ally-ship do? How does your engagement in the language change the way that you relate to people?

Answer: Well, learning the language kind of helps me understand their experiences and certain things that they may do or say a little bit better, since that kind of can inherently lead to me learning more about the culture. And also, just even in my own house, even though none of my family members are Yurok, it's really interesting because now if we go out and like, drive through Klamath where there's a predominately Yurok population, we can actually understand what some of the signs mean and everything, which is pretty neat actually. And I don't know, it's just really nice to be able to peak into how other people see the world. (Gillespie, 2018)

Even students who did not take the class may expand their understanding of Native issues just by the existence of the class in their school, even while acknowledging real obstacles that remain in the perception of the class. One White female EHS alumni, who took four years of Spanish, recounted:

My Spanish class was right across the hall from the Yurok class, and often the doors were open to catch a breeze. I would see kids going out to the hall or the bathroom all the time, or on their phones in class, looking bored. I only saw Native kids in the Yurok class, or "white trash" kids.<sup>8</sup> One "white trash" kid told me he took Yurok to get the easy A because he heard German and Spanish would be harder. I stuck with the smart kids, we all took AP classes together. I told my mom, "It seems like kids don't take Yurok class seriously", and she said, "Yes, but at least it exists." I never had to think about it, what it means to lose a language or culture, because I'm White and speak English, but that struck me. (Anonymous participant, 2019)

Despite many obstacles, Yurok classes had a positive impact in multiple ways across a wide demographic of students. Yet, as the quote above shows, the school, district and community still have work to do in educating people about the importance of Indigenous presence in school curricula.

Access to the language positively impacts students from different backgrounds variably. Students from heritage-speaking backgrounds, meaning those whose parents, grandparents or ancestors

spoke the language or were ethnically identified with it in some way, repeatedly told me they were taking the class to reclaim something their grandparents or other family members had lost through processes of colonisation or external oppression. The students had heard their family stories of elders being beaten in school for speaking their language, and elders had then internalised the idea that their mother tongue was worthless or a danger to its speakers. These childhood experiences of culturecide interrupted intergenerational language transmission. Students at both EHS and HVHS see their Yurok language classes as challenging attempted cultural erasure.

EHS students talked about having much more demographically mixed social circles than their parents and grandparents, and they frequently made comments like “my grandparents were discriminated against for being Indigenous but not me” (Anonymous participant, 2018b). Indigenous language teachers like Mr Gensaw have brought historical truths and Indigenous culture not taught in dominant society into the Yurok language classroom. This allows non-Native students, especially White students, to undo problematic narratives about Indigenous people they had previously learned.

Yet the larger community climate, including insensitivity to ongoing use of settler colonial symbols, persists in numerous formal education spaces. In 2019, I observed a college recruiting event at EHS featured HSU’s policy to automatically enroll the top 10% of the graduating class, hoping to bolster their waning local enrolment and degree completion rates through direct outreach. HSU’s administrators came with the Lumberjack mascot with his stuffed axe. I sat near one of the only Native students invited to the event, whom I had previously interviewed. She sat stone-faced directly in front of the Lumberjack, who represented the promise of college success. Maybe a family member had been a logger and she could have felt a connection to the mascot, or maybe the mascot looked like the kind of people who stole her ancestors’ land. Regardless, the imagery is confronting when looking at what it means to unsettle settler colonialism in the region.

### ***Hoopa Valley High School (HVHS) case study***

HVHS sits in a valley ringed by mountains and across the street from the Trinity River. Located in Humboldt County, it is part of the Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified School District, which has some of the highest percentages of Native American K-12 student enrolment in the state. During the academic year 2018–19, when the majority of data collection took place at HVHS, the schools’ student body was 82.7% American Indian, 7% White, 6.6% Hispanic or Latino, 0.8% Pacific Islander, 0.4% African American, and 2.5% of students identified as being of two or more races (DataQuest, 2020c).

Carole Lewis, a long-time Yurok language teacher and Yurok elder, instructed levels 1, 2, and a combined 3/4 class at HVHS during the study period. As HVHS is situated in a place where the majority of the students identify personally with Indigenous culture in some way, this curricular cultural recognition operates more as an identity-confirmation mechanism than it does in Eureka, where revelations about Yurok existence and realities are often surprising for non-Native American students with little previous exposure.

