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Mneesha Gellman
Emerson College

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Speaking Up: School Climate and Language Politics in the Trump Era

Mneesha Gellman
Emerson College

Abstract

Identity politics are fraught. High school is a prime location where such politics play out and interface with state-dictated norms and values about acceptable social behavior. This article examines identity politics during the Trump era in two far Northern California high schools to better understand the impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students. I argue that while the Trump effect allowed hostility towards BIPOC people to be expressed more openly in general, schools can also be sites of resistance to culturecide—the killing of culture—that diminishes the role of minority ontologies and epistemologies in the formation of young people. Yurok and Spanish language courses serve as spaces of heritage language revitalization that challenge White supremacist ideologies embedded in curricula as well as wider US culture.

Introduction: Schools as Microcosms

Identity politics—when people from any type of a shared identity engage in political behavior outside of tradition political party structures—are fraught. Public schools provide a particularly potent space to examine them for two reasons. First, schools are primary locations for the inculcation of state-dictated norms and values about acceptable social behavior. This takes place both formally through educational media and associated lessons in the classroom—what is taught and whose values such content promotes—and informally through social interaction. Furthermore, in the United States, public schools proclaim non-partisanship yet they contain highly political content and behavior.

Second, schools in the US have been sites of culturecide—literally the killing of culture, including its suppression through coercion, and usually referencing actions taken by a majority group to force the assimilation of a minority—for BIPOC students for generations. In a divisive era of politics, what does it look like to resist ongoing culturecide within the curriculum and the classroom? This article examines the Trump era as a specific temporal moment in order to better understand identity politics in two far Northern California high schools. I argue that while the Trump effect in politics has allowed hostility towards BIPOC people to be expressed more openly in high

schools, at the same time, there are also examples of resistance to culturecide happening within the schools. Language revitalization and continuation of heritage language use are a few of many examples of how BIPOC students and their teachers are speaking up and speaking out to resist culturecide and associated White supremacist ideologies.

I write elsewhere in detail about the specific impact of Yurok language access on young people (Gellman 2023, 2022b). In this article I focus instead on school climate issues in relationship to language and identity politics. The article proceeds as follows: First, I describe the case study settings; Second, I outline the methodology and methods used to guide the research and introduce the case studies. Third, I provide a brief grounding in the literature on nationalism and identity. Fourth, students themselves describe their identity-based experiences in high school during the Trump era. I conclude with an assessment that in the toxic political culture on issues of diversity during and after the Trump presidency, schools have an important role to play in supporting resistance to culturecide for BIPOC youth.

Culturecide and Yurok Language-Learning in Eureka and Hoopa

EHS sits in the middle of a small coastal town of 27,000 inhabitants, the largest urban center in a rural

California county a few hours south of the Oregon border. Demographically, far Northern California is majority White, but the region has a significant Latinx population, people from Asian and Polynesian heritage, and also one of the largest concentrations of Native Americans per capita in the state, including the Karuk, Hupa, Tolowa, Wiyot, and Yurok tribes. Beginning with the Gold Rush of 1848, which brought a massive wave of White prospectors to the area, far Northern California has been transformed by settler colonialism, a process which includes White dispossession of Native American lands, genocide, and culturecide, some of which continues into the present day.

Language repression has been a mainstay of cultural policy throughout the US since the beginning of settler colonialism. This was most visible in Indian boarding schools, where Native children were put into English language immersion and physically punished for speaking Indigenous languages. In the face of such abuse, tremendous language repression ensued. Many far Northern California tribes are making concerted efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages and enact resistance and resilience in the face of ongoing settler colonialism (Bommelyn 2006, Risling Baldy and Begay 2019, Wiyot Tribe 2020, Yurok Tribe 2022).

Language politics continue to play out in educational settings. In 2015, around the same time that an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawsuit over racially-based discrimination by staff towards students was settled with Eureka City Schools (ACLU NorCal 2015), EHS added Yurok language classes to the language elective curriculum. Such a curricular change became an opportunity to look at how cultural content in the classroom impacts students, staff, and teachers from a range of demographic backgrounds, as well the wider community. Joining Spanish and German, Yurok now fulfills the mandatory one-year language requirement for EHS graduation, and also counts toward California's A to G requirements (two years of language) for students that want to be competitive applicants in the University of California or California State University systems. Students and teachers in Yurok III/IV, and Advanced Placement Spanish were interviewed for this study in 2018.

