

Up River Coyote

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Up River Coyote

Emmanuel Pihneefich Cyr

Humboldt County is also home several Native American tribes; The Karuk Tribe, Hupa Tribe, Yurok Tribe, and the Wiyot Tribe. I grew up in a town named Willow Creek, found in North Eastern Humboldt County. Willow Creek is considered aboriginal territory for the Hupa Tribe. Willow Creek's rich history was developed during the gold rush. Historically, during the gold rush era, Willow Creek was formerly known as "China Flat" because it was conceived as a huge concentration camp of Chinese people who as slaves were forced to work mining claims and build roads. Tourists today come to the area to look for the legend of Bigfoot; the famous bigfoot sighting known as the Patterson Film was taken only 40 miles away from Willow Creek. When I was a kid, I always remember going to the famous Bigfoot parade, as a tradition every summer, with my family to celebrate Bigfoot's presence as a community. Humboldt County as you all may know is also known for being home to the marijuana industry, and during the fall you can see many "trimmigrants" arrive in my community.

Growing up, I would experience several instances that provided me a sense of belonging. The most memorable ones would be my daily commute from my home to my school or families houses on the Hoopa Valley Reservation, where my mom, a Karuk tribal member, has taught at the elementary school for 20+ years. My commute consisted of a 15-mile drive through the bluffs of the Six Rivers National Forest following the Trinity River. I would always stare out the window watching the river contact the rocks and would use the river as a way to tell what time of the year it was based on the flows. I would go onto the reservation to see my grandma and my brothers' families and hang out with my peers, cousins, aunties, uncles, and grandparents. The river was like the highway for my community, and during summers we would follow the river upstream and downstream to participate in our cultural ceremonies including the brush dances and flower dances. My sister's flower dance was very memorable for my family, where my whole community came together for her and womanhood, and the legacy that she now carries as a Karuk woman.

Being present in my culture, it was important to me to have access to fishing and hunting to provide for my family but also to engage in activities that became a part of my identity today. I think of the river and the mountains when I think of home. Driving around with my dad in his pickup, early morning deer hunting, watching the world around me go from dark to light and feeling anticipation was one of my favorite places of belonging. Native/cultural foods have always been a way I have been able to connect with my community as well. My mother would cook salmon for dinner at least 2 times a week; everyone I knew in my close community could relate! Salmon, huckleberries, my grandmas' homemade biscuits and a big pot of beans and canned deer meat are food items that make me feel a sense of home.

My native community has faced many challenges throughout colonization. Genocide, boarding school, cultural assimilation, ecological destruction is to name a few. We've had people try to take so much from us, everything, from our lives to our identity and the things that are most important to our culture. My tribe, the Karuk Tribe, is centered in the Mid-Klamath Watershed. Our people have experienced, many forms of genocide throughout colonialization and during the goldrush. My mother, grandmother, and great grandmother all attended boarding school as children. My people today are federally recognized yet we have very little rights to the land we have occupied for centuries. The hardships my people and other local tribes have gone through are reflected throughout my community. I see it when I think of the prominent alcohol, and drug abuse, and by witnessing local people stuck on the reservation dependent on welfare, and commodities is a direct representation of genocide that have created an endless cycle for many people in my community. However, although we find struggles, I also see people from my community coming together to find strength from all these challenges and bring healing even though the worst of times have taken place. To me, I felt the photo essay, "The River Remembers" by Laura Aguilar showed some relevant themes of decolonization throughout her work. A quote that I thought stood out states, "Aguilar's nude self-portraits demonstrate that colonized bodies of color, like the land, can be sites of healing as well as sites of artistic regeneration." By her showing this kind of work it reflected to me the uncomfortable feeling that takes place when recognizing decolonization to the human body and the surrounding land.

To me and my community, our natural resources and local traditions are what are most important to us. The salmon that run up the streams are the most important source of food that my communities have always depended upon. The resources and local wisdom is the prominent reason native American people are so resilient. Everything is connected, from the grasses and trees, to the animals and fish, and the fire and snow on the landscape. It is important for me to make this connection because as a community we all share this same mindset. A quote from the article titled, "Ecocide is Genocide" by Lauren Eichler states a perfect representation of the importance resources are to Native people, "during the 2016-17 Standing Rock movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline, Native American protestors held signs that stated, "Water is sacred" and "Water is life." These posters did more than signify the fear that a resource would be affected. These words signified a concern about the wellbeing, health, and livelihood of the water and land for its own sake as an integral member of the community."

The way that me and my community pass down knowledge and histories is from storytelling. One of my favorite things to do is to sit by the fire with an elder in my community and to listen to what they say, through their local wisdom and knowledge you can come to learn a lot. My community uses stories to understand creation, landmarks, feelings of love and anger, lessons, etc. Everything is in the surrounding environment has a story of why it is the way it is and its connection to places/beings. My favorite character in many of my local stories is the coyote, in most stories he's the trickster, always getting himself into trouble learning most lessons the hard way. Most people in my community question my parents' decision to name me after him. My middle name is, "Pihneefich" which means coyote in Karuk. Although I can understand how ironic it can be. I have grown to accept the coyote's persona and take it with me when going about in this big world from lesson to lesson.

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