In focus group discussions in 2018, many Indigenous interviewees at HVHS talked about the emotional pain of identity loss for their elders based on childhood experiences of physical and emotional violence. Indigenous language students of today who are heritage speakers see the connections between their own ability to study the language and their sense of self as Indigenous (Focus Group, 2018). Students at both EHS and HVHS show an enthusiasm for learning Yurok in ways that convey an appreciation for exposure to either heritage culture or culture of others. This

exposure boosts self-esteem and confirms identity for heritage-speakers, and it helps all students gain a more realistic perspective of the communities in which they live.

### **Duluwat Island: Apologizing for a massacre in Humboldt County**

On October 21, 2019, the City Council of Eureka unanimously voted to return the entirety of Duluwat Island (formerly Indian Island), to the Wiyot Tribe (Greenson, 2019). This represents one of the few moments of atonement in Humboldt County for the genocidal past. Duluwat Island is the largest of three islands in Humboldt Bay, nearly a mile long and a half mile wide. Duluwat was home to two Wiyot villages, Etpidohl and Tuluwat, which served as the base for an annual World Renewal Ceremony. In 1860, Tuluwat villagers were preparing for the ceremony when a White militia invaded the island in the middle of the night, slaughtering up to 250 women and girls left to keep the camps while most men were away fishing and hunting (Doran & McVicar, 2004; Norton, 1979). The massacre was one of numerous acts of violence against Native Americans in far Northern California by White militias enacting manifest destiny by claiming Indigenous lands for ranching (Malloy, 2020).

Over the last two decades, the Wiyot Tribe has worked to get Duluwat Island back. In 2000, from the proceeds of a grassroots fundraising campaign, the Wiyot Tribe bought back 1.5 acres of the island's 275 acres from the City of Eureka (Wiyot Tribe, 2008). The Tribe, in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, began an environmental restoration project to address the contamination of the island from sewage and industrial pollution from a former lumber mill (EPA, 2018; Wiyot Tribe, 2008). In 2004, the City returned an additional 40 acres to the Tribe (EPA, 2018). The return ceremony included members of the Wiyot Tribe sailing in traditional boats from the Adorni Center on the shore of the Bay to the island (Doran & McVicar, 2004).

The story of Duluwat Island is in some ways emblematic of this remote corner of California, now popularly described as being behind the Redwood Curtain, meaning the part of far Northern California ensconced in rainy redwoods, with bad internet and periodically cut off from elsewhere by landslides on Highway 101. The other nickname for the region, the Emerald Triangle, refers to the fertile cannabis-growing area of Humboldt, Mendocino and Trinity Counties. From gold to cannabis, Northern California has been central to White dreams of land-based freedom and profit development.

The violence that characterised the colonisation of Northern California was not at all unique, nor was the fervency of deliberately forgetting that past and glorifying it instead. The particular uniqueness of Duluwat Island, rather, lies in the fact that it was physically given back. In the ceremony of land repatriation, words of apology were spoken by White settler-descendants, including the Eureka Mayor, in public recognition of a human rights violation (Greenson, 2019). The recognition this gives to Indigenous grievances in far Northern California is vital, as such an apology serves to legitimise Indigenous versions of historical and present inequities.

There have been other actions taken by White people in Humboldt County to acknowledge violence against Indigenous people in the region. One organisation, Democracy Unlimited of Humboldt County, partnered with the Seventh Generation Fund to create a voluntary "Honor Tax"<sup>9</sup> on landowners whose homes were within the traditional boundaries of Wiyot land as a way of acknowledging the history of land theft (Walters, 2009). The tax was controversial—a review of comments underneath the online articles shows scepticism and sometimes disgust from community members at the idea—but it is an awareness-raising campaign as well as a financial one (Walters, 2009).