Yurok Teaching and School Climate

James Gensaw, a Yurok tribal member, was the EHS teacher for Yurok levels I, II, and a combined III/IV class

five days a week until summer 2022, when he moved to be the Yurok language teacher at Del Norte High School. Mr. Gensaw is part of a small cohort of approximately 16 Yurok language-keepers, a group of advanced-level Yurok language-speakers. Language-keepers like Mr. Gensaw are active participants in language revitalization efforts by teaching Yurok in spaces like the K-12 system and in community classes. Instrumental in broader regional initiatives—from Yurok culture-focused youth summer camps to annual language institutes—Mr. Gensaw teaches the Yurok language, infused with local history and the current reality of Native communities. By normalizing Yurok language and culture in the school curriculum, his classes challenge conventional victor's-history textbooks and therefore unsettle the predominantly settler-colonial-derived cultural and historical knowledge that many students hold.

When I first formally interviewed Mr. Gensaw in early 2018, we were a year into the Trump presidency, and he had much to say about school climate:

Right before the presidential election, and right after, there were so many negative things going on here at Eureka High School. They call it the 'Trump effect,' and I think it was not just here, it was in all high schools. There was a group of what you would call, I guess like, the good old boys, you know, some people call them hicks, you know, people who wear Wranglers, cowboy boots, and so they were going around threatening different people, you know, it's almost like they had their voice, had their leader, right? You know, 'Trump, President Trump!' and then it's like, 'he can say whatever he wants and get away with it, and so can we!' And so a lot of that was going on, you know, there were some racial slurs made right after the election, were written in the bathrooms, and then during the same time period, a Yurok student in one of my classes was threatened by another student—the student showed him a knife and said, 'I'm going to scalp you!' (Gensaw 2018).

The ongoing and overt acceptance of settler-colonialism as a dominant social practice was clear to Mr. Gensaw and to many others watching the political polarization of the United States after the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump. In many ways, the 2016 election granted White people permission to articulate racist thoughts and act

on them with impunity in the public sphere (Saul 2017). Previously, during the so-called “post-racial” Obama administration, such behaviors were not as overtly accepted in the political mainstream. Many people saw this new comfortability with White supremacy through actions displayed at events such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, or the storming of the Capital building on January 6, 2021. Such philosophies of White dominance have also manifested in educational settings, with high-profile controversies over the teaching of Critical Race Theory and ethnic studies, for example.

Yurok and Spanish at Hoopa Valley High School

In addition to Mr. Gensaw’s Yurok classes, I also worked with Carole Lewis’s Yurok language students at Hoopa¹ Valley High School (HVHS) during the study period 2018-2020. The Hoopa Valley is a majority Native-American community on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, and HVHS is more than 80 percent Native American. Ms. Lewis, a long-time Yurok language teacher and Yurok elder, instructed levels I, II, and a combined III/IV class at HVHS. HVHS also offers instruction in the Hoopa language, and has been at the forefront of culturally relevant curriculum design for Native American students. EHS and HVHS are two of the four high schools in far Northern California where the Yurok language is offered as a world language elective.²

As a way to look at minority language access more broadly, as well as to serve as a control, I included Spanish language classes in the study design, and worked with students and teachers in multiple levels of Spanish classes at both EHS and HVHS during the same time period as the Yurok classes. I also included students and teachers from US History, World History, and Civics classes in the original study, and that data is presented elsewhere (Gellman 2023).

Research Methodology and Methods³

I first met Mr. Gensaw in 2016, when I reached out to the Yurok Tribe’s Education Department, interested in co-creating a research project that could be useful to them in language revitalization efforts and that would utilize my skill set as a political scientist. Collaborative methodology, referring to codesigning and implementing a mutually engaging research puzzle with stakeholders, is the framework used here and described at length elsewhere (Gellman 2021, 2022a, 2023). In this case, collaborative methodology meant working with the Yurok Tribe’s Education Department Director and Yurok Language Program staff to design the research questions and specific research instruments for the study, including qualitative interviews, focus groups, and survey questions.

Collaborative methodology facilitates a research puzzle that addresses real-life issues of interest for people affected by the research themes, and can further scholarly goals as a secondary, rather than a primary, objective. Working with any historically or contemporarily marginalized group demands this kind of sensitivity. By rejecting extractivist frameworks, collaborative methodology attempts to counter neocolonial research models.

After defining the scope and scale of the project with the Yurok Tribe’s Education Department, official research permission was granted from the Yurok Tribal Council. I then obtained Emerson College Institutional Review Board permission.⁴ Following all approvals, I spent multiple two-to-four-week trips in 2017-2020 traveling to California usually two to three times a year to do data collection and to check in with stakeholders. I continue to do annual report-backs to the Yurok Tribal Council and to any schools and districts that are willing to make space for me on their agendas.

