

## The Maidu and Miwok People in the Wake of California's "Growth"

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## **The Maidu and Miwok People in the Wake of California's "Growth"**

Benjamin Cross

Growing up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range of California in Auburn placed me on the edge of some of California's best nature in my (biased) opinion. Less than 15 minutes east from where I lived is the confluence of the North and Middle Fork of the American river, and another 10 minutes south finds you by the South Fork. Equally apparent amongst this natural beauty however were the trappings of human development, reservoirs, dams and old dam constructions, quarries, large multi-acre ranches, and of course sprawling suburbs. From a young age I held much more appreciation for the natural beauty in direct proximity to where I lived as opposed to the bland, uninspired cookie cutter repetition of civilization that my day-to-day life was lived in relation to.

This appreciation for nature, and general disdain for development was instilled in me by my father who'd take me and my siblings on frequent hikes by the rivers and around the Sierra Nevadas. In addition to being somewhat of an amateur geologist and botanist, pointing out and identifying various plants and rock formations, my Dad also had a keen interest in the people who had lived for thousands of years prior to European colonization and settlement in the areas we "explored," notably the Maidu and Miwok people. He'd point out and find traces of their habitation for us as we hiked, like obsidian arrowheads, and grinding stones, man-made bowl like indentations left behind on certain rock formations from the repeated grinding of acorns gathered by the Maidu and Miwok peoples from the Black Oaks that grew in proximity to the stones, into a type of flour that would be used in bread and formed a staple part of these people's diets. However, my particular favorite of these traces left behind were the petroglyphs, or a form of ancient rock art, some of which are estimated to be 15,000 years old. In the areas we hiked, these petroglyphs took on a variety of forms, from more abstract shapes like circles, spirals, wavy lines, to more defined figures like stick people and animals. My imagination would always run wild when we stumbled upon some petroglyphs, ascribing potential meanings or symbolism to what we found, but ultimately

resigning to the fact there was no way for me to definitively describe what they meant to those who originally made them (or if they were even made as more than mere doodles). However futile it was for me to attempt to understand the intention placed behind the creation of these petroglyphs by the Miwok and Maidu, the intention and symbolism behind grinding stones and leftover tools like arrowheads did not. Represented by these artifacts was the collective desire to live, shared and practiced by these peoples for millennia. But whereas these traces of the Maidu and Miwok people's historic residence in my area filled me with awe whenever I found them, returning home to "civilization" and driving by the towns and homes indicative of present habitation only made me melancholic.

Thinking about why modern examples of human society made me feel such indefinable loss, whereas evidence of Maidu and Miwok society in nature filled me with reverence and hope, I think this difference in feeling comes down to the ways of knowing and approaching the world represented by these respective societies. Evidence of indigenous peoples' life like bedrock mortars and petroglyphs, show a people who live in a deeply intimate and reciprocal way to the land that constitutes their territory, opting for a more dispersed low-impact lifestyle with emphasis placed on understanding/respecting the various forces (themselves included) constituting and maintaining the local ecology, viewing themselves as one strand in a wider web of life. Evidence of modern human life like towns and cities represents a departure from a more environmentally centered epistemology, to one that is anthropocentric, placing humans as something distinctly separate from nature. In such epistemology humans are at the center, man controls nature not vice-versa, and our very existence/well-being is predicated on the exploitation and absence of nature. Every shopping center as an absence of sprawling meadow, every neighborhood as an absence of forest, every open pit mine as an absence of a mountain, every inch of road and human civilization as an absence of nature existing unfettered. Even more sickening, modern human life represented in the absence of nature is predicated upon the genocide and extinction of anyone with opposing beliefs, including indigenous peoples around the world resisting subjugation by the nation state.

This sense of loss incurred in me by the existence of most modern de-

velopment comes from recognition of the incalculable and widespread social damage associated with their colonial legacies. The fact that these cities are currently active and remain inhabited while much of the same and surrounding areas are no longer inhabited by indigenous peoples, who are denied this same right as they're relegated to areas with little or no access to nature and systematically wiped out, speaks to much greater depths of injustice. Moreover, the ongoing colonial legacy of development in California is heavily steeped in environmental injustice, with negative effects as a result "...widespread ecologically harmful practices..." primarily felt by marginalized indigenous peoples and people of color (Pellow and Vazin 2019). In addition to toxic waste disposal sites and air polluting industries being zoned in much greater number by brown communities as opposed to white ones, environmental injustice also manifests in the level of access one has to nature, with in particular communities of color and low-income communities on average lacking safe nearby outdoor spaces for recreation as opposed to majority white communities (Coleman 2022). A concept that further helped frame my thoughts was Jose Esteban Muñoz's idea of the brown commons. This refers to a commons of people, places, things, feelings who are made a commons by their shared experiences of exploitation and struggle under racial capitalism and at collective attempts at imagining alternatives to this exploitative dynamic (Muñoz 2020). The petroglyphs, artifacts and other traces left behind by indigenous peoples in California and the United States can be seen as a representation of this brown commons, offering insights into the ways in which indigenous peoples lived in relation to the natural world, as well as breaking down the supposed divide between land and body through the history embodied in these traces. Laura Aguilar's nature self-portrait photography contributes to this brown commons in that it centers and catalogues brown bodies as being included in natural settings (Venegas 2017), in much the same way that petroglyphs and other rock art left behind by indigenous peoples offers a kind of record of their relation and intimacy with nature.

What will remain of the cities we've built in a millennium? What will they tell about us? Will the blood baked into the bricks condemn us in the eyes of historians? If nothing else, our cities will stand testament to our denial and attempted domination of nature, just as petroglyphs stand testament to our existence under the belief we are a part of nature.

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