One of many conflicts over apologies for violence ranging from slavery to boarding schools is that any admission of guilt may open the doorway to rights demands (Coates, 2014; Nobles, 2008). This “shaming and claiming” pattern has been effective to get states to acknowledge atrocities that they could no longer publicly ignore because of public pressure, but which rights are actually being claimed varies dramatically from case to case (Gellman, 2017). Examples like the returning of Duluwat Island to the Wiyot Tribe are so rare because giving land back to its traditional owners, something that many Indigenous activists think people in the United States should do, is highly contentious. Some liberal White back-to-the-landers in Humboldt County who spent years building their homesteads on traditionally Indigenous land applauded the return of Duluwat Island but made no move to turn over their own acreage. Reflecting on Duluwat as a larger example of why land return is so important, Hupa, Yurok and Karuk scholar Cutcha Risling-Baldy urges people to not “live in a murder house” (Risling Baldy, 2017), meaning that we should not take pleasure in dwelling in places that come at the cost of others’ lives. Structural reparations strike at the heart of individualist and nationalist agendas and show the formidable obstacles that remain in the project of unsettling.

### ***The politics of memory***

Memories serve as symbolic means to transmit ideas across people, places and moments. People use a variety of symbols to link personal realities to communal ones across time (Eber & Neal, 2001). Memory is also highly political, and scholars have detailed how the act of forgetting plays a role in democratisation and democratic consolidation and stability.<sup>10</sup> From Spain’s dramatically legislated Forgetting Pact, accompanying an amnesty for those involved in Franco’s civil war (Encarnación, 2008a, 2008b, 2014), to memory manipulation in Argentina (Jelin, 2003) and Chile (Hite, 2000), societal memory is highly political. State-mandated forgetting has taken place through amnesty laws in numerous countries (Cobban, 2007), with courts and congresses playing key roles in legislating what will be officially remembered or recognised (Collins, 2008).

The United States has been a stark example of institutionalised forgetting, with memories of Indigenous genocide silenced through government agencies, courts and schools. One Yurok and Karuk writer lays out this silence:

We’ve never been apologized to for the loss of our people during the gold rush, we’ve never been apologized to for the theft of our land under the General Allotment Act of 1887, we’ve never been apologized to for the loss of language, and the attempted extinction of our culture by the boarding schools, and on and on and on. (McCovey, 2006, p. 291)

In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Native American Apology Resolution that apologised “on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native peoples by citizens of the United States” (Capriccioso, 2010). This resolution was tacked onto a defence appropriations spending bill that received little publicity, leaving one journalist to ask, “Is an apology that’s not said out loud really an apology?” (Capriccioso, 2010). While Obama’s apology has been the only federal-level apology of its kind, California Governor Gavin Newsom has facilitated state-level recognition through Executive Order N-15-19, recognising the wrongs of the state towards Native Americans and also labelling past White treatment of Native people in the state “a genocide” (Hamilton, 2019).

While forgetting may bolster the self-perception of White people, including settler-descendants, denying the validity of Native Americans’ collectively held memories about violence against them diminishes the identities of those who are memory-keepers. For Indigenous youth I interviewed at

EHS and HVHS, stories about familial experiences of boarding schools or local massacres takes place mostly in oral contexts. Those stories have not been incorporated into mainstream K-12 curricula, nor has most of the stolen land been returned to traditional owners (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Robbins, 2021). While well-meaning people may add land acknowledgements to (our) signatures or open public events with such acknowledgements to raise awareness, alleviating White guilt without structurally addressing the legacy of colonialism falls flat (Native Governance Center, 2021; Wood, 2021).

Erased memory can be at least in part restored. Journalists are telling the story of Duluwat in newspapers, but that content has made few inroads in high school curricula, although momentum for local content inclusion is increasing (Wipf, 2022). Efforts to include Indigenous language and accurate history in classrooms alongside land return can also focus renewed attention on past and present injustices. In both culturecide and cultural survival, memory—from whose perspective and for what purpose—plays a role. Language choice and land control are two arenas open to unsettling. While language restoration is seen as definitely possible for many tribes, land return is much harder. Focusing land return efforts on places that are culturally significant to tribes and under federal jurisdiction may offer parameters to help this type of unsettling gain momentum. It can also make scope conditions for the burden on tribes that fundraise to repurchase land originally stolen from them.