This article is based on mixed methods data from

1 While the people and language are spelled Hupa, the Anglicized version of the name, Hoopa, refers to the town, and this has been encoded in the spelling of the school name. I follow local practice in referring to the place and school as Hoopa, but the people and language as Hupa.

2 Del Norte High School and McKinleyville High School are the other two high schools where Yurok is offered.

3 Even fellow methodologists continue to interchangeably use the terms methodology and methods, but these two terms are not the same thing. Methodology refers to an overarching philosophy or framework for a given study, while methods indicate specific data-collection tools.

4 Study #17-063-F-E-6-1 [R3].

EHS and HVHS that draws on 110 surveys,⁵ 80 student interviews, 24 teacher and administrator interviews, 5 focus groups, and 110 classroom observations, plus many hours of informal observations in school campuses and surrounding communities.

While the Spanish and social studies faculty were not included in the collaborative phase of the research design, the research questions resonated with those teachers as well. Overall, I coded hundreds of pages of interview and focus group transcripts manually to identify a range of examples of school climate, and also noted examples of young people speaking up to resist culturecide.

Theorizing Language Rights as Resistance

The right to language is highly political, and in many cases, connected to a host of other political claims. I have written elsewhere about the rights to mother-tongue and heritage-tongue education for minorities in multiple countries (Gellman 2017, 2020). In these cases, cultural rights claims are in no way limited to language itself, as demanding language rights is part of a larger claim to cultural autonomy. In turn, cultural autonomy implies land rights, governance rights, and educational rights, among others. In this way, language rights may begin as simply the right to speak one's heritage tongue, but in fact are part of a greater demand for states to recognize and accommodate specific identities.

Overturing the myth that "Indians are extinct"—a myth that multiple White students admitted they believed before taking Yurok in high school—threatens White supremacy in ways that are deeply unsettling for those who benefit from it. In the United States, homogenization efforts have decimated Indigenous languages, dropping the number of languages spoken at the time of colonial contact from 300 (Cohen 2010) to 169 (Coronel-Molina and McCarty 2016: 5). While roughly fifty of those languages are in California, many have very small numbers of speakers (Hinton 1994) and continue to shrink.

For Spanish language in the United States education system, there are competing tensions. As with Indigenous

language-speakers, there is a clear assimilationist approach by the formal education sector to move Spanish-speakers towards English fluency. In addition, with increasing interest in global communication, students and families—both heritage-speakers but increasingly non-heritage-speakers—are seeking out Spanish as a valuable language skill. The mixed messages sent to young heritage-speakers about the value of Spanish and its utility in their lives can be confusing. In the context of nationalist agendas in the United States, however, the emphasis on English in schooling is in line with other nation-building projects.

Studies of nationalism recognize the central role that language plays in defining 'in' and 'out' group identities. Weber's classic study, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976) shows how schools and the military consolidated French identity through language standardization institutionalized through assimilationist values. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) underscores the utility of a shared language for creating a mutually held national identity across large distances through the printing press, the early vehicle for newspapers which were intelligible only to those who had language-assimilated to a given group. More contemporarily, May's work posits that language-based conflicts implicate the limitations of nation-state design, which are geared toward homogenization through a common language and mass education (2012). Stepan, Linz, and Yadav argue that the term "nation-state" is too limited a framework for today's pluriethnic populations, and offer the term "state-nation" to describe contemporary political entities, including the United States (2011: 1-8). Such a terminological reframe allows territorially-bound political entities to be conceptualized in more culturally and linguistically inclusive ways than "nation-state" permits, and may need to be expanded to account for autonomous tribal territories, as political scientist Kessler-Mata describes in *American Indians and the Trouble with Sovereignty* (2017).

Oppressed peoples have long figured out how to speak in covert ways (Risling Baldy 2018, Lara-Cooper and Lara Sr. 2019, Scott 1990), yet those stories don't often penetrate the formal educational curriculum. The 1775 Kumeyaay uprising at the San Diego Mission, for example, shows a hidden transcript of resistance that breaks into the public realm, but children are not taught Indigenous versions of history in the sanitized mission history units required by the State of California (Risling Baldy 2017). Only in 2017 did

⁵ The survey data reinforces themes documented qualitatively in this article, but is excluded here due to space limitations.

a new California history curriculum update the state's mission unit from required to optional status. However, many teachers who taught the unit in previous years continue to include it, even as the controversies over how to teach mission history continue (Keenan 2019). Given that education is such a fundamental contributor to youth identity formation, the way that victors' versions of history are presented as fact should merit significant attention.