### **Conclusion: Indigenous cultural survival as resistance to culturecide**

This article has shown how resistance to culturecide is a part of Indigenous cultural survival and is intricately linked to unsettling settler colonialism. I have questioned here the notion that assimilation into dominant cultural frameworks is inevitable. In fact, dominant frameworks of White supremacy, as visible through public sector educational curricula as well as land control, will take collaborative labour across racial and ethnic lines to overturn. Indigenous language access in schools and land return to traditional owners are two concrete measures that unsettle the status quo. While land return may be unlikely from private owners, millions of acres of traditionally Indigenous lands that were taken unethically are now controlled by various levels of government. The Duluwat return is one example of a town government taking this step, and there is potential for so much more.

Education serves as a mechanism to interrupt problematic misconceptions of Indigenous peoples. Bringing Indigenous languages and culture into the public education sector is one way to begin reversing the history of misinformation that youth receive. Participation in language and cultural programming can serve as a means of resistance to culturecide for heritage speakers, and it can be a cultural competency-building tool for nonheritage speakers. Narratives of Indigenous silence or erasure can be challenged through the cultural knowledge that comes with Indigenous presence in school curriculums. My research findings are realistic. Providing Indigenous language access is not a panacea for the many issues that Indigenous communities and Indigenous students face. However, the findings illustrate that such Indigenous language access is culturally responsible policy to undo systematic culturecide in the formal education sector.

The Duluwat Island return shows that Wiyot community leaders were persuasive in shaming and claiming the City of Eureka to give Duluwat back to its rightful owners—the Wiyot Tribe. This example is the most fundamental kind of cultural survival—the reclaiming of traditional territory that enables so many other cultural rights to flourish in the present day. The Wiyot Tribe, like many other Indigenous groups in the United States, is working to maintain and support a range of cultural rights, including language rights for their communities, even as first-language speakers

have passed away, making intergenerational transmission more difficult (Wiyot Tribe, 2020). With the return of Duluwat Island, Wiyot people can again hold their World Renewal Ceremonies on that space, transforming a place of genocide into a place that showcases Indigenous survival, resistance, and resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Ewing (2020) makes the point that capitalising White makes visible a shared identity of Whiteness. As such visibility is central to unsettling, I follow that practice here.

<sup>2</sup> Duluwat is the Wiyot name for what was formerly known as Indian Island. Tuluwat is the name of the Wiyot village on Duluwat that was the site of the massacre. For more information, see <https://www.wiyot.us/186/Tuluwat-Project> or <https://www.indiantime.net/story/2019/10/24/news/duluwat-island-is-returned-to-the-wiyot-tribe-in-historic-ceremony/32831.html>

<sup>3</sup> The problematic way in which all White and non-White people are homogenously lumped together in the terms used by this particular data website is beyond the scope of this paper and does not reflect author preference.

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<sup>4</sup> Many United States census data instruments use the label “American Indian”. I only use the label when directly referring to that data. Otherwise, I use the term “Native American” when a general reference is needed to refer to people of more than one Indigenous identity.

<sup>5</sup> The Anglicised version of the name Hoopa is used to refer to the town and Reservation, but the people and language are referred to as Hupa.

<sup>6</sup> Class periods varied in length between 50 and 100 minutes depending on whether it was a block schedule day or standard schedule. Both schools use block schedules during testing periods and HVHS uses a standard schedule Mondays and block schedules Tuesdays–Fridays, so there was variability in the length of observations.

<sup>7</sup> The archives are available for open access at [www.northcoastjournal.com](http://www.northcoastjournal.com).

<sup>8</sup> EHS has strong cliques and social divisions among students that are reflected in socio-economic hierarchies within the region. This interviewee’s use of the term “white trash” reflects her observations of the social world that is ordered through both race and class, categorisations which were widely shared across interviewees both in high schools and local communities. I address the role of harmful categorisations in high school in other works (Gellman, in press).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.honortax.org/> for more.

<sup>10</sup> There are models of remembering violence as an integral part of societal healing as well. Germany’s intentional integration of a Holocaust curriculum following World War II set a high standard for how state-based atrocities can be sensitively conveyed to a range of age groups through the public education sector. Given the comparability of the United States to the German case in terms of resources and institutional capacity, the lack of political will in the United States to acknowledge the genocide of Indigenous people stands out all the more starkly.