It is not only history, but language itself, that plays an oppressive role in many educational settings. In his now classic work on the subject, Nigerian scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes how language regimes—which Sonntag and Cardinal take to mean the institutional generation of language hierarchies, policies, and practices in a given state (2015: 6)—shame minority citizens into furthering the interruption of language transmission in their own families and communities (Thiongo 1986). This has been California's story too (Lara-Cooper and Lara Sr. 2019, Valdés et al. 2006). The internalization of ethnic majority values is bound up with culturecide, which in many countries takes place alongside cultural and economic globalization. The remainder of this article draws on students and educator voices to show how school climate was affected during the Trump era, and how language classes have served as a tool to resist White narratives of domination.

Speaking Up in Their Own Words

Marginalized people and their allies have found a range of ways to speak up against racism, sexism, xenophobia, and anti-LGBTQI+ behavior in the aftermath of the 2016 election (Zepeda-Millán and Wallace 2018, Patrón 2021). In this section, I share excerpts of interviews with students in far Northern California about their lived experiences and provide analysis on the central themes. I begin with the voices of Latinx students at EHS:

*Leo*⁶

In 2018, Leo was an enthusiastic senior at EHS, and a food service employee after school and on weekends. Leo grew up speaking Spanish at home and English at school. By 2022, he worked as a manager at a fast-food

restaurant and was taking classes at College of the Redwoods (CR). He related the following story about discrimination in Eureka:

I had an instance where an older male, he looked like he was like in his eighties, I was just, you know, casually walking to work as I do daily, and he pulls over next to me in a pick-up truck and he says, 'you need to go back to Mexico, we don't need you here, stop taking my jobs, go back to your country!' And for a while I was puzzled as to why he would take the time to pull over and say that to me, but I didn't care to give him the satisfaction to explain myself, 'cause I didn't feel like I needed to, because I knew that I wasn't from Mexico, I was born here in the States, so it didn't really hit me until after I thought of the whole situation. It's instances like that where I think that people are very uneducated (Anonymous 2018m).

Though Leo himself is US-born, others in Eureka's Latinx community are not. The larger "it" that hit Leo after this incident was recognition that the driver's insult was directed toward his whole community, not just him as a US-born Mexican American. Leo continues:

Another instance is when we recently had our presidential election [in 2016] and we're going through all of those [political] things, I was just hear[ing] constant really nasty verbal comments about other races, not just my own. And I don't kind of want to throw anybody under the bus, but it was mostly hicks, or I could say White people, that were doing it and it kind of hurt me because prior to that, they were so close to everybody else, and now they're kind of like pointing the finger, like 'okay, you need to go back to where you came from. The United States isn't for you!' It really kind of hurt me as a person 'cause I'm like, before all of this, we were all brothers and sisters. It made me puzzled, because in elementary school and middle school, they were never like that. It was like, they were all still accepting of each other and, you know, all of a sudden, after the election, I guess they showed their true colors—they just needed that platform to show what they truly felt. And for all I know, they could have been feeling that the whole time, they just never spoke up about it (Anonymous 2018m).

⁶ All student names are pseudonyms.

Leo describes how the election of Trump allowed his peers and community members to say things toward him and other BIPOC students that they might have been feeling before 2016, but just didn't say. In this way, the blatant racism of the Trump era also operates like a social betrayal of childhood relationships that Leo viewed as free of such biases. He further comments about the challenges for students to speak up when such views are expressed:

I know a lot of teachers have a zero tolerance about, you know, being very vocal against other races, being racist in general is not an okay thing and a lot of teachers are, you know, putting their foot down and saying, 'Hey, you can voice your opinion, but to an extent. I won't allow you to bash other people based on their background, skin color, sexuality, whatever the case may be. It's not okay.' Whereas students, I personally have always seen people kind of, like, very quiet about it. They haven't really spoken up about it, and the few people that do speak out about it, they're always the ones that get more of the backlash for speaking up about it. I think that that's something that needs to change, because I think that you should be able to speak up regardless of what the situation may be, whether it be bullying or discrimination. I think that people should be able to say, 'Hey, that's not okay, you can't do that and you can't say that!' I think that's just something that needs to change, that people need to speak up more about it, just in general about everything that's going about discrimination and bullying (Anonymous 2018m).

When I asked Leo what it would take for him to speak up more himself, he quickly replied, "Less backlash. If I didn't get as much [backlash] for speaking up, that would be something that motivates me a little more" (Anonymous 2018m). Leo is able to identify the way that discrimination and the need to speak up has shifted in the Trump era. He does speak up, and wants to speak up more, but worries about the repercussions and hopes the school and community will work on creating solutions.

Marta

Marta, a bilingual Mexican American student in AP Spanish, expresses some ambivalence about her and her family's experience speaking Spanish in Eureka.

With my family, we just go to Mexican restaurants. My parents aren't really assimilated yet. Once in a while we go to some type of fast-food restaurant and they still speak Spanish in the restaurant and it's okay. I have to be the translator for them sometimes. That's what happened when I was small. I had to translate for them, but now my dad's learning more and more English. He actually asks me for help on English, so I feel like it's, like, a good thing (Anonymous 2018j).

Many minority students I interviewed described the experience of translating for their parents, which is a common experience in immigrant households around the world, where children are the first in their families to speak both the family language and the new country's majority language, usually learned at school.

When I follow up with a question about if Marta is comfortable using Spanish in public, she responds: "In some stores, yes. In others, not as much because people just look at you. And I feel like that's the case for Hmong speakers as well. Like, we don't know what they're saying so we do the same [we look]. And they just look at us and we're like, 'yeah, we're speaking our language. It's allowed'" (Anonymous 2018j). There is a sense of shared experience across groups here, with Marta identifying Hmong classmates who are also stared at if they speak their language in public spaces, and that she herself looks at people speaking a language she can't understand. Being looked at can come from curiosity, hostility, or something else. Marta is not sure how safe it feels to speak Spanish publicly—it changes based on context.

Donna

Donna identifies as Mexican, with Indigenous roots, and is enrolled in Yurok III at EHS.

She describes that, though she has friends from a variety of backgrounds, some students at EHS are not interested in socializing with her because of her identity. When I ask if she feels accepted for who she is at school, she describes the following:

Some people, they don't like my culture sometimes, so I guess they just are not, I don't know how to put it, they just don't give a chance for people from my culture to express themselves...some people, I won't say their names, they're saying things like, that we

don't belong here, and that this isn't our home country and stuff like that, so we shouldn't be here and all that. Not just for Mexican people, but also for, like, Hmong and other people who aren't like, like, 'go for America,'⁷ I guess (Anonymous 2018k).

When I ask her how she responds to such statements, she replies:

It like, pisses me off and bothers me a lot, but I don't say nothing 'cause, I don't know, I don't want to start anything I guess. And I'm also not very talkative in class. But I talk about it to my friends and my group. That's about it. But people say stuff to others too—like the Hmong people—they be coughing [out insults under their breath] and stuff, but no one says nothing...I don't think the teachers hear it, and I don't tell them because I don't want to start any drama, I guess (Anonymous 2018k).

The theme of not telling a teacher or administrator about racism or discrimination happening among students is consistent across all my fieldwork. BIPOC students regularly say they do not report hostile behavior because they don't want to be seen as tattling and they don't want the stigma or backlash that likely goes with it. They also assert their own strength in being able to shrug it off in public. This is seen in responses from students across a range of backgrounds below.

Additional school climate experiences of EHS and HVHS students

Lara, of Southeast Asian descent, takes Spanish 3 with Mr. Olson. In an interview, she describes how she feels at school and in the wider Eureka community:

Question: Can you tell me how you feel about your identity in day-to-day life?

Answer: I guess, like, here at school or at home, I do feel fine. I just feel like myself. In other public places, depending on the location, I do feel a little bit out of place. I guess, like, when there's—I don't how to explain it—I guess, like, at a restaurant or a public place like a theater or something, I just feel weird because

of things that have been happening on social media and stuff, people saying racial slurs at people—I just feel like I might be attacked in public because of that.

Question: What have people said to you?

Answer: Just the stereotypical, 'are you Chinese?' Or they make fun of the language [imitates gibberish]. Or like 'do you eat this thing?' Or 'oh my gosh, do you eat dogs?' Like that.

Question: But that's not happening in the school?

Answer: Not towards me. And in town I might see it happen towards other people. Like other races too, not just Asian. I just have that feeling that I might be the next person they choose to say those things to. And so like, I do feel a little bit uncomfortable when I have to go outside the house or school. I kind of be cautious, I always try not to draw attention toward myself because I'm usually quiet. I don't really, like, speak to anyone unless I needed to, for assistance or help or anything (Anonymous 2018b).

Aggressions such as calling Asian people "dog-eaters," or making fun of their language, or the dismissive gesture of lumping all Asian identities together as Chinese took place long before the Trump era. Yet the permissively racist era in United States history, from the 2016 election onward, exacerbates such behaviors. White nationalist contingents and other xenophobic and racist individuals and groups have used Trump's example to justify bolder racist behaviors. In this context, Lara's fear of being targeted is not just hypothetical, but based on real acts of violence that have taken place in communities across the United States and globally.

In Lara's interview, themes of being treated like an outsider are clear. Though Lara later describes how many people in her family identify with Eureka as their home, and went to EHS themselves, they still fear being singled out by racist targeting. And these fears are not arbitrary. She has heard other people harassed, and tries not to draw attention to herself to minimize the possibility of her own targeting.

Similarly, an African American female student described being harassed her first year at EHS, and also her sense of unease as a person of color moving around Eureka's Old Town, where she likes to browse on the days she doesn't have to work after school:

My boyfriend always calls me paranoid for, like, you

⁷ He is referencing "America First," a policy advocated by Donald Trump that prioritizes the United States over other countries.

know, looking around so skeptically or just, you know, like, getting in the car quicker than he does. And it's just like, okay, I'm African American. I'm a female. I've only taken a few years of mixed martial arts and I'm small. So I'm telling him, 'I don't think you understand that a lot of people don't like me.' I'm not safe the way you are safe (Anonymous 2018d)!

This student makes clear that her physical actions, such as checking her surroundings and moving quickly from place to place, emanate from a fear of being targeted in a way her White boyfriend cannot understand.

Erma, a Sephardic Jew, is taking Spanish I, and addresses both the antisemitism and racism at EHS and in the wider community:

I try not to focus on major things, but I really don't like a lot of the racial comments that people make, 'cause they'll just, like, casually say it and they don't realize what they're saying. They'll be like, 'oh I didn't know that you're that.' Like people will make Hitler jokes sometimes or like last year, there was a kid on campus who drove around with the confederate flag and yelled at me 'get out of our country.' I got, like, really offended about that, but he got, I think, suspended or expelled so it was okay. And I don't like how everyone, like, last year was talking, 'oh, go vote Trump' because they voted him in for the wrong reasons, I think. Like his humor, but that's not even funny. He was just making insensitive comments. I feel like peoples' minds in the United States aren't really in the right place a lot of the time (Anonymous 2018f).

When I ask Erma how common the Hitler jokes or flag incidents are at the high school, she responds:

In the high school, I mean, there are people who make jokes about it [Hitler].... It's not like, trying to be hurtful, it's just like, causal jokes, but it's just not cool. And then around [the] whole community, I would say there's a lot of racism especially if, like, you're going to walk around. There will be, like, homeless guys who just scream random stuff at you. Or like, if I go out to a restaurant, my mom, she kind of looks Hispanic, and the ladies will, like, give her dirty looks sometimes. Or like, there's been a few times we go to the stores and people just come up and say weird stuff about her being Hispanic (Anonymous 2018f).

In the face of these racial and ethnic discriminations, Erma herself has become close friends with a Native American student and participates in the Native American Club. She speaks warmly of the cross-cultural exchange that she enjoys in that space and with her friend. Though her great grandmother was Cherokee, Erma says her family sees that as diluted and they identify much more as Orthodox Jews (Anonymous 2018f).

Jill, a Chinese American EHS senior taking AP Spanish and Civics, speaks Cantonese, Taishanese, English, Spanish, and a little bit of Mandarin. She comments on how teachers manage student bias toward those of different backgrounds in the classroom:

I think the teachers do a good job at it, but the school in general, I guess, doesn't do a lot about it. One time, we had to decorate the hallways as different cities. They did Hong Kong, and it just kind of seemed like a stereotypical racist Chinatown, which is weird because Hong Kong is a big city, really diverse! They did, like, red and it looked like a Chinatown. Everyone was like 'wow, that's so good' and I was like, the only one who knew about Hong Kong culture and I was like, 'no that's not right' (Anonymous 2018h).

As a diverse school with an increasingly non-White population, Jill points to the need to sensitize EHS faculty as well as students. Well-meaning activities can still perpetuate stereotypes and lead to feelings of exclusion.

BIPOC students were not the only ones concerned about climate issues both at school and nationally. A White EHS student in Spanish III commented:

I feel like our president is not really doing what's best for everyone. Just the entire scandal with building a wall—that doesn't seem fair. And what he's trying to do against the immigrants—how he's trying to send people home that have been in this country for over a decade. It seems like he's trying to 'cleanse it' is what I've heard people say, but I don't feel like we need to be cleansed. I feel like the more types of different people we have, the more we can learn and the more we can grow (Anonymous 2018i).

This student expresses appreciation for immigrants and cultural diversity, and also demonstrates awareness of the larger political context in which she lives.

By contrast, another White EHS student, who I

interviewed during his Civics class, took some coaxing to see the politics visible in his own life. Daniel is a hunting enthusiast with a mother who identifies as apolitical (2018c). Below is an interview excerpt that shows how he thinks about politics.

Question: What does democracy mean to you?

Answer: I mean, I don't really worry about all that politics stuff. I mean I don't really know. I try not to really worry about that too much.

Question: But how do you think the state affects you?

Answer: I mean, this state has a lot of strict laws. Their gun laws are very strict. Like, as of next year, you're going to have to buy a forty-dollar card to buy ammunition, and then after that, you can only buy two boxes of ammunition at a time. And you have to register it through some ammunition thing and they're going to, like, track how many boxes you buy in a year and all this stuff. All they want, I think, is your money, and it's just a big waste of time.

Question: Okay, so that's a point of contact with the state. Can you kill whatever animals you want whenever you want?

Answer: Not whenever you want. There's seasons that you can pretty much kill whatever you want but yeah, I have tags so...

Question: So there's the state again. On the one hand, you're not so worried about politics. It is what it is. On the other hand, you've just identified numerous ways in which it affects your own life.

My interview with Daniel turns toward issues of bias on campus. He starts to look away when I ask about issues of prejudice among students and cracks a few jokes to make himself laugh, but then answers directly:

Question: Do you think the campus climate is functioning well here?

Answer: I mean, I wouldn't say anyone hates each other here. There are people who don't associate with other people [across racial and ethnic lines] but I mean, if it comes down to it, I'm sure anyone would have anyone's back here.

Question: Do you think that's true in the larger community as well? Like in Eureka?

Answer: That's a different story (Anonymous 2018c).

While community and campus climates are not the same, they certainly inform each other. For this White

student, school might appear to be a place where people would "have each other's backs," but that feeling was not shared by the majority of BIPOC students I interviewed at EHS.

White students were not the only ones who had little to say about politics. HVHS is a public high school located on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, with the high school on nearly the same footprint as the previous Indian boarding school where many current students' grandparents or great-grandparents were interred. HVHS leads the region in an explicit commitment to culturally relevant curriculum for Native American students (KTIEP n.d., Supahan n.d.), and has been offering both Hupa and Yurok language classes as part of its official curriculum for decades.

At HVHS, some students who identify as Native American were also dismissive of anything political in their daily lives. For example, here is an exchange with Sara, a ninth grader in Yurok I:

Question: What do you think about politics?

Answer: I don't know nothing.

Question: What about tribal politics, water politics?

Answer: I don't really pay attention to that stuff.

Question: Does anyone in your family pay attention to it?

Answer: No, my family's like a go-go-type family. 'Cause it's like, school, [sports] practice, and then dinner, and then we'll go to sleep. So it's just a repeat kind of thing. Then on the weekends we go to games and stuff like that (Anonymous 2018l).

While the student above was clear that her world was focused on sports and family, other students expressed political ideas without labeling them as such. Ray, a Yurok I student at HVHS who identifies as Hupa and Yurok, similarly expressed that he didn't follow politics, although his grandmother would talk to him about things happening on the news (Anonymous 2018a). Yet many of his deeply reflective responses to other questions about how he would change his community if he had a magic wand—to make more housing available, and to provide more healthy resources for young people and more counselors to support students—were highly political even though he didn't label them as such.

School climate extends beyond racial and ethnic discrimination. Students across a broad demographic identify

anti-LGBTQI+ behavior as contributing to hostile school climate. Ella, a White student in the YEAH Club (Youth Educating Against Homophobia) expressed: “A lot of students still remain blind to the club’s existence and queer issues in general. I mean, I think I heard the word ‘faggot’ thrown around in, like, three different classes today, like twelve times in each. Like, it is ridiculous. This campus is really, really hostile” (Anonymous 2018e).

But when asked about racial or ethnic discrimination, Ella commented: “When it comes to race, we actually have a pretty good melting pot here... I don’t feel like racial tensions are as high as they could be. I mean, I do still hear a few slurs thrown around, but that’s generally on the backburner. It’s more so blatant sexism and really bad homophobia is what’s going on” (Anonymous 2018e). Ella points to the relatively tranquil diversity within her classes—White, Hmong, Latinx, African American, exchange students from other countries, and some from backgrounds she isn’t familiar with—as evidence of EHS’s “melting pot.” Ella recognizes that her Whiteness might be influencing which kinds of discrimination she tunes into.

Ella herself is language-hungry, interested in her Welsh roots as well as local languages, which she is exploring in Mr. Gensaw’s Yurok I class. She sums up why language matters for cultural identity: “I guess if I’m going to put [it] into a metaphor, language and culture, they’re like, two rooms right next to each other, and they each got a door between them because learning one literally will, like, open the floodgates to learning the other” (Anonymous 2018e).

Brandi, a Yurok language student, describes how the door between language and culture operates for her in Mr. Gensaw’s classes, where language learning is a vehicle to talk about past and present Indigenous issues.

James [Mr. Gensaw] talked about the massacre during the Gold Rush, and I feel like that opened up people’s eyes about what happened in this area, and the bounty they had on Native Americans to, like, scalp them and stuff like that. It was very eye-opening for me and I hope it was for the other students in the classroom. ‘Cause before the class, I had no idea there was even a massacre in this area. So to have that knowledge and know is way better than not knowing (Anonymous 2018g).

When asked what she has done with the knowledge she gets from studying Yurok, Brandi responds:

I’m way more respectful of my area and every time I go up to Klamath⁸ and enjoy the scenery, I’ll always make sure to leave it the way it was and respect the people that came before me...and it helps me be better...Like if I see something like a racoon, and I know the word for it, I’ll say that word, especially with animals, because James [Mr. Gensaw] would talk about how animals used to talk and used to be like humans and have little stories and stuff. And so it kind of helps you go about daily life and not to be a bad person and just be, like, overall a good person, you know? (Anonymous 2018g).

This example—the Yurok curriculum helping a non-heritage-speaker be more respectful toward the local environment and the traditional owners of the land—is a straightforward argument for curricula that reduce “othering” (Norgaard 2019)—a practice of seeing people different from the self as problematic. The impact need not be dramatic to be profound. Naming a racoon in Yurok reminds Brandi of the stories Mr. Gensaw shares in his class, and with the name comes the values of respect for local culture that translate into more careful and culturally aware behavior.

Tim Olson has been teaching Spanish at EHS since 1996, and was nominated for Humboldt County Teacher of the Year in 2019-2020. A White non-native speaker, Mr. Olson emphasizes vocabulary alongside cultural learning, and talks about immigration issues and other political content in his classes. One day in 2018 while I observed his AP class, students listened to a podcast about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) policies, and he warned the class in Spanish and English that things could get emotional, as some people might connect more personally to the stories.

Mr. Olson is aware that his students have a range of documentation situations happening in their families, and for some, the lessons might feel painfully personal. Other students might absorb his DACA lesson with little

⁸ Klamath is a small town located 60 miles north of Eureka on the Yurok Indian Reservation.

personal understanding of migration. Though Mr. Olson laments the lack of a Spanish for Spanish-speakers class at EHS, he notes the benefits of classes with a broad range of student backgrounds:

I feel like it makes it a little more real for the kids. I like it when we're talking about DACA and immigration, to have [immigrant-background] kids who they've [White kids] already become friends with right there kind of makes it real. Like I was talking about yesterday in AP, that human-to-human contact, getting to know somebody as a human being really makes it authentic. It's harder to stereotype and that kind of stuff, when you know someone personally (Olson 2018).

The parallels here for students across Yurok and Spanish classes have been clear in the data. For students from heritage-speaking backgrounds in both language classes, the classes are a space of validation of their lived experience and cultural resources. Students from other backgrounds have the opportunity to learn from fellow students and the teacher both the language as well as the cultural and political significance of Native and Latinx identities that would otherwise not be visible in the curriculum. The classes help empower students across demographics to be better equipped to speak up and support peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion: Speaking Up and Reaching for Their Dreams

In this article I have looked at identity politics during the Trump era as they played out in two regional high schools. In the context of racism and discrimination made acceptable to the mainstream public during the Trump presidency, school climate and its effect on young people offers a window into the challenges that lie ahead for pluriethnic democracy. Yurok and Spanish language classes serve as examples of culturally relevant curricula that help students from all backgrounds better connect with local communities and push back against the erasure or misrepresentation young people may be exposed to in previous schooling or other parts of their lives.

The two far Northern California high schools are unique, but they also share characteristics with many schools around the world. Students want to pursue their education and get ahead, and they generally keep quiet

about problems they see because they don't know how to fix them, or because they are scared of being targeted for speaking up. Yet despite a hostile school climate, at EHS, BIPOC students were generally optimists. They did not see obstacles—such as daily exposure to discrimination, lack of economic resources, or mental health problems—which are glaring to the eyes of the researcher, as barriers that would derail their dreams. However, at HVHS, students displayed significantly higher levels of apathy regarding their ability to reach benchmarks they set for themselves. The history of settler colonialism, genocide, and culturecide perpetrated on Native American communities surely factors into their sense of possibility.

Divisive politics and identity-based behaviors are not going away anytime soon. Culturally relevant curricula, including heritage language classes such as Yurok and Spanish, are a means to work towards fostering learning communities that are centered around principles of equity and justice. Such classes can support all students as they navigate complex politicized identities and push back again the institutionalized culturecide still prevalent in formal education